

POWER, SEXUALITY, AND THE MASOCHISTIC AESTHETIC
FROM SACHER-MASOCH TO KHARMS

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To my parents, Elena and Valerii Vinokour

ABSTRACT

POWER, SEXUALITY, AND THE MASOCHISTIC AESTHETIC

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This project centers on what I call the “masochistic aesthetic,” which emerged as literature dovetailed with medicine and law in German-speaking Europe and Russia around 1900. I argue that incipient totalitarian societies instrumentalized art and literature to produce citizens who enthusiastically consented to painful social discipline — that is, political masochists. Masochistic narratives like Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870), Anton Chekhov’s *The Duel* (1891), or Andrei Platonov’s *Happy Moscow* (1933-6) reflect the ethnographic attention to borderlands, regulation of the body, and indefinite delay of pleasure inherent in the imperial or totalitarian settings that engendered them. After tracing the origins of the masochistic aesthetic to the synthesis of sexology and literature in Austria-Hungary, I track its passage into degeneration discourse in late-imperial Russia (Lev Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov) and the labor rationalization movements of interwar German-speaking Europe (Franz Kafka, Robert Walser). I conclude with an analysis of political masochism’s apotheosis in Stalinism (Andrei Platonov, Daniil Kharms), showing how the convergence of literature with bio-centric labor theory in the Soviet 1930s produced an ethos of joyful self-sacrifice and indefinitely delayed gratification. By casting masochism as a tool of

political and ethnographic normalization, my work revises the traditionally psychoanalytic approach to the phenomenon in Russian culture. Mobilizing masochism's understudied "Slavic" underpinnings and the Germanophone influence on its Stalinist incarnation, this project offers insight into the uneasy nexus of politics and private life that gave rise to Stalinism and Nazism. My research contributes to debates in comparative literature, labor history, and gender and sexuality studies, addressing themes central to the intertwined cultural histories of Russia and German-speaking Europe.

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Introduction: Political and Aesthetic Masochism in the Twentieth Century

In our Soviet Union, comrades, people are not born — only organisms are. In our country [*u nas*], people are made [*delaiutsia*]: tractor drivers, motorists, mechanics, academicians, scientists, and so on. I myself am among those who were made rather than born. I was not born a human being, I became [*sdelalsia*] a human being.¹

—Trofim Lysenko (1898-1976)

The February 1935 speech from which these words are drawn elicited a standing ovation from the audience and even earned a vociferous “Bravo!” from Stalin himself.² The effects of the dictator’s accolade were swift and far-reaching, propelling Lysenko to stardom within the Soviet scientific establishment. Lysenkoism, a term that encompasses both its creator’s pseudoscientific theories and the political campaign he spearheaded against Soviet geneticists, would persist as the ideological underpinning of Soviet biology for many years, outliving even Stalin. Not until Khrushchev was deposed in 1964 did evidence-based biological research begin to regain its stature. In 1965, Lysenko was relieved of his position as head of Genetics Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, which he had occupied since 1941, and the ban on genetic research was officially lifted.

Characteristically devoid of scientific terminology or data-based conclusions, the passage above not only encapsulates Lysenko’s approach to agriculture, but distills the essence of Stalinist ideology at the dawn of the Stakhanovite movement. By defining humanity as an earned privilege associated with a specific form of labor (tractor driving, scientific research) rather than an innate condition, Lysenko articulates the dominant

principle of Stalinism: each Soviet subject bears ultimate responsibility for forging him or herself in accordance with the principles of the reigning ideology. This ideology, which by the mid-1930s had assumed an internally coherent form generally designated “high Stalinism,” dictated specific consequences for those who failed to make themselves into productive laborers at the collective task of building socialism. Through their criminal lack of discipline, such people became Agambenian *homines sacri*, forever excluded from Soviet communality and relegated to the precarious status of mere biological “organisms.”

This dissertation investigates the nature and origins of this notion of “forging” — actively shaping raw human material into disciplined individuals whom states can exploit to advance ambitious geopolitical programs — in Russia and Germanophone Europe between roughly 1870 and 1940, that is, in the decades that saw the disintegration of two empires and the rise of authoritarian (Stalinist and Nazi) states in their place. To be sure, the mechanisms used to render political subjects pliable during this period relied significantly on overt violence — mass imprisonment, torture, artificially created famine. But physical violence alone would never have sufficed to force the enormous populations in question into compliance with the increasingly inhuman diktats of their leaders. Nor can it entirely explain why people expressed an apparently sincere commitment to state ideology in private — in diaries, for example, or in literature written exclusively “for the desk drawer.” Achieving this level of ideological penetration required the invention of a subtler form of violence than the one the NKVD or Gestapo could provide.

The most effective tool at the disposal of repressive European states in the first half of the twentieth century was their ability to induce in many individuals the internalization of

ideological premises and to inculcate corresponding mental and physical disciplinary practices that would reinforce these premises, rendering them second nature. Because they were designed not to benefit the individual but rather to realize a highly theoretical, large-scale, collective goal (the triumph of the ancient Germanic *Volk*, the definitive onset of communism), these practices were often physically unpleasant. Instilling them, which ruling elites considered indispensable for the attainment of national goals, required persuading vast numbers of people that the pain they were suffering in the present was worthwhile — because it was temporary, or, more often, because withstanding it hastened the arrival better days. The pain of the moment was not simply to be endured, but actively enjoyed as a harbinger of the radiant socialist future or the thousand-year Reich.

Those who derive (sexual) pleasure from their own pain have been called *masochists*. I define *political masochism* as a form of subjectivity the state constructs by disciplining citizens to enjoy (or make a plausible show of enjoying) suffering in the name of achieving infinitely deferred, utopian political goals. The conditions of possibility for political masochism as it began to emerge in Russia and Germanophone Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century were the fracturing of previously powerful imperial formations and an attendant weakening of the ties between the colonial center and its distant peripheries; demographic shifts enabled by new technologies and their economic consequences; dramatic social changes, like the rise of feminism, which threatened to subvert longstanding social hierarchies; and especially the popularization scientific theories like Darwinism that destabilized existing conceptions of humanity's relationship to itself and to the world at large. The same factors, which collectively led to these

empires' collapse, also obtained in their successor states and produced widespread anxieties that observers would often attribute to a dangerous proliferation of deviance. As Michel Foucault has shown, the dualistic nature of sexuality, which European social thought has placed at the midpoint between private practice and public concern since at least the eighteenth century, made it an important lever in states' efforts to manage populations. Accordingly, much of my analysis centers on public discourse and literature dealing with sexuality and related issues like marriage or gender.

Modern masochism was invented in Austria-Hungary as a medico-legal concept, the brainchild of the sexologist and forensic psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. On the suggestion of an anonymous correspondent from Berlin, Krafft-Ebing named the form of sexual deviance previously called *algolagnia* after one of his better-known contemporaries — the historical fiction writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, author of the novella *Venus in Furs* (1870). This coinage points to the abovementioned convergence of seemingly unrelated disciplines, in this case erotic fiction, criminology, psychiatry, and sexology. More importantly, it indicates the decisive role of aesthetics in the transmission of the principles of political masochism. The formal techniques Sacher-Masoch developed in *Venus in Furs* not only reflected, but actually reinforced some of his society's most salient structural features — all while performing their subversion through stagings of idiosyncratic sexual preferences. The passage of these aesthetic techniques into public discourse, for example through the work of Krafft-Ebing and Freud, and their subsequent precipitation back into fiction, created a feedback loop that persisted in European imperial culture long after Sacher-Masoch's death.

In 1936, Walter Benjamin observed that “[humanity’s] self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure [of the first order]. Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by Fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.”³ In the course of building up Benjamin into one of critical theory’s most prominent institutions, readers have reduced this statement to the idea that “fascism aestheticizes politics” while “communism politicizes aesthetics.” Like all truisms, this binary deserves to be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, careful observation reveals that fascist Germany and communist Russia, the most notorious representatives of their respective ideologies, enacted both halves of this binary. Each regime injected aesthetic elements into its political program while simultaneously constructing a unitary official culture whose every facet was to serve concrete political ends. This blurring of disciplinary and conceptual boundaries, together with the historical logocentricity of both Russian and Germanophone culture, has permitted scholars like Vladimir Papernyi, Jochen Hellbeck, Jeffrey Herf, Albrecht Koschorke, and Evgeny Dobrenko to treat a panoply of sources (novels, poetry, diaries, films, laws, decrees) as a single entity — a “master text.” It is this “master text,” this set of essentially aesthetic experiments that became the basis for political policy, that I claim is masochistic.

The term “masochism” is in need of some recuperation. In the popular imagination, the word conjures images of leather-clad dominatrices or self-sabotaging gluttons for social punishment. Masochism has existed as both a sexual proclivity and a more general pattern of behavior for centuries, though the designation itself only came into use at the end of the nineteenth century. Since approximately 1900, psychiatrists and scholars from various disciplines have produced a vast body of research on the topic, their approaches

ranging from the cultural-historical (Sabine Wilke, Anne Dwyer) to the psychological or psychoanalytic (Sigmund Freud, Theodor Reik, Gilles Deleuze). The secondary literature on Sacher-Masoch, his reception, and his legacy within Germanophone or Western European culture is, as one would expect, especially copious. A few examples stand out as especially relevant to my project: Albrecht Koschorke's work (particularly his first book, *Leopold von Sacher-Masoch: The Staging of a Perversion* [original title: *Leopold von Sacher-Masoch: Die Inszenierung einer Perversion*]), which considers the legalistic, philosophical, and historical underpinnings of Sacher-Masoch's fiction; John Noyes' *Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, which articulates the connection between European masochism and colonialist practices; and Catriona MacLeod's investigation of Sacher-Masoch's frozen *tableaux* ("Still Alive: Tableaux Vivant and Narrative Suspension in Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*"), which offers insight into the visual and physical elements of masochistic scenarios.

Russian masochism, too, has been the subject of numerous studies. The association of masochistic behavior with Russians dates to the seventeenth century, when Sigismund von Herberstein, an ambassador to Russia from the Holy Roman Empire, first declared Russians prone to enjoying the condition of subjugation. Taking their cues from this tradition, early sexologists like Krafft-Ebing regarded Russians as exemplary masochists, a conviction that has scarcely faded over time. Indeed, as recently as 1995, Daniel Rancour-Laferrière proclaimed the existence of a Russian "slave soul," which he argued expressed itself in the nation's politics, philosophy, and literature.⁴ Sacher-Masoch, a lifelong Slavophile himself, further contributed to masochism's "Slavic" coloration by

portraying his protagonists' sexual desires as conditioned by their Eastern European heritage.

Subtler analyses than Rancour-Laferrière's have also excavated the connection between Russian culture and the enjoyment of pain: for example, Alexander Etkind's *Whip: Sects, Literature, and Revolution* [original title: *Khlyst*], argues for the centrality of masochistic religious sects like the *skoptsky* (self-castrators) and *khlysty* (flagellants) in proto-revolutionary Russian literature and philosophy. As its title suggests, Igor Smirnov's *Psychodiachronology: A Psychohistory of Russian Literature from Romanticism to the Present* divides Russian history into six periods and associates with each both a literary movement and a corresponding psychological disorder. In particular, he defines Russian totalitarianism as a fundamentally masochistic political order.

Despite its breadth, depth, and sheer volume, existing scholarship does not account for the connection between masochism's ethnographic specificity and its political undercurrents, instead discussing these issues separately. Furthermore, studies of masochism generally fail to consider the phenomenon's impact on European history as a whole. My work redresses these omissions by redefining "masochism" as a generalizable political, rather than primarily sexual, construct and establishes a direct line of influence between imperial capitalism and socialist and fascist totalitarianism.

My conclusions are neither fully descriptive nor prescriptive. What they uncover is a mode of acting and thinking brought into being within public discourse by a loose cadre of *littérateurs*, political actors, social theorists, scientists, criminologists, and medical practitioners. Whether any Soviet or Nazi subject would explicitly describe him or herself as a "masochist," or whether joy in suffering was actually experienced or merely

performed, is a question outside this project's scope. It is not merely that masochistic modes of behavior were encoded in Nazi and especially Stalinist culture once these coalesced into recognizable entities; it is that these cultures were from the beginning constructed according to masochistic templates. Throughout the period in question, masochistic scripts abounded on page and screen, in diaries and novels, and within official speeches, decrees, and laws. Collectively, these texts would come to model the ideal form of subjectivity from the perspective of both Stalinist and Nazi ideology.

Over five chapters, my project argues that categories like “pervert” and “enemy of the people” evolved through literature's convergence with medicine and law, enabling nascent or waning empires to bolster collective identity through the regulation of private behaviors. Occupying the intersection between ideology and political practice, literature provided a discursive laboratory that helped crystallize masochistic political subjectivity. This mediating function is particularly pronounced in literatures located on geographical or ideological peripheries: not in the novels of proto-fascist *Freikorps* members, but in the works of Franz Kafka, German-speaking Prague Jew; not in the programmatic texts of Socialist Realism, but in the writings of “fellow travelers” like Andrei Platonov. Texts by “peripheral” authors instantiate the masochistic relationship to the state, building subordination out of a seeming attempt to control or challenge state authority.

Chapter One, “The Birth of the Masochistic Aesthetic from the Spirit of Empire,” traces the origins of masochism as both a medico-legal term and an aesthetic phenomenon. Sexological discourse in late-nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary and Germany centered on “perversions” that would purportedly spell society-wide degeneration if left unchecked. Richard von Krafft-Ebing's medico-legal compendium

Psychopathia sexualis (1886) and Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* exemplified the ongoing interpenetration of medicine and law with literature. Krafft-Ebing not only coined the term "masochism" on the basis of Sacher-Masoch's fiction, but also compiled the pseudo-literary confessions of anonymous "perverts" into *Psychopathia sexualis*' case studies. Conversely, Sacher-Masoch's cultural milieu conditioned his favored aesthetic techniques — from ethnographic fetishization of "Slavic barbarism" to the use of rigid posing and intertextuality. Despite its reputation as erotica, *Venus in Furs* is a statement on imperial politics as well as medical and legal practice that documents the futile attempts of Severin, a prototypical decadent aesthete, to subvert the dominant social and sexual mores of his age.

After Severin pushes his masochistic fantasies beyond the limits of what he can endure, he declares himself cured of perversion and adopts the socially appropriate pose of sadism toward women. Yet Severin's seeming liberation from deviant sexuality masks a more significant transformation: from sexual rebel to obedient political subject. For all that he appears to discard his masochistic persona, Severin merely trades sexual for political masochism, internalizing his society's norms to become his own willing disciplinarian. Severin's story thus prefigures, in miniature, the emergence of masochistic political subjectivity in totalitarianism.

Chapter Two, "Masochism in Fin-de-Siècle Russian Culture," casts Russian literature around 1900 as a laboratory for the continuing development of political masochism. As the Russian autocracy tightened its grip amid rising social unrest, it telegraphed its inability to offer lasting, organic solutions to social problems to both the masses and the intellectual elites. In the face of this aggressive, yet erratic and increasingly impotent

imposition of state authority, fiction became a site of science-inflected theorizing on sexuality, with Germanophone sexology and Western European Darwinist thought exerting especially profound influence. Authors like Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy shaped the Russian masochistic aesthetic by promoting self-discipline as the only remedy against moral and physical degeneration. The chapter includes readings of Chekhov's *The Duel* (1891) and Tolstoy's controversial *Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) and *Resurrection* (1899) as harbingers of the Soviet masochistic aesthetic, which also emphasized self-discipline and abstinence. It concludes with a discussion of important predecessors to the biocentric political masochism of Stalinist Russia, including Nikolai Fedorov's *Philosophy of the Common Task* (published 1906-1913) and Fedor Sologub's *Petty Demon* (1905/7).

Chapter Three, "The Organic Turn: Labor, Technology, and the Body in Robert Walser and Franz Kafka," charts the evolution of the masochistic aesthetic in German-speaking Europe after Sacher-Masoch. Though the birth of a unified German state — the Wilhelmine *Kaiserreich* — represented a triumph of statecraft after centuries of fragmentation, the narratives of decline that had dominated Germanophone public discourse in the late nineteenth century persisted even after 1871. Doomsday predictions became especially common in the wake of the First World War, when demographic and economic factors seemed to presage the imminent demise of what was now commonly described as the "German race." Between the wars, European public discourse accordingly began to focus on "rationalizing" labor in the service of economic prosperity and national prestige. Rejecting the technocratic practices of Fordism and American Taylorism as "soulless," German rationalization proponents concentrated instead on

disciplining the human body, a development I call the “organic turn.” Walser and Kafka’s fiction meshed with the discourse of the organic turn and its attendant political ideology of enthusiastic consent to personal sacrifice. Walser’s *The Tanners* (1907), *The Assistant* (1908), and the *The Robber* (1925) encapsulate the author’s devotion to an archaic model of personal servitude and his resentment of technologically facilitated finance capitalism. Kafka’s personal correspondence and *The Man Who Disappeared* (1911-14) typify the contemporary conflation of technical advancement and gender by identifying women with the typewriters, telephones, and other new-media communication devices they operate.

Chapter Four, “The Masochistic Aesthetic in its Stalinist Phase,” shows that Stalinist culture, as it coalesced between 1925 and 1939, was enacting an “organic turn” of its own. Soviet public discourse fixated on the figure of liquidity, construing bodily fluids and energies as volatile forces that must be regulated to maximize socialist labor productivity. Such diverse figures as Aaron Zalkind and Alexei Gastev argued for a zero-sum balance between the bodily energies available for labor and for sex, presenting abstinence and sublimation as necessary components of the proper Soviet habitus. Meanwhile, literature and politics commingled to produce a Stalinist “master text” extending into private behaviors, utterances, and writings. By imagining a socialist utopia lying in the indefinite future while insisting on permanently “revolutionary” forward movement, this master text induced Soviet citizens to consent to a perpetual sacrifice of their energies to socialist construction, producing the masochistic subjects of the day.

Chapter Five, “Liquid Pains and Pleasures: Andrei Platonov and Daniil Kharms,” investigates the themes of liquidity and bodily fluids in the writings of Platonov and Kharms, arguing for the centrality of these authors within the very culture that marginalized them. As Platonov’s initial enthusiasm for early Soviet bio-technological utopianism gradually waned, his handling of liquidity in works like *Happy Moscow* (1933-6) betrayed his doubts about the possibility of controlling this protean quality. Kharms’ absurd and solipsistic short prose, though unpublishable in his time, nonetheless dovetailed with the Stalinist master text in its obsession with (particularly feminine) bodily fluids. Kharms’ idiosyncratic philosophy of liquidity, developed with Leonid Lipavsky, Yakov Druskin, and others, displays an unmistakable affinity with official speech on sexuality and energetics. The example of Kharms shows that the rhetoric of liquidity, the definitive aspect of the Stalinist masochistic aesthetic, implicates even dissenters in the perpetuation of Soviet ideology.

My work establishes that twentieth-century European totalitarianism exploited the blurring of disciplinary boundaries among science, law, and literature. Political ideologies deployed aesthetics to help manufacture subjects’ joyful consent to suffering. In addressing themes central to the intertwined cultural histories of Russia and German-speaking Europe, this project contributes to debates in comparative literature and theory, labor history, and gender and sexuality studies. By mobilizing the understudied “Slavic” underpinnings of masochism and the Germanophone influence on its Stalinist incarnation, I shed light on the uneasy nexus of politics and private life that produced Stalinism and Nazism and continues to influence present-day Russian politics.

¹ As quoted in Soifer 122. In the original, this reads: «В нашем Советском Союзе, товарищи, люди не рождаются, рождаются организмы, а люди у нас делаются — трактористы, мотористы, механики, академики, ученые и так далее. И вот один из таких сделанных людей, а не рожденных, я — я не родился человеком, я сделался человеком.»

² Ayala 637.

³ Benjamin 42.

⁴ Rancour-Laferrière's book is called *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering*.

Chapter 1

The Birth of the Masochistic Aesthetic from the Spirit of Empire

1. Introduction: When Severin Met Wanda

Early in his novella *Venus in Furs* (1870), Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895) stages a seduction scene in which the tortured aesthete Severin shares a reminiscence of his student days with Wanda, a beautiful widow he hopes to transform into his Domina.

[M]y room looked like that of Doctor Faustus: everything was thrown together in wild disorder, large closets stuffed with books which I bought secondhand from a Jew in Servanica, globes, atlases, phials, astronomical charts, animal skeletons, skulls and busts of famous men. [...] I studied indiscriminately, without system or selection: chemistry, alchemy, history, astronomy, philosophy, jurisprudence, anatomy and literature. I read Homer, Virgil, Ossian, Schiller, Goethe, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, the Koran, the Cosmos and the Memoirs of Casanova. As this chaos grew from day to day, so did my unbridled imagination and my supersensuality. I always carried the image of the ideal woman in my mind; sometimes she appeared on a bed of roses surrounded by Cupids, in a décor of skulls and leather-bound books; sometimes she loomed in Olympian garb, with the severe white face of the plaster Venus, and at other times I saw her with the thick tresses of brown hair, the laughing blue eyes and the *kazabaika* trimmed with ermine that were my pretty aunt's.¹

This passage, part of a long monologue that explains how Severin came to love furs and the cruel “Messalinas” who wear them, features several themes we commonly associate with fin-de-siècle aesthetics, from eclecticism (the dubiously authentic Ossian, for instance, is sandwiched between indisputable literary classics) to collage-like narration relying on images as clichéd and counterfeit as a “plaster Venus.” One unusual element is the fetishization of ethnic “others,” signaled by the mention of Servanica, a predominantly Jewish street in Sacher-Masoch’s birth city of Lemberg (L’viv); by the use

of the Ukrainian word *kazabaika* for the short, fur-trimmed jacket that is the inalienable attribute of the Masochian Domina; and especially by the reference to the “pretty aunt” who taught Severin to both fear and love the whip.² The aunt’s very name, Countess Sobol, not only reinforces the emphasis on furs, but also, in its evocation of sable specifically, points to one of Russia’s most famous exports and the impetus for its first contacts with the West. The original “Messalina” in Severin’s life synthesizes an antique sexuality unspoiled by the cold and rational influence of the Germanic north with the passion for dominance Sacher-Masoch attributed to Austria-Hungary’s Slavic neighbors. Her syncretism typifies the ethnically diverse, sexually conflicted, and backward-looking empire of Sacher-Masoch’s time. Her presence in *Venus in Furs* is a clue that the novella is more than the most readable work of an author both contemporaries and subsequent scholarship deemed mediocre.³

This chapter argues that *Venus in Furs* is the first literary expression of what I call the *masochistic aesthetic*, an aesthetically based but primarily socio-political practice that refracted and actively contributed to the moods and tendencies of German-speaking Europe around 1900, especially the fearful fascination with Russians and other Slavic peoples. As the above passage suggests, masochistic fantasies are inherently “interdisciplinary,” extending beyond the erotic realm into ethnography, historiography, and aesthetic theory. Sexuality itself, by virtue of its position between the interests of the individual and the fate of a population or nation, becomes a volatile force field wherever geopolitical fortunes are in flux (Austria-Hungary around 1900, Germany between the wars, Bolshevik Russia after 1925). Masochistic tendencies, whether displayed by

individuals or converted into society-wide praxis, naturally flourish in geographical borderlands as well as on epistemological and cultural thresholds.

2. “Masochism” at the Intersection of Law and Medicine

Masochism, as both disease and aesthetic form, came into being during the explosion of sexological discourse in German-speaking Europe around 1900. The preceding century had seen the coalescence of sexuality into a recognizable epistemic entity, whereupon it quickly became the object of social, medical, and legal interference. In Europe, two dominant tendencies molded the modern concept of sexuality. One set of social forces drew sexual practices out of the domestic sphere of individuals and into the realm of legal codification, scientific inquiry, journalistic activity, and commercial targeting, subject to what Foucault described as a “fundamentally positive power that fashions, observes, knows, and multiplies itself on the basis of its own effects.” Other forces operated in the opposite direction, as it were, situating sexual practices and identities within the minds and bodies of individuals, which the state increasingly wished to make legible to itself.⁴ Because Berlin and Vienna surpassed France as centers of sexological research by 1900, it was from German-speaking Europe that the dominant discourse on sexual questions emerged.⁵

One of the central influences on German-language sexology was criminology, which had begun to crystallize as a field during the first third of the nineteenth century. In 1835, the British ethnologist and physician James Cowles Prichard (1786-1848) coined the term “moral insanity,” which decoupled criminal behavior from intellectual deficiency and, after 1850, became increasingly associated instead with “disorders of the

emotions, the instincts, and the will.”⁶ At the same time, a view of (especially sexual) criminality as an affliction of the individual gave way to an understanding of criminality as an indicator of health or sickness on a societal scale. A major contributor to the generalization of pathology to whole populations was Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), author of *Criminal Man* (1876), who together with predecessors like Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) and contemporaries like Benedict Augustin Morel (1809-1873), helped inaugurate the notion that sexual desire could threaten the welfare of nations.⁷ Lombroso saw criminality as both concentrated in the inherited biological characteristics of individuals and as a social problem in urgent need of attention from medical and legal professionals.⁸ Lombroso and his followers adhered to degeneration theory, which defined criminality as based in biology and therefore hereditary and considered it the consequence, paradoxically, of both a lack of and an excess of civilization. According to degeneration theory, “anomalies of the sexual functions,” as Richard von Krafft-Ebing would call them, were the province not so much of “primitives” as of the “civilized races,” precisely because of the constant exposure of the latter to such fruits of civilization as (over)stimulating city life.⁹ By 1900, degeneration theorists had created a firm rhetorical link between mental disturbances and social problems, that is, between factors of nature and nurture in producing what was perceived as society’s decline.¹⁰

The theorization of links between genetic and environmental factors and the rapid development of criminological science during the first half of the nineteenth century set the scene for reforming legal practice relating to sexual deviance. For example, advocates in Germany, Britain, and France campaigned for the de-criminalization of homosexuality on the grounds that it was a hereditary condition necessitating medical

treatment rather than criminal behavior requiring legal sanction.¹¹ In German-speaking Europe, the push for legal reform was bolstered by a sense that a new law code was necessary in the wake of unification in 1871. If, as Jacob Grimm had argued in 1814, “the law is, like language and custom, a characteristic of the *Volk*,” an “element of culture through which the spirit of the *Volk* speaks,” it followed logically that a newly unified *Volk* needed a unified and refurbished code of law.¹² Indeed, the quest for “national legal unity” played a defining role in German history throughout the 1800s.¹³ Initially, penal code reformers strived to curtail the state’s authority so as to protect the individual. By the end of the century, by contrast, they aimed to expand the state’s capacity to punish in order to protect society from criminal influence.¹⁴ As prominent reformers like Franz von Liszt (1851-1919) argued, this latter goal would be accomplished by rewriting legal codes so that punishments mapped onto specific criminals rather than their crimes.¹⁵

At approximately the same time as laws were being modified to better target individuals, degeneration theorists began to claim that the health of populations, and thus the fate of nations, depended on the ability of law and medicine to assess individual sexual health.¹⁶ This notion spurred the rise of the new discipline of sexology, which took a systematic, classificatory approach to deviance. The passage of sexuality into the legal and medical realms allowed for the exploration of issues relating to public and private selves and unleashed debates on the limits of reason.¹⁷ Anxieties about potential aberrations, once couched in Christian terminology connected to guilt and sin, were now re-cast in anxieties around “depopulization, the weakening of the state, and the undermining of public order.”¹⁸

Toward 1900, medical and legal experts began to argue that education and social hygiene were far more effective than legal means in stemming the tide of sexual aberration.¹⁹ Maintaining bourgeois respectability both within and outside the home was a prerequisite to continued cultural and political achievement. Only by guarding themselves against internal corrosion could states hope to triumph over competitors in the Darwinian struggle for political and economic supremacy.²⁰ Degeneration theory confirmed that the fates of nations were determined by the sexual behavior of the individuals comprising them. In typically circular fashion, Morel, Lombroso, and others had claimed that sexual deviance was not merely an “immoral [choice]” but a mark of degeneration, so that what might appear to be discrete instances of aberration were actually part of immutable “sexual identities.” Taken in aggregate, deviant sexualities could affect imperial geopolitics and thus required tight control.²¹

As European medical and legal communities grew increasingly entwined, sexuality research became part of the larger effort to conquer degeneracy. In German-speaking lands, medical doctors were consulted in criminal cases with increasing frequency during the first half of the nineteenth century. This spurred the development of the new medical specialty of psychiatry as an offshoot of forensic psychiatry, which was regarded as an invaluable tool for court-appointed medical advisors, particularly where sex crimes were concerned: as Krafft-Ebing put it, “in no domain of criminal law is cooperation of judge and medical expert so much to be desired as in that of sexual delinquencies.”²² This new consulting trend had material consequences for those on trial: between 1895 and 1905, the number of defendants committed to psychiatric care doubled in Prussian courts alone.²³

Two factors hastened the convergence of medicine and law: the popularization of degeneration theory and the explosion of social-Darwinist ideas, which conceived of nations and states as “big people” jockeying for social and political supremacy.²⁴ Unlike disparate individuals, these “big people” could not afford to succumb to vice; accordingly, certain activities (non-procreative heterosexual sex, same-sex penetration, visits to flagellation brothels) were ripe for reimagining as deleterious to public health and therefore subject to legal interference.²⁵ Flagellation, for example, had been a staple item on European brothel “menus” since at least the eighteenth century, but became increasingly unacceptable (along with prostitution more generally) after 1850.²⁶ Moreover, given the perception of public health as fragile, even “normal” sexual activity was reconceptualized as a legitimate, indeed a crucial area for legal (and therefore medical) interference.²⁷ Toward 1900, sexual questions were receiving significant attention from a variety of disciplinary settings, with law enforcement officers, legal theorists, sexologists, journalists, and authors of fiction striving to understand where health ended and disease began. Cross-pollination among diverse fields facilitated the instrumentalization of literary aesthetics for theoretical and even policy ends and propelled masochism out of the boudoir and into social, medical, and legal discourse.

3. Fiction and Ethnography in Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia sexualis*

Perhaps no single figure is as important to the epistemological legacy of this period as Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902). As a professional sexologist who was also a prominent forensic psychiatrist, Krafft-Ebing was at the center of the dovetailing of sex and legalism. Indeed, his famous compendium of psychosexual perversions, *New*

Research in the Area of Psychopathia sexualis [*Neue Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der Psychopathia sexualis*] (1886), contained a special section on the status of deviance within the legal system. Krafft-Ebing argued for a medical rather than punitive penal approach in those criminal cases where sexually depraved conduct resulted from hereditary degeneration. *Psychopathia sexualis* became an instant and enduring bestseller, with fourteen editions published between 1886 and 1903.²⁸ Its popularity enshrined it in the sexological canon, ensuring its lasting influence on the field even after its moralizing tone and lurid descriptions had become outdated.²⁹

Krafft-Ebing's stipulation of a connection between sexuality and violence and his conviction that there is no such thing as a totally "normal" sexuality proved especially enduring. Though the sub-classifications were many, the two overarching types of perversion contained in the volume were *sadism* (in which sexual enjoyment is derived from afflicting others) and *masochism* (in which sexual enjoyment is derived from being afflicted *by* others). Krafft-Ebing explicitly based the latter designation on the works of Sacher-Masoch, who "frequently made this perversion, which up to his time was quite unknown to the scientific world as such, the substratum of his writings."³⁰ The sexologist's work cast sadism and masochism not as individual preferences, but as widespread trends with potentially global consequences. For Krafft-Ebing, individual sexuality was the crucible in which bourgeois morality and civilization shaped biologically determined instincts.³¹

Like his criminologist predecessor Prichard, whose discussion of "moral insanity" tended to elide the boundary between the normal and the abnormal, Krafft-Ebing defined perverse sexuality in a way that conflated health with perversion.³² He framed sadism

and masochism as exaggerated forms of “natural” male and female sexual proclivities, respectively. If this was the case, however, who could say when a behavior or fantasy exited the realm of normality and became truly perverse?³³ Krafft-Ebing, like many of his contemporaries, believed “modern social life” to be rife with degenerative tendencies. He argued that this tendency proceeded not from moral decay alone, but rather (as only a “medical investigator” like himself could correctly discern) from the proliferation of “defective individuals” genetically predisposed to a “lasciviousness” that “induces perverse sexual acts.”³⁴ Krafft-Ebing’s study constructed a sexuality whose every variation was tinged with perversion. Not even children were exempt from perversion — on the contrary, most perversions could be traced back to childhood; those that could not were likely caused by inherited genetic disturbances.

For Krafft-Ebing, the only hope of halting the degenerative progression lay in the maintenance of morality through education, social hygiene, and, where necessary, medical intervention. This belief, along with his adherence to reformist sentiments and degeneration theory, aligned Krafft-Ebing with what I earlier called the “centripetal” propulsion of sexuality into public view. By contrast, Krafft-Ebing’s psychiatric methodology reflected the opposite, “centrifugal,” tendency, which drew sexuality out of the sphere of public influence and into the highly subjective realm of aestheticized writing.

Why did Krafft-Ebing’s compendium, whose salacious parts he wrote in Latin to “exclude the lay reader” and which he intended as a legal and medical manual, borrow one of its central concepts from a work of fiction? The sense of incongruity between the genres to which source and destination belonged persists only as long as we do not

examine the volume in detail.³⁵ In fact, *Psychopathia sexualis* took far more from *Venus in Furs* than Sacher-Masoch's name. In a way, Krafft-Ebing's book was itself a work of fiction that borrowed not only the quotation-heavy style of Sacher-Masoch's novel, but drew also upon its author's Orientalized fantasy of the Slavic East.

Working on the cutting edge of the emerging discipline of psychiatry, Krafft-Ebing moved away from his colleagues' emphasis on brain anatomy and neurophysiology.³⁶ Instead, his main tool in the description, classification, and analysis of sexual perversion was the case study, derived not only from work with patients, but also from his voluminous correspondence with anonymous "perverts."³⁷ This was a deliberate choice, since for Krafft-Ebing, sexual instincts were rooted in the personality, so that, as Harry Oosterhuis writes, "a proper diagnosis of perversion was not primarily determined by bodily characteristics or actual behavior, but by individual character, personal history, and inner feelings: perception, emotional life, dreams, and fantasies."³⁸ The life histories of Krafft-Ebing's patients and correspondents tended to be simultaneously "very emotional," and written with "a certain intellectual detachment vis-à-vis their [authors'] own feelings," which facilitated interpretive processing.³⁹ In other words, Krafft-Ebing's own patient-autobiographers wrote themselves into medical discourse. The sexologist often quoted verbatim from the letters, turning his medical encyclopedia into a tissue of quotations as dense and varied as *Venus in Furs* itself.

Confessional writing, with its roots in Christian religious ritual, can hardly be called an innovative tactic in identity-formation by the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the practice of confessing, as Foucault has argued, began to assume new forms through interaction with intellectual currents of the time, including psychiatry. Sexuality

underwent not only medical and legal scrutiny, but also “obsessive self-analysis in bourgeois milieus,”⁴⁰ analysis aided and abetted by a burgeoning consumer culture capable of indulging individual sexual whims.⁴¹ The satisfaction of sexual desire could now be pursued both within the bounds of romantic love and as part of a distinct, fully fledged “lifestyle” to which a wide panoply of newly available consumer goods could cater.⁴² Fiction, itself eminently purchasable, reflected the tastes and curiosities of its readership, which ensured the great popularity of confessional writings by the fin-de-siècle. The confessional mode was mostly relegated to pulpy novels written by women (like Wanda von Sacher-Masoch, the author’s second wife), which contained “revelations of sexual practices and experiences” that could not be so explicitly addressed in “serious” literature.⁴³

Even before they entered Krafft-Ebing’s care, his patients had fully internalized the ambient medico-legal preoccupation with sexual degeneracy and begun to use it to analyze their own proclivities, occasionally transferring their autobiographical observations onto the page. Though some correspondents wrote Krafft-Ebing with pleas to help them make sense of their “deviant” proclivities, others were more concerned with society’s condemnation of their desires than with the desires themselves. This latter type of “pervert” was well represented among campaigners for homosexual rights, to whose movement Krafft-Ebing contributed by publicly framing homosexuality as a disease rather than a crime. Typically for the contradictory discourse of the time, the changing rhetoric around homosexuality demanded that homosexuality be recognized as natural using almost the same terminology as opponents of homosexual rights.⁴⁴ This discursive debt did not produce freedom from the confines of bourgeois moralism, but instead

created an atmosphere where the very idiosyncrasy of individual sexualities was cause for concern and could be used to motivate further intervention on the part of the state.⁴⁵

Indeed, where “the very foundations of society” were assailed, as Krafft-Ebing wrote, by “the most monstrous excesses of sexual life” in a period of unprecedented “civic and moral decline,” only a strong commitment to civilization — both at the individual and state levels — could keep man from devolving back into beast. But whose civilization? For Krafft-Ebing and his contemporaries, individual perversion had hereditary and, extrapolating to multiple generations, ethnic roots. This meant that both the study and treatment of perversion in society had a necessarily ethnographic bent.⁴⁶ Masochism and sadism, the twin pillars upon which the epistemological structure of *Psychopathia sexualis* rested, were already heavily implicated in the notion of sexuality as culturally conditioned. “There are some nations, viz., the Persians and Russians,” Krafft-Ebing wrote, “where the women regard blows as a peculiar sign of love and favor. Strangely enough, the Russian women are never more pleased and delighted than when they receive hard blows from their husbands.” These blows, he claimed, were delivered by the instrument most “customary” in Russia — the whip, an instrument that married men allegedly procured “immediately after the wedding, among other indispensable household articles.”⁴⁷

Krafft-Ebing was certainly not the first to regard Russia as a hotbed of perverse, and in particular masochistic, sexual activity. Perhaps the first Western European to make this association (without, however, couching it in the medical formulations of Krafft-Ebing’s time) was Sigismund Herberstein, a sixteenth-century Habsburg diplomat who spent years in Russia as an ambassador of the Holy Roman Empire. He wrote of his

hosts, “It is in the nature of these people that they should vaunt their bondage more than their freedom.”⁴⁸ Herberstein’s *Notes on Muscovite Affairs* (1557) was for years one of the most authoritative sources on Russia in Western Europe, contributing to the persistent cliché of the Russian’s “natural” propensity toward slavery.

Mastering the far-flung territories of the world had to begin with the conquest of much stranger, more intimate territory: the domain of sexuality, which, if left medically unanalyzed and juridically untouched, threatened to consume not just the individuals involved, but their families and friends and thence, by contaminating osmosis, the nation itself.⁴⁹ A concern with sexuality as rooted in an imperialist malaise was especially pronounced, in the late nineteenth century, in German-speaking Europe — in the newly minted German Empire after 1871, on the one hand, and in multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire (Austria-Hungary after 1867), on the other. As John Noyes has argued, the two decades between 1870 and 1890 were “years of crisis in the self-image of European man as imperial man,” a figure who was supposed to be at once stoic in the face of the mounting pressures of ever-advancing civilization *and* sensitive and refined, a role model both for the savage races living on the fringes of his empire and an exemplar of his own nationality in the competitive European arena. At their very zenith, European imperial powers grew insecure in the face of their evident limitations, succumbing to a longing if not for more concrete geographical borders —an unattainable luxury for empires on the prowl — then at least for tight boundaries around definitions of gender, race class, and nationality.⁵⁰ The specter of the demise of family and “true” femininity or masculinity haunted late-nineteenth-century imaginations, combining with worries about national integrity to produce a cultural mood suffused with the fear of and the fascination with sex

and ethnicity.⁵¹ Often, these anxious fascinations would combine into an Orientalized figuration of the world outside imperial centers — like Krafft-Ebing’s prurient descriptions of Russian sexuality — which expressed itself in literary fantasies that reinforced the links between colonial and sexual violence.⁵² As Hermann Glaser observed, the edges of colonial Europe “served in the nineteenth century as a distant and exotic stage where fantasies of domination, violence, and pleasure were projected onto stereotypes of sexuality.”⁵³ Though the fetishization of ethnic difference is as old as colonial conquest, Orientalism acquired an anxious cast as the dominance of old empires began to wane. Sexology, in which Krafft-Ebing and his like-minded colleagues largely set the tone in Europe, developed as a hybrid discipline containing not only literary, medical, and legal elements, but also a heavy dose of colonial aesthetics.

It is apt to characterize certain practices within Imperial Russia, such as “exotic journeys” into Siberia or ethnographic research aiming to catalogue populations living at the Empire’s peripheries, as an “internal colonization.”⁵⁴ But Russians were not the only internal colonizers on the continent: German-speaking Austrians, too, pursued colonial policies vis-à-vis the Slavic populations living within Austro-Hungarian borders. Germanic fascination with the Orientalized Slavic “other” expressed itself not only in state policy, but also in literature — unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the inherently aestheticized nature of Orientalism on the one hand, and, on the other, the foregrounding of aesthetics in late-nineteenth-century Austrian culture. This aesthetic turn had begun after the failed revolutions of 1848, which unleashed a slow-growing mood of skepticism toward liberal ideals like progress and equality, which began to seem like a façade concealing not only the injustices attending the rapid expansions of capitalism, but also

violence directed at ethnic groups on the Austrian Empire's eastern periphery. This shift encouraged the introspection that animated the sexual self-analysis of some of Krafft-Ebing's correspondents. Aesthetics and psychology thus intertwined with one another, both acting as "refuges from unpleasant social and political realities."⁵⁵ The more unpleasant the reality, the more tempting the retreat into aesthetics and intellectual life, which the Austrian bourgeoisie pursued with increasing passion and commitment as political liberalism faltered.⁵⁶

Aesthetics, and specifically text, thus became the point where centripetal and centrifugal forces met, forging sexuality as the focus of heightened state interest, on the one hand, and as a highly personalized (if not quite private) activity, on the other. Literature served as a laboratory where the newfound propensity for sexual self-analysis could be thoroughly investigated. It also provided a setting for exploring anxieties about the integrity of German-speaking nations. Readers in the Austrian Empire, in particular, evinced a "nearly insatiable longing for descriptions of all that was strange and foreign" as 1900 approached. Especially popular were ethnographic novellas of the type Sacher-Masoch so loved to write, which occupied the intersection between ethnographic catalogue, caricature, and scientific study.⁵⁷

4. *"Against German Interest:" Sacher-Masoch and His Critics*

Sacher-Masoch's writing reflected and perpetuated the aestheticization of anxieties about geopolitics and sexuality, the fetishization of Austria-Hungary's Slavic components, and the intermingling of medical and legal discourses. Just as Krafft-Ebing turned to fiction to produce his sexological texts, Sacher-Masoch's fiction drew not only

on the author's idiosyncratic fantasies, but also on his political and social surroundings. Whereas today his name, when it is mentioned at all, is synonymous with erotica, in his own lifetime Sacher-Masoch was known primarily as a writer of historical fiction. An examination of contemporary criticism reveals that objections to Sacher-Masoch's works conflated his perceived disloyalty to German-speaking Europe with his propensity for the risqué. Sacher-Masoch's reception demonstrates how firmly entwined questions of sexuality had become with politics in fin-de-siècle Austria-Hungary.

An Austrian national, Sacher-Masoch was born in Lemberg, now L'viv, to an Austrian police director and a Ukrainian noblewoman. He grew up speaking Polish, French, and Ukrainian dialect, and though his parents spoke German to one another, he himself began to learn the language only at age 12, after his father's work took the family to Prague. Sacher-Masoch was always proud of his Slavic roots and, in crafting his literary persona, adopted a cosmopolitan image that earned him mostly derision among literary critics. The author of an anonymous 1866 literary feuilleton, published in *Parasites and Renegades in Austria* under the title "Japhet who seeks his nationality," described Sacher-Masoch as "flirting with all imaginable tribes" while "writing against German interest" in a "broken" German intermingled with "Ruthenian."⁵⁸

By 1870, Sacher-Masoch, an academic historian by training, had officially left his post at the University of Graz and devoted himself entirely to the historically tinged fiction writing he had been producing over the course of the preceding decade. A utopian thinker, Sacher-Masoch espoused certain views that skirted the limits of acceptability in his time: for one thing, he was an avowed Pan-Slavist; for another, he was more liberally inclined toward unusual sexual behaviors than many contemporaries. He was also, in

exceptional fashion, a public “philo-Semite” — much of his fiction, beginning with his successful first novel, *A Galician Story* (1859), featured ethnographically precise descriptions of Jewish ghetto life. This philo-Semitism provided contemporaries additional cause to suspect him of insufficiently authentic “German-ness.”⁵⁹ Accusations that he wrote in a way that was “un-German” paved the way for intimations that he was Jewish himself, a fact Sacher-Masoch regularly denied. In an 1875 letter to Emilie Mataja, a young female admirer, he wrote in exasperation, “I beg you, for heaven’s sake, not to think I am a Jew. My family was already ennobled in 1517 when we came from Spain to Austria and at that time Jews could not become nobles.”⁶⁰

As the quotation from *Parasites and Renegades in Austria* indicates, even in the 1860s, when Sacher-Masoch was known primarily as an author and not as the impetus to name a disease, reactions to his writing in the German-speaking world ran the gamut from vague bemusement to harsh censure. Critics imputed to Sacher-Masoch an unseemly prurience that, along with his proud cosmopolitanism, sealed his reputation as a man who was at best “a Slav with Germanic education” and as such fundamentally alienated from the nation-building projects of German-speaking Europe.⁶¹ Critique had grown so barbed by the 1870s that Sacher-Masoch felt compelled to respond with a pamphlet pointedly entitled “On the Value of Criticism [*Über den Werth der Kritik*]” (1873). In apocalyptic tones seemingly borrowed from degeneration theorists, Sacher-Masoch railed against the fatal decline of German-language literary criticism since the age of Goethe and Schiller.

Predictably, the publication did little to reconcile Sacher-Masoch with his critics (particularly the Prussian and Austrian nationalists among them), and the general

consensus on his value to the Germanophone literary legacy after his death in 1895 differed little from opinions expressed in his lifetime. “[Sacher-Masoch] was rooted nowhere,” wrote the critic Hermann Bahr in 1897, continuing, “he could not turn to the great past of Austrian literature, because he was not at all Viennese. He hated Germans. He had outgrown the Slavic tradition. There was no culture that would have been appropriate for his talent. There was no community that could serve as the expression of his strengths.”⁶² Wilhelm Arent, writing two years earlier, summed up critics’ long-standing views on Sacher-Masoch’s relationship to “perversion” as follows: “long before Sacher-Masoch died spiritually, he had died as a literary figure through [his tendency toward] the most wretched pornography.”⁶³

Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia sexualis* linked Sacher-Masoch’s name with perversion in the public eye, tarnishing what was already a shaky reputation and embittering the author’s twilight years. In fact, *Venus in Furs*, which Krafft-Ebing had called the “substrate” of masochism, was hardly conceived as a stand-alone pornographic masterpiece. Sacher-Masoch planned to enfold it in a voluminous six-part survey of love, property, state, war, work, and death under the title *Legacy of Cain*. Of the six projected parts, Sacher-Masoch only completed *Love* (1870) and *Property* (1877) before abandoning the project altogether in the 1880s. What became Sacher-Masoch’s most (in)famous work was thus meant to round out a comprehensive depiction of political and social conditions in contemporary Austria-Hungary.

Prior to 1886, neither Sacher-Masoch himself nor his critics saw him as primarily a chronicler of deviant sexualities, although his erotically charged writings drew the ire of some critics even before *Psychopathia sexualis* dealt the final blow to his reputation.

Instead, his literary niche was historical fiction. His ethnographic fascination with Jews and Slavs corresponded with the ethnographic elements of Krafft-Ebing's sexology and fed his abiding interest in rebellion, social unrest, and ethnic clashes in Eastern Europe and Austria-Hungary. For Sacher-Masoch and his critics alike, Eastern Europe was a place where "a freedom which no one can infringe upon still lives," where "the spirit and the heart rise up and rebel against the slightest repression and tyranny. [Its] plains, [its] steppes are the cradle of freedom and religion."⁶⁴ What Krafft-Ebing ultimately called *masochism*, at the suggestion of an anonymous Berlin reader of Sacher-Masoch, emerged out of these interests.⁶⁵

It was no coincidence that Sacher-Masoch and Krafft-Ebing shared a set of political and social preoccupations; indeed, the views of these two men were representative of their time. Imperialist malaise, so strongly expressed in fears of creeping degeneracy, assailed Sacher-Masoch as strongly as it did any other Austrian citizen. As Anne Dwyer has written, the Austrian Empire was plagued by "anxieties about its own provincial status." Sacher-Masoch channeled these anxieties into depictions of an "Austrian imagined community," though, as a German-speaking Austrian, even one with Slavic roots, he was "limited in his understanding of the Slavs he so admired."⁶⁶ Sacher-Masoch's fascination with violence cannot be ascribed to personal sexual idiosyncrasy alone. For Sacher-Masoch, nations were "big people," and, conversely, individuals and their relationships were microcosms of nation-level struggles. Like Krafft-Ebing, Sacher-Masoch believed that individual degeneracy contributed to the decay of nations, which decay then purportedly returned, as a pernicious boomerang, to pervert individuals further. According to contemporary wisdom, the proliferation of "perverse" aesthetics

quicken the already rapid pace of European decline. As the social critic Max Nordau (1849-1923) argued in his widely read treatise on *Degeneration* (1892), decadent aesthetics contributed to degenerative processes. The converse, Nordau claimed, was also true: cultural actors incapable of adhering to traditional aesthetic norms suffered from degeneration and sexual perversion.⁶⁷

Before he turned to fiction, Sacher-Masoch was already concerned with political power dynamics, focusing his academic work on powerful female rulers like Catherine the Great. His first stories treated his native region of Galicia, one of the least “civilized” and most overtly Slavic parts of the Habsburg Empire, and reflected childhood experiences like witnessing “harsh repression of peasants” and various other manifestations of social and political inequality.⁶⁸ It is thus not as if, in his tenth year of writing fiction, Sacher-Masoch suddenly became obsessed with themes of violent dominance and produced *Venus in Furs* to assuage his lust. The dominant women of his fantasies were not drawn not from thin air or even, as he would suggest in autobiographical writings following the publication of *Venus in Furs*, from childhood encounters with the whip. Rather, they were modeled on the historical figures whose policies had molded Europe’s culture. Sacher-Masoch’s intellectual *terra firma* was historical investigation, and it is out of this territory that he ventured into the realms of biography and, eventually, erotic fiction.⁶⁹

Sacher-Masoch lived in exciting times that offered rich raw material for his historical and ethnographic explorations. In 1866, the year he made his literary debut with the novella “Don Juan of Kolomea,” Austria and Prussia fought one another in the Seven-Weeks’ War. Austria’s crushing defeat by Prussia spelled its exclusion from the project

of German unification, which culminated in 1871 with the founding of the Wilhelminian *Kaiserreich*. This exclusion affected Austria's geographical organization as well as the balance of power among its many ethnicities. Weakened and forced to compromise with nationalistically minded dissidents within its own borders, in 1867 Austria became Austria-Hungary, a dual monarchy. In the discursive space, these changes led to increased German nationalism within Austria, with writers seeking to compensate the failure of political unification with a show of "cultural unity."⁷⁰ Against this background, Sacher-Masoch's Galicia-centered works — dating from *A Galician Story*, which was inspired by an unsuccessful Polish attempt to overthrow Habsburg rule in 1846 — express the anxiety ethnic violence generated among German-identifying Austrians not only about the integrity of their own national identity, but also about possible territorial encroachment from the Russian Empire, which lay just north of Galicia.

Imperial territories like Galicia constituted what Mary Louise Pratt called "contact zones," places where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."⁷¹ Sacher-Masoch's writings, with their culturally hybrid characters restlessly exploring exotic settings and unusual desires, were the discursive or aesthetic equivalent of the geographical contact zone, not only because of their ethnographic focus on ethnicities unfamiliar to the German-speaking reader, but also because of their concern with sexuality, itself a "contact zone" between state and individual concerns. As the next section will show, the ethnicity most essential to Sacher-Masoch's conception of sexual masochism was the Russian or Slavic one.

5. Sacher-Masoch's "Slavic Barbarism"

While Jews drew Sacher-Masoch's attention as an amateur ethnographer, they were not the source of his most elaborate, systemic ideas about German nationality, nor did they fascinate him from an aesthetic-sexual standpoint. That role in Sacher-Masoch's philosophical conception belonged to a different ethnicity: the Slavs. It is not only that, as Noyes has written, "exotic sexuality was intended as an identification with the minority experiences of Slavic life;" that is, that Sacher-Masoch fetishized potentially "foreign" sexualities as metonymies of the "foreign" ethnicities that enthralled him.⁷² Rather, Sacher-Masoch, along with countless Western Europeans since Herberstein, considered what Krafft-Ebing called "the passion to play the slave" as inherent to the Slavic national character.⁷³ This conception of "Russian" pleasure in bondage simultaneously nourished Sacher-Masoch's idiosyncratic sexual proclivities and united the dominant anxieties of his age within a single construct. National decline, the bogeyman of the Austrian Empire (particularly after 1866-7), was supposed to proceed from widespread sexual perversion, which in turn acquired a distinctly Slavic coloring. Many of Sacher-Masoch's works reflected and amplified these notions by imagining the Slavs as those to whom, once the sun set on Western Europe, the future would belong.⁷⁴

Venus in Furs, the strongest expression of Sacher-Masoch's "perversion," also constitutes his deepest engagement with Austrian imperial ethnography. The novel is a hybrid in every respect, from its title to the personal histories of its characters to its very form, which features loosely connected episodes, diary entries, letters, and elaborate framing devices. Its Slavic flavoring is established through numerous details, in names like "Wanda von Dunajew" and even the putatively Germanic "Severin," which in fact recalls the Russian word for "north," *sever*.

Even more important in establishing the aesthetic of the novel are Slavic-style attributes, including Wanda's tight, fur-trimmed jacket (*kazabaika*) and a long whip with a short handle of the type "used in Russia on recalcitrant slaves."⁷⁵ Once Wanda and Severin codify their relationship via a contract that enshrines Severin's submission to his mistress in legal language, even the locale becomes, if not Slavic, at least foreign. Severin and Wanda depart Austria-Hungary for Italy, which Wanda selects because, unlike the Orient or Turkey, it is a "cultivated, sensible, Philistine society" where her enslavement of Severin will obey not the law of the land, which forbids slavery, but only her whims.⁷⁶

Sacher-Masoch was certainly not the first Western European to become enamored of Russia or Russians during the second half of the nineteenth century. Because of the resounding success Ivan Turgenev's (1818-1883) works enjoyed in translation, the "Russian theme" became a favorite of thousands of French, English, and German readers in the 1850s and 1860s. Thanks in large part to Turgenev, Western Europeans could become acquainted with socio-political elements of Russian life (serfdom, peasant collectives), the Russian philosophical *Weltanschauung*, the rituals of Russian Orthodoxy, and Russian aesthetics.⁷⁷ Like Sacher-Masoch, Turgenev was a cosmopolitan who was able to project a "comprehensible, palatable, and highly literary" version of the "Russian soul." Of course, the Western European attraction to Russia was not purely aesthetic: because German and Austrian culture was in flux, many intellectuals were looking to the East with fear as well as admiration.⁷⁸ In *Venus in Furs*, the characters of Wanda and Severin reflect their creator's concurrent anxiety about and interest in Slavic matters: neither is fully German in manner or nationality, with Severin

in particular wavering between “German pedantry,” expressed in his love of tight scheduling and legal contracts, and “Slavic passion,” which comes to the fore in his sexual proclivities.⁷⁹

Sacher-Masoch admired Turgenev as much as he did Gogol, Karamzin, or Pushkin — even more, perhaps, because Turgenev was still alive and potentially available for collegiality and friendship.⁸⁰ Works like *First Love* (1860) allowed Sacher-Masoch to feel an authentic connection to the “Slavic” mentality, in particular alerting him to the erotic-literary potentialities of corporal punishment.⁸¹ Sacher-Masoch’s imitations of the Russian author did not escape public notice; indeed, before his name was linked forever to the masochistic perversion, Sacher-Masoch was known in Europe as the “Galician Turgenev, a German-speaking storyteller from the East.”⁸² Moreover, if initially the “Slavic” material in Sacher-Masoch’s fiction, partially inherited from Turgenev, represented the Austrian author’s Slavic roots, it gradually became a formal vessel for the literary expression of his distinctive sexual tastes.⁸³

This shift in the function of the Slavic elements of Sacher-Masoch’s fiction — from testaments to his ethnographic curiosity to manifestations of sexuality — may be seen in the way the author reinterpreted Turgenev’s devices and styles. In Sacher-Masoch’s reinterpretation, Turgenev’s subtle stylistics, which push the reader to take hints and make logical leaps, became far more explicit and voluminous. What Turgenev merely implies, Sacher-Masoch explicates.⁸⁴ Moreover, if in Turgenev’s novels there is little that is ethnically “exotic” about scenes of whipping or the notion of people owning slaves (serfdom was not abolished in Russia until 1861, after all), the same details become intriguingly foreign once imported into the German language and embellished according

to the ethnographer's tastes. Even the notion of love as the illness of the over-refined, over-sensitive aristocratic gentleman, which in the Russian literary context was so naturally matched to the traditional (since Pushkin and Lermontov) figure of the superfluous man, acquired a tantalizingly foreign cast as characteristics of the Austrian imperial subject Severin.⁸⁵

As mentioned earlier, the response to the Slavic element in Sacher-Masoch's fiction was generally negative. Many contemporaries, including Krafft-Ebing, saw *Venus in Furs* as the "manifestation of 'un-German' degeneration," demonstrating the degree to which "normal" sexuality was linked to the integrity of the national vision among late-nineteenth-century Austrians.⁸⁶ In his article "Nihilism in Germany" (1870), the critic Karl von Thaler was explicit on this point: "If Sacher-Masoch continues to play the nihilist, I would like to advise him not only to speak Russian, but also to write in Russian, for in Germany there would be in this case as little room for his books as there is for the Russian barbarism in whose name [Sacher-Masoch's] Wanda [...] beats her lover."⁸⁷

Yet Sacher-Masoch had his admirers among German-Austrian critics. The highly complimentary article by the writer and critic Ferdinand Kürnberger (1821-1879), written in 1865 and published as a preface to the 1870 edition of *The Legacy of Cain*, makes some of the same factual arguments as Sacher-Masoch's detractors, but gives them a positive valence. Kürnberger's claim is about the peculiar value of Austrian literature to the Germanophone public sphere. For Kürnberger, Austrian literature was potentially "more German than German literature because of its ability to draw on youthful Slavic 'Sensualismus' (sensuality) as a source of rejuvenation."⁸⁸ A close examination of the preface yields even stronger endorsements of Sacher-Masoch's ethnographic interest in

the Slavic world. According to Kürnberger, the Russian national Turgenev, who may well be the “Shakespeare of the sketch,” can only be of limited political-social usefulness to the German “Volk” in its cultural development. The best type of author to help a weakened German culture refresh itself and fulfill its promise is precisely a German-speaking *Austrian*, whose native territories abut, and in some cases intersect with, Slavic ones. “How would it be,” asks Kürnberger, “if instead of the great-Russian Turgenev we had a Little Russian, an East Galician, i.e., an Austrian, i.e. a German?”⁸⁹ If successful, such an author could enable the German-speaking world to expand its cultural (and ultimately, political) reach to some of the territories that, at present, belong to foreign lands. Kürnberger proposed that writers like Sacher-Masoch, who freely borrow aesthetic and cultural elements from Slavic sources, could help German literature “conquer [...] completely new, Eastern lines of longitude,” and “annex” to itself “new, fresh peoples of nature” who may have not, until now, written in German, but who may be expected to do so increasingly “in the course of history.”⁹⁰

As Kürnberger’s language implies, territorial “annexation” will be the next step following linguistic and cultural incorporation. Thus, the “Eastern sensuality” that permeates Sacher-Masoch’s *oeuvre* has real geopolitical potential. Though it cannot be characterized as natively German, Sacher-Masoch’s “sensuality” can only be an asset to a truly strong “Volk,” which is able to “recognize his own property” regardless of the “strangeness” of the setting.⁹¹ Moreover, Kürnberger writes, German literature could use an infusion of the foreign; it has long since become more cerebral [*geistig*] than sensual [*sinnlich*].⁹² Kürnberger’s text reveals that Sacher-Masoch’s Slavic side and his sexual peculiarities were fundamentally intertwined. As his preface shows, this “sensuality”

was not uniformly regarded as perverse, since it stood to refresh an ingrown culture and propel it to new imperial heights. Kürnberger's favorable view of Sacher-Masoch as a reviver of ponderous Germanic *Geistigkeit* prefigures the privileged position German-speaking commentators accorded to soul [*Seele*] over mind or intellect [*Geist*] in the decades preceding the rise of Nazism and especially between the two World Wars.

Seen through Kürnberger's eyes, Sacher-Masoch became a champion of the very cause Krafft-Ebing believed him to be undermining: civilization. Because Krafft-Ebing construed Sacher-Masoch as an exemplar of perversion so representative that a fundamental taxonomical category had to be named after him, and because critics writing after *Psychopathia sexualis* were only too happy to write off Sacher-Masoch's preoccupation with unusual sexual situations, with which they had been uncomfortable all along, as *medically* perverse, it may seem far-fetched to suggest that the two men were operating on the same side of the same barricades. Yet each sought to understand how European civilization, and the Habsburg Empire in particular, could escape what appeared to be an ongoing and inevitable decline. Sacher-Masoch's works reveal that he was concerned about perversion in precisely the same way as sexologists and criminologists of his time, making Albrecht Koschorke's designation of Krafft-Ebing and Sacher-Masoch as "kindred spirits [*seelenverwandt*]" particularly apt. Indeed, both men sought a narrative that could confront and ameliorate what they regarded as a civilization in crisis.⁹³ The Darwinian power struggles of nations find their equivalent in the relationships between the sexes, which Sacher-Masoch describes as "war:"

Love is the war of the sexes in which each struggles to subjugate the other, to make the other into a slave, a beast of burden, for men and women are enemies by nature, like all living things, united in sweet lust [...] for a short time by their

desires, by the drive to propagate themselves, only to ignite an even more terrible enmity and to battle even more violently and ruthlessly for dominance. Have you ever seen greater hatred than between people who were once united in love? Have you anywhere found more cruelty and less mercy than between man and woman?⁹⁴

If in the short piece called *The Wanderer*, which introduces the tales found in the “love” volume of *The Legacy of Cain*, it is the titular figure who explains this to the narrator, in *Venus in Furs*, Venus herself articulates this view. Sacher-Masoch’s Venus construes the inability to love without cruelty as a Northern, and more specifically a German, affliction: “you northerners are unable to love, for you have not an inkling what love is about.” She continues,

As soon as you try to be natural you become vulgar [*gemein*]. To you Nature is an enemy. You have made devils of the smiling gods of Greece and you have turned me into a creature of evil. You can only cast anathemas on me, curse me or offer yourself in sacrifice like frenzied bacchantes at my altar [...] Stay in your northern mists and Christian incense and leave our pagan world to rest under the lava and the rubble. Do not dig us up; Pompeii was not built for you, nor were our villas, our baths and our temples. You do not need the gods — they would freeze to death in your climate!⁹⁵

In Venus’ view, Christianity corrupts pristine antique eroticism by infusing it with violence, specifically the disciplinary violence of wedlock. Moreover, the triumph of “cold” Christian morality perverts the respective biological predispositions of man and woman, rendering him submissive and her cruel.⁹⁶ Whether the speaker is a mythical goddess, a figment of the narrator’s imagination, or a mysterious Slavic wanderer, these positions are recognizably those of degeneration theory. Like many of his contemporaries, Sacher-Masoch tended to blame imperialist malaise (particularly, in the Austrian case, the troubled relations between various central European ethnicities) and the perceived greater incidence of sex crimes in his age on both hereditary decline and an

excess of civilization. By passing the tenets of degeneration theory through an aesthetic prism, Sacher-Masoch created a literary apparatus that parodically reproduced and ultimately re-imagined the central concerns afflicting his declining imperial home. The complex of techniques he developed for addressing these concerns in *Venus in Furs* constitutes what I call the “masochistic aesthetic.”

6. *Venus in Furs* as Exemplar of the Masochistic Aesthetic

In *Venus in Furs*, the masochistic aesthetic consists of several techniques, each reproducing a societal concern or attitude within form or narrative. Taken together, these techniques not only paint a portrait of society in Sacher-Masoch’s time, but also contribute to what might be called the “master text” of that society, for instance by inspiring the language Krafft-Ebing used to more precisely catalogue “perversions.”

The first feature of Sacher-Masoch’s masochistic aesthetic was its ethnographic bent. Austria-Hungary’s shifting borders and clashing ethnic groups fanned fears of non-German ethnicities (particularly those based in the Slavic East) while impelling certain observers to fetishize them as a source of energy capable of reinvigorating a fading empire. The interest in the costumes, practices, and sexualities of Slavic and other “foreign” ethnicities contributed to a second feature of the masochistic aesthetic, namely its reliance on quotation (particularly from historical sources) and pastiche. One particularly vivid instantiation of this tendency is Wanda’s insistence that Severin copy out a suicide note she has written for him to indemnify her against prosecution should he die as a result of her abuses. The pair converse beneath a large painting of Samson and

Delilah, depicted as “an opulent creature with flaming red hair” who “reclines half-naked on a red ottoman, a sable cloak about her shoulders.”

She smiles and leans toward Samson, who has been bound and thrown at her feet by the Philistines. Her teasing, coquettish smile seems the very summit of cruelty; with half-closed eyes, she gazes at Samson, while he regards her longingly, crazed with love. Already his enemy has laid a knee on his chest and is about to blind him with the white-hot sword.⁹⁷

This passage is almost comically overloaded with historical clichés and repetitions of images from earlier parts of the novel. The flaming red hair and sables are drawn directly from descriptions of Wanda’s appearance, while Samson’s “crazed” gaze replicates every look Severin casts in Wanda’s direction, so that there can be no doubt about how the roles are cast in this reconceptualization of a biblical story. The posing of the figures is also entirely standard for Sacher-Masoch, with the lady smiling “coquettishly” as she tramples her lover-victim — a fantasy that Sacher-Masoch invoked regularly, both in fiction and in his private affairs. Even the invocation of the “Philistine,” which we might assume to be a period detail, recalls Wanda’s earlier description of those modern societies in which slavery is proscribed as “Philistine,” a fact that wrenches the myth out of its biblical context and anachronistically places it in the present day. True to the tenets of degeneration theory, it is civilization (“Philistines”) that delivers men like Samson or Severin to the mercy of perverted heroines like Delilah or Wanda. Even when he is supposedly cured of his masochistic tendencies, Severin remains committed to this type of artistic and historical eclecticism, his intellectual life mimicking the unsystematic jumble of books found on his shelf when he was a student.

It is no exaggeration to say that *Venus in Furs* is entirely composed of visual and textual quotations, beginning with the figure of Venus herself, an ostensible transplant

from antiquity whose image actually derives from Titian's *Venus With a Mirror* (1555). The novel's central "perversion" is constructed only partly from elements of Severin's psychology; to a much greater extent, it is the cobbled together from numerous extra- and intradiegetic texts (from Hegel and Turgenev to Severin's own "confession"), pictures, statues, and recitations of canned monologues. As Hartmut Böhme has written, the novel is a patchwork in which "quoted pictorial and textual sources" and the "theatricality" of the scenarios "slowly melt together."⁹⁸ The plot, such as it is, proceeds not through the unfurling of events, but through the repetition of frozen *tableaux vivants*, imitations of classical sculpture or Slavic peasant scenes.⁹⁹

While the repetition of clichés and stereotypes may at first glance seem to indicate only that Sacher-Masoch was a mediocre fiction writer, they are in fact inalienable components of his narrative, without which it would cease to be truly masochistic. Repetition, in particular, contributes to what is perhaps the best-known feature of sexual masochism, that is, its propensity to elide or disavow climax. Though the dramatic punishment Severin endures at the hands of the Greek prince may seem climactic, it is in fact only a reprise of an earlier scene: Wanda's whipping of the enfeebled German artist whose painting of Wanda as Venus sparks the initial conversation between Severin and the frame narrator at the beginning of the novel. As Severin looks on, Wanda "ties [the artist's] hands behind his back, winds a rope around his arms and another around his body," posing him exactly the way she will later pose Severin to ready him for the Greek's maltreatment.¹⁰⁰ The triumph of antique erotic "naturalness" over the constrained mores of the Germanic north is underscored in each case by careful mention of each victim's German or Austrian nationality. The end result of these and other

repetitions, especially as they interact with the episodic nature of the narration, is that time does not pass but instead stagnates, perhaps delaying not only the end of the masochistic reverie but also staving off the passing away of empire. Similarly, the creation of an elaborate fantasy world furnished with several centuries' worth of cultural references reflects the aestheticization of daily life as a means of distracting imperial subjects from the pressing issues of population decline, social upheaval, and political flux.

Ritualistic bodily discipline, evident in the rigid tableaux into which Severin places Wanda and himself, is a further element of the masochistic aesthetic. Like the unsystematic sampling from an array of ancient and modern aesthetic sources, the love of discipline is a constant in Severin's life that gives the lie to his claim that Wanda and the Greek "cure" him of masochistic urges. All that changes is the discipline's external form: if during his enslavement to Wanda, Severin, now known as "Gregor," dons a "Cracovian" servant's livery, stays in unheated rooms, goes without food, and endures repeated bindings and beatings, after they have parted ways, he pedantically follows a "rigorous philosophical and practical system" of reading and exercise that takes up most of his waking hours.¹⁰¹ At first glance, this "system" may appear to be simply rich, aristocratic Severin's way of indulging his many admittedly dilettantish passions.¹⁰² Yet its frenetic pace and obsessive, time-filling character marks it as a distinctly Foucauldean (self-)discipline that, in its partitioning of space and time in the name of "productive" ends, prefigures an almost Taylorist rationalization of labor. Foucault, paraphrasing Jos van Ussel's *History of the Sexual Problem* (1968), associates the rise of "capitalist society" with the transformation of the body into an "an instrument of production and

performance.”¹⁰³ This body, according to Foucault, is “caught in a tug-of-war between technologies that want to render it productive and others that seek to produce sexual pleasure” — a description that maps easily onto the body of the masochist.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the advance of technological progress subjects both the laborer’s and the masochist’s body to “power relations” that “invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.” The imperial body’s economic potential could only be harnessed “as a useful force” if its various operations and function were brought under the control of disciplines.¹⁰⁵

In parodying late-imperial disciplines, the masochistic aesthetic simultaneously rebels against and participates in the “mechanistic” refiguration of the body as a tool, a body which, in order to be “useful,” will “have to be disciplined as a machine and theorized as desiring its own discipline.”¹⁰⁶ Moreover, it does so knowingly: Krafft-Ebing’s anonymous correspondents already alerted him to the element of parody in masochistic theatrics, which deployed violence not in the arbitrary and nonconsensual manner favored by the state, but in an environment characterized by self-control and mutual consent.¹⁰⁷

Severin, with his “minutely executed” schedule, which obeys not only the passage of time but the measurements of the “barometer, aerometer, hydrometer” and the philosophies of “Hippocrates, Hufeland, Plato, Kant, Knigge, and Lord Chesterfield,”¹⁰⁸ has been well disciplined by Western civilization, his space subjected to what Foucault describes as the “principle of elementary location of *partitioning*,” his time to a disciplinary machinery that aims to “establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition.”¹⁰⁹ The visual elements of *Venus in Furs*, particularly the static poses emulating the idealized forms of the sculptural Venus, represent that

aspect of partitioning that works by exhaustion of available temporal resources, subdividing frozen moments in time in the hope of producing “ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces,” as if “time, in its very fragmentation, were inexhaustible.”¹¹⁰ In *Venus in Furs*, the rationalization of the Faustian “fleeting moment” subverts the goals of power to its own ends by serving not the maximization of efficiency in production, but the typically masochistic goals of delaying or eliding climax and disavowing pleasure. Similarly, the emphasis on visual citation and textuality in the masochistic aesthetic simultaneously parody and reinforce the modern state’s tendency toward surveillance.

The existence of the masochistic aesthetic shows that disciplines cannot belong exclusively to institutions and power structures. Private individuals will aid (and also travesty) the state’s disciplinary apparatuses by reimagining them as aids to the very perverse pleasures increased surveillance seeks to root out. In its co-option of corporal punishment, physical confinement, bodily training, and tight scheduling, which industry and especially legal institutions deployed with increasing regularity toward 1900, the masochistic aesthetic parodied the “corrective” nature of discipline, just as its legalistic documentation parodied actual legal files.

Law holds a particular status within masochism, because stagings of masochistic scenarios, as Gilles Deleuze and others have noted, are peculiarly dependent on the “juridical aspect” of submission, expressed via the legal contract.¹¹¹ Masochistic relationships, writes Deleuze, “must be regulated by contracts that formalize and verbalize the behavior of the partners. Everything must be stated, promised, announced and carefully described before being accomplished.”¹¹²

As we might expect, both Sacher-Masoch's personal life and his fiction prominently featured sexual contracts. Moreover, the existence of the masochistic contract in Sacher-Masoch's private life actually enabled the introduction of the contract into his fiction. One of the stipulations in his 1869 agreement with his mistress, Fanny Pistor-Bogdanoff, was that her abuses must break off for six hours a day to allow for his personal work, the fruits of which Pistor was contractually obligated never to read. As a man whose erotic fiction, not to mention his worldview and historical philosophy, drew liberally on his private sexual activities, Sacher-Masoch was adept at conflating fact and fantasy. This fact becomes evident if we read *Venus in Furs* as a commentary on Sacher-Masoch's turbulent marriage to the real-life Wanda, born Angelica Aurora Rümelin (1845-1933). The publication of *Venus* preceded by one year Sacher-Masoch's first encounter with Rümelin, who permanently adopted the name Wanda after trying it out in her first letters to her future husband. Nonetheless, *Venus in Furs* was not only inspired by real-life events (Sacher-Masoch's 1869 affair with the writer Fanny Pistor), but itself inspired them — since Rümelin would be known as “Wanda von Sacher-Masoch” even after the couple divorced in 1887. After Sacher-Masoch complained about critiques that called his female characters “monotonous,” Wanda “advised him to get rid of this type of woman, to erase this woman *from his life*” as a means of eradicating her from his books. Sacher-Masoch, however,

replied that such a woman was actually *missing* in his life and, for that very reason, present in his writings; that all of Wanda's furs were not enough to satisfy him and what he really needed was ‘a whip,’ since to be mistreated by his own wife was his only real voluptuous pleasure. ‘You shall have to mistreat me and I promise that all these cruel females will disappear for ever from my books.’ Wanda accepted this ‘deal.’¹¹³

Sacher-Masoch's insistence on constructing his life and fiction as mirror images, I argue, was more than a psychological quirk; rather, it revealed that masochism must have a practical as well as an ideological or aesthetic manifestation.

The primary driver of events in *Venus in Furs* is Severin's "Confessions of a Supersensual Man," a text that recalls the letters of the anonymous correspondents who enabled Krafft-Ebing to write *Psychopathia sexualis* as a collection of self-pathologizing bourgeois introspections. In a parallel gesture, Sacher-Masoch mixed life experience freely into his fiction, and vice-versa, by means of elaborate staging. We can best observe this practice on the example of his correspondence with the budding writer Emilie Mataja. Mataja first wrote Sacher-Masoch with an urgent plea for writerly guidance in 1875, at the height of the latter's fame in Europe. Seizing the opportunity to satisfy sexual "ideals" that, as he admits in later letters to Mataja, are absent from his marriage, Sacher-Masoch proposes a trade: in return for his literary mentorship, Mataja must agree to be his "tyrant [*Tyrannin*]."

Sacher-Masoch held up his end of the deal, editing Mataja's writing and using his literary connections to help her make headway with publishers. He also instructed her, in pedantic detail, in the intricacies of being the perfect Domina — once sending along a strip of paper that was supposed to represent the width of the fur trim on the jacket he wished her to purchase. Though he repeatedly directed his student to use her life as a source for her art, Sacher-Masoch failed to lead by example, maintaining a rigid division between the roles of literary mentor and abject sexual slave. Two months into their correspondence, Mataja received this irritated entreaty from her master: "I ask you, this one time, to obey without backtalk. When I am in Vienna and you have your ermine

jacket on, then you can take your revenge, then I am your slave and my neck your footstool, but when the pen, rather than the whip, is in your hand, then I am your tyrant. So, obedience!”¹¹⁴ Though he may have desired to play the slave, Sacher-Masoch was not mindlessly subservient to his own passions: on the contrary, his orchestration of his own torment is second only to his literary advice in pedantry and authoritarianism. This held even when his position as a public figure provided fodder for his fantasies, compelling him to insistently direct Mataja’s attention to his literary fame. Adopting Mataja’s own voice, he wrote, “this man who is read and admired throughout Europe will be my slave, my dog, and will kiss the very foot that tramples him!”¹¹⁵ Sacher-Masoch’s correspondence with Emilie Mataja shows that no amount of fantasizing in public (that is, through his fiction) could satisfy his masochistic yearnings. Only in the more intimate forum of titillating epistolary exchange with a female admirer could he approach his desires.

Sacher-Masoch’s letters to Mataja, like Severin’s efforts to maintain self-control through study and exercise, propose an alternative disciplinary framework to the one imposed upon author and hero by the requirements of Western liberal masculinity. The protocols Severin invents are a constitutive element of sexual masochism, and their influence extends to the popular imagination of BDSM practices today. Some of the elements of the masochistic aesthetic that are most clearly representative of its necessarily ethnographic bent — the whip, the *kazabaika* — are also the clearest indicators of its parodic refiguration of the disciplinary machinery of late-imperial Europe. For instance, precise posing is just as important to the masochistic *metteur en scène* as it is to the properly disciplined imperial productive body, as F.W. Taylor himself

would later demonstrate in his analysis of coal shoveling.¹¹⁶ The whip is key in the masochistic scene; but just as crucial is the series of gestures by which the whip is deployed. These gestures are subject to the alternative discipline of the masochist, which “defines each of the relations that the body must have with the object that it manipulates.”¹¹⁷ This is why it is important to Sacher-Masoch not only that Emilie Mataja purchase and wear a *kazabaika* of a specific cut and color, but also that she step on his head and neck and present the soles of her (specifically clad) feet to be kissed.

The contract is as much the attribute of the aesthetic of *Venus in Furs* as are Wanda’s whip and *kazabaika*. Outside that novel, however, the legalistic component of the masochistic aesthetic need not take the form precisely of a contract. Instead, legalism may permeate a masochistic text merely as an underlying flavoring, emerging for instance in an alignment of plot points or characters to the ideological norms of the state, as is the case in masochism of the Stalinist variety. Yet even the most scrupulous attempt at legal correctness within masochistic fiction is doomed to read as parody. The legal language and structure of the masochistic contract are contradictory to its aim, which is to “set the stage for a pleasurable self-destruction of the juridical subject” — an impossibility in the Western legal system, which “does not allow for self-initiated obliteration.”¹¹⁸

Yet even as it mocks the law, the masochistic contract serves an important role in the staging of masochistic scenarios. This is due to its pedagogical quality, which enables the victim to “educate, persuade, and conclude an alliance with” his or her torturer.¹¹⁹ The pedagogical aspect is embedded in the contractual nature of the relationship between the masochist and his or her abuser, since the former will go to any lengths to make the

latter subject him or her to pleasurable discomfort, in effect “[forcing] another person to force him.”¹²⁰ If left unsatisfied, this pedagogical impulse can prove painful for the prospective torturer, since, as the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik noted, “there are a great many exasperated masochists who torture their objects until they retaliate with the desired punishment or revenge.”¹²¹ Masochistic pedagogy, as Sacher-Masoch’s letters to Mataja show, often expresses itself in a pedantry about clothing, meaning that it overlaps with the disciplinary choreography of staged masochism. Indeed, like the contract, the “tormentor’s” outfits are a kind of “uniform” that reminds him or her of her function as “an employee, a slave of the self-styled victim.”¹²² If ever, incidentally, the masochist finds himself in the hands of a torturer who oversteps the contract, or, worse, a sadist, the pedagogical aspect may be inverted so that the masochist becomes not the teacher, but the uncontritely contrite pupil, “insolent in his obsequiousness, rebellious in his submission.”¹²³

Thus, the masochistic contract functions through inversion, empowering the ostensible “victim” to instruct and ultimately instrumentalize his abuser in the service of his own fantasy. For this reason, the masochist belongs to the class of Foucaultian “monsters,” a category produced as a natural by-product in the creation of a “juridico-biological” domain in the late eighteenth century.¹²⁴ The “monster,” like the masochist, “traps the law while breaching it,” provoking “either violence, the will for pure and simple suppression, or medical care or pity.”¹²⁵ The contract itself, meanwhile, permits the masochist-as-prospective-victim to erase himself as a juridical entity and become as bereft of rights as an inanimate object, even as the contract’s very existence documents the autonomy and functionality of its liberal bourgeois signatories. In addition to its

practical, pedagogical aspect within the masochistic scene — it allows the masochist to precisely choreograph the actions of his “abuser” and so maximize his enjoyment — the masochistic contract “dramatizes the violence on which the law is founded.”¹²⁶ By codifying sexual relations (however technically unenforceable such a codification may be), the masochistic contract also reflects the intensifying legal scrutiny that private sexual activity came to endure in the late 1800s.

The absurdity of a contract that exists only to establish the non-personhood of one of its signatories was not lost on Sacher-Masoch himself, as *Venus in Furs* makes clear. The contractual relations between Wanda and Severin unravel precisely because they divest him of his autonomy as a subject — by the time the Greek comes to punish him, Severin has lost all influence over Wanda and cannot even rekindle her interest by threatening suicide. The contract’s disciplinary function is thus not that it subjugates Severin to Wanda, but that it “cures” him of his “supersensuality.” This means that even as it mocks the very principle of rule of law, the contract reinforces the societal norms it initially appears to flout. Following his Italian journey, Severin, chastened and apparently liberated from the urge to submit to a cruel mistress, reverts to what Krafft-Ebing would no doubt call a “normal” sexual disposition, deriving sexual satisfaction from dominating women rather than subjecting himself to them.

Unarticulated tensions continue to plague a psychologically divided Severin even after he is “cured.” The man the narrator encounters chafes under a regime that seems precise as clockwork, but in reality allows ample time for inexplicable fits of passion.¹²⁷ Severin is as alienated from his Galician community, where he is known as a “dangerous fool [*gefährlicher Narr*],” as he is from his own self.¹²⁸ “Everywhere Severin turns,”

Noyes writes, “he finds a system of rationality that promises to bring order to his life. And yet the proliferation of rationalities has exactly the opposite effect.”¹²⁹ At the end of the novel, Severin divulges to the narrator the lessons he has learned from his youthful experience with Wanda. “The moral of the tale,” he says, is that “whoever allows himself to be whipped deserves to be whipped. But as you see, I have taken the blows well; the rosy mist of supersensuality has lifted.” It is here that the novella’s reputation as a nearly pornographic record of one man’s deviant sexual proclivity is, once again, not borne out by the text itself. Instead, it turns out to be a kind of socio-medical exposition of deviation symptomatic of the essential inequality of men and women in contemporary Europe. “Woman,” Severin tells us, “as nature has created her and as man is at present educating her, is his enemy. She can only be his slave or his despot, but *never his companion*. This she can become only when she has the same rights as he, and is his equal in education and work.”¹³⁰ In other words, male masochism is one natural consequence of liberal (and, as Venus herself claims at the beginning of the novel) Christian civilization.

In sum, Sacher-Masoch distilled some of the essential discursive, legal, and medical trends that had contributed, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, to imperial anxieties circling around the vexed questions of national identity and integrity in the German-speaking world. These anxieties, filtered through the prism of degeneration theory, became a preoccupation with sexual perversion that, in turn, stimulated greater state intervention in sexual activities and discourses. Whether the conversation was occurring in legal, journalistic, or fiction-writing circles, its material outcomes tended to be textual (pieces of legislation, articles, novels). On the other hand, because the

concerns of those fearing for the fate of the “German” nation (whether this meant Austria, Prussia, or some mythical pan-German utopia) had an ethnographic, Orientalizing quality, I argue that the most significant produce of these conversations was precisely *aesthetic*.

Sacher-Masoch’s work, which conflated private and public sexualities as a means of both coping with anxiety about Austrian-German national identity *and* indulging the author’s personal desires, offers a view not of extreme, but of typical attitudes in German-speaking Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, for all that it has entered literary history as a tale of deviant sexuality, *Venus in Furs* not only “recuperates the more comforting stereotypes of the age,” but also reminds readers of the importance of maintaining moral hygiene and remaining on the correct side of the blurry divide between perversion and normalcy.¹³¹

7. The Masochistic Aesthetic Beyond Austria-Hungary

The masochistic aesthetic, which originates in the works of Sacher-Masoch, an Austrian subject with Slavic roots writing during a particularly turbulent time in European imperial history, is not limited to this ethno-historical context. It is the aesthetic of any individual or group that resists, and is simultaneously shaped by, incursions of power into the private sphere. Sometimes, as in the case of Sacher-Masoch and Krafft-Ebing, masochistic texts travel back into public discourse, heightening the anxieties that produced them and increasing the state’s motivation to control the anxiety-producing elements. Variations on the aesthetic sensibility Sacher-Masoch and his contemporaries developed may be observed in those historical settings that share certain

characteristics with Austria-Hungary at the fin de siècle. What follows is an outline of the socio-political conditions of possibility for a general masochistic aesthetic and a corresponding political subjectivity.

As this chapter has shown, one important aspect of the masochistic aesthetic is its ethnographic component. Fledgling totalitarian states just beginning their quest for world dominance, like waning empires, exhibit a preoccupation with geographical borders. Because former or prospective empires survey their borders in a spirit not only of jealous guardianship but also of possible territorial expansion, the “other” lying on the border’s far side may be subjected either to a positive or negative fetishism, either glorified or demonized, associated with the nation’s “native” core or with bestial forces that must be kept at bay at any cost. The aesthetic produced in this setting necessarily replicates the fetishistic attitude toward ethnic or ideological aliens, circling obsessively around metonymic attributes like whips or furs.

Austro-Hungarian political masochism emerged partly from the turn toward aesthetics around 1900, which in turn proceeded from the prevalence of colonialist fantasies about ethnic “others” and efforts to escape unpleasant political and social realities through greater engagement with culture. In the Soviet case, it was literature that gained a privileged position in the wake of the 1917 Revolution as the first-ever Bolshevik state sought to find its voice. For the nascent state that must invent a new official language to match its new forms of governance, reliance on quotation, pastiche, and cliché helps bridge the gap between past and future.

Any state subjecting its subjects to intense scrutiny, not only in their behavior on the street, at work, or elsewhere in the public sphere, but in their private (especially sexual)

lives — that is, any state striving to make its citizenry more legible — is apt to amplify fears of perversion. These fears increase worries about the integrity of collective identity (whether national, ideological, or geographical) and motivate power to interfere in the minds and bodies of subjects, through legal, medical, and ideological means. One result of increasingly invasive laws and regulations is a preoccupation with legal matters in media and public discourse. So, for example, the more important the identity-authenticating “party ticket [*partiinyi bilet*]” became in the Stalinist 1930s, the more anxiety around its possible falsification and misuse penetrated film and literature.¹³²

As a sexologist, Krafft-Ebing naturally focused his attention on masochism as a sexual phenomenon, a choice that has colored most subsequent studies of masochism. I claim, by contrast, that the sexual realm is just one possible field for masochistic behavior. To be properly described as “masochistic,” a situation need not feature a weak masculine figure being sexually dominated by a strong but withholding feminine one. Reik, one of the first to study the phenomenon of “social masochism,” defined it as a striving for debasement in order to incur castigation from oneself and others. At its core, masochism is about the staging, control, and disavowal of desire, whether that desire be for sexual release, for political power, or for writerly prowess. This looser definition of masochism implies that even in the absence of a masochistic contract between two individuals, it is possible for the masochistic aesthetic to possess a legal underpinning. Indeed, for Reik, the punishments that the social masochist imposes on himself are nothing more than “atonements for the subsequent realization of otherwise forbidden wishes,” attempts to “bribe the higher moral courts, to which a tribute is paid by these privations and self-punishments.”¹³³

The masochistic aesthetic is further characterized by the stretching of narrative time, which, as I noted above, can also be a form of Foucauldean discipline that extends to the spheres of labor or state ideology. The allegiances of masochists and utopians overlap in this respect, since both disavow pleasure in the present in order to delay climax or historical *telos*. Sexual gratification, socialist utopia, and freedom from pain and fear are always just beyond the horizon for the political masochist. Therefore, whenever commentators privilege past or future over present, declaring the end of history, projecting a utopian future as permanently arriving, or glorifying a lost golden age, the masochistic aesthetic cannot be far behind.

Another factor contributing to the possibility of generalizing masochism beyond the sexual sphere is that masochistic fantasies need never come to fruition in order for the fantasizer to derive enjoyment from them. Krafft-Ebing already noted that sexual masochism may be “confined to the sphere of imagination to the inner world of thought and instinct.”¹³⁴ Indeed, the classical masochist takes pleasure primarily in the staging of his desires. This is why, for instance, Sacher-Masoch was more interested in keeping up the endless correspondence with Emilie Mataja, which gave his imagination plenty of textual fuel without endangering his social standing, than in actually meeting her, or why the realization of Severin’s fantasy about being humiliated by a rival lover of Wanda’s dispelled the “mist” of his “supersensuality.” The importance of fantasy for the masochist also explains his or her obsessive attention to the details of performance.

Though the social, political, and cultural conditions that produced Sacher-Masoch and Krafft-Ebing’s version of the masochistic aesthetic may appear uniquely rooted in the Austro-Hungarian context, they have in fact recurred throughout the twentieth century.

Borders in flux, increasingly authoritarian governments, and visions of future political and cultural grandeur produced similar ideologies: fear for the integrity of collective identity; ethnographic concern with any “others” lying outside geographical boundaries; a propensity to fantasize, quote, and produce clichés; an emphasis on legalism and textuality; and an extension, partitioning, and exhaustion of time that turns the present into endless waiting. As it develops, the masochistic cultural mode contributes to the tightening of authoritarian controls even as it parodies them, meaning that it may be deployed both by those in power and those wishing to subvert it.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

¹ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 175-6.

² Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 174.

³ For Albrecht Koschorke, *Venus in Furs* is one of the few books Sacher-Masoch wrote that “can be read with pleasure.” (“Mastery and Slavery: A Masochist Falls Asleep Reading Hegel” 551)

⁴ Foucault, *Abnormal*, xxi.

⁵ Oosterhuis 58.

⁶ Oosterhuis 41.

⁷ Oosterhuis 27-8.

⁸ Wetzell 28.

⁹ Krafft-Ebing 32.

¹⁰ Wetzell 47.

¹¹ Oosterhuis 57-8.

¹² “‘Das Recht ist wie die Sprache und Sitte volksmäßig’ [...] Auch der Germanist Jacob Grimm begreift das Recht als Element der Kultur, aus dem ‘der Volksgeist’ spricht.” (Laufs 159)

¹³ Laufs 159.

¹⁴ Wetzell 34.

¹⁵ Wetzell 74.

¹⁶ In the 1890s, the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing would note the “sad fact” that “sexual crimes are progressively increasing in our modern civilization.” (Krafft-Ebing 333)

¹⁷ Oosterhuis 260.

¹⁸ Oosterhuis 32.

¹⁹ Oosterhuis 27-8.

²⁰ Oosterhuis 28.

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- ²¹ McEwen 9.
- ²² Wetzell 40, Krafft-Ebing 336.
- ²³ Wetzell 79.
- ²⁴ This wording derives from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Der Wanderer*, a novella from the 1860s: "Nations and states are big people, and like the little ones, they are eager for plunder and thirsty for blood." (Sacher-Masoch, *Love: the Legacy of Cain*, 9) The notion of individuals banding together to conclude a covenant with an authority thenceforth acting in their name is as old as Hobbes, but over the course of the nineteenth century, this political theory acquired a distinctly Darwinian cast.
- ²⁵ Oosterhuis 29.
- ²⁶ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 87.
- ²⁷ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 88.
- ²⁸ Oosterhuis 152.
- ²⁹ Oosterhuis 9.
- ³⁰ Krafft-Ebing 86-7.
- ³¹ Oosterhuis 56-7.
- ³² Oosterhuis 41.
- ³³ Oosterhuis 64.
- ³⁴ Krafft-Ebing 334.
- ³⁵ Krafft-Ebing vii.
- ³⁶ Oosterhuis 116.
- ³⁷ Oosterhuis 117.
- ³⁸ Oosterhuis 60.
- ³⁹ Oosterhuis 180.
- ⁴⁰ Oosterhuis 215.
- ⁴¹ Oosterhuis 239.
- ⁴² Oosterhuis 252.
- ⁴³ "Lebensbeichten und Bekenntnisse erfreuten sich um die Jahrhundertwende außerordentlicher Beliebtheit. Diese Konfessionen stammten überwiegend von Frauen und enthielten in der Regel Enthüllungen über sexuelle Praktiken und Erfahrungen, die in der gehobenen Literatur so nicht zum Ausdruck gebracht werden konnten." (Gerstenberger 107)
- ⁴⁴ Dollimore 225.
- ⁴⁵ Oosterhuis 264.
- ⁴⁶ Krafft-Ebing 3-4.
- ⁴⁷ Krafft-Ebing 23.
- ⁴⁸ Herberstein 39.
- ⁴⁹ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 139.
- ⁵⁰ Showalter 4.
- ⁵¹ "Der Verfall der Familie, der Verlust wahrer Weiblichkeit und die Verweiblichung des Mannes gehören zu den in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts mit Regelmäßigkeit beklagten Zeiterscheinungen." (Gerstenberger 104)
- ⁵² Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 118.
- ⁵³ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 117.

⁵⁴ “In the nineteenth century, Russia was a colonial empire alongside those of Britain or Austria, *and* a colonized territory like Congo or the West Indies. In its different aspects and periods, Russian culture was both the subject *and* the object of orientalism. The main paths of colonization led not only outwards, but also into the Russian heartland. [...] The characteristic phenomena of colonialism, such as missionary work, exotic journeys, and ethnographic scholarship, were directed inwards toward the Russian villages as well as outwards and overseas. Expanding into huge spaces, Russia colonized its own people. This was the process of internal colonization, the secondary colonization of one’s own territory.” (Etkind 251)

⁵⁵ Oosterhuis 263-4.

⁵⁶ McEwen 6-7.

⁵⁷ “Das 19. Jahrhundert hatte bekanntlich ein geradezu unstillbares Verlangen nach der Beschreibung all dessen, was als fremd- und ausländisch anziehend in einem erscheinen konnte. Die sogenannte ethnographische Novelle ist in diesem Zusammenhang hauptsächlich deshalb von Interesse, weil sie, indem sie geflissentlich das ‘Charakteristische’ herausarbeitet, zwischen der wissenschaftlichen Studie einerseits und der krassen Karikatur andererseits ein suspektes Vermittlergeschäft betreibt.” (Sebald 42)

⁵⁸ „Manche hatten längst mit einiger Neugier gefragt, welcher nationalen Abstammung der mit allen erdenklichen Volksstämmen kokettirende doppelnamige Herr eigentlich selbst sich erfreue, und konnten darüber keine klare Auskunft erlangen. Er schrieb ausschließlich Deutsch gegen die deutschen Interessen und feindete die deutsche Grammatik an, indem er sie ruthenisch radebrechte.“ *Presse* (Wiener politisches Blatt) 1866, im Feuilleton: *Parasiten und Renegaten in Österreich*; Nr. 323: Japhet, der seine Nationalität sucht

⁵⁹ Klanska 194.

⁶⁰ “Nur bitte ich mich um Himmelswillen nicht für [...] einen Juden zu halten. Meine Familie ist schon 1517 als eine adlige aus Spanien nach Österreich gekommen und damals wurden Juden nicht geadelt.” (Sacher-Masoch, *Seiner Herrin Diener*, 77)

⁶¹ “Sacher-Masoch, ein Slave mit germanischer Bildung, in Galizien geboren, entrollte gleich in seinen ersten Novellen Bilder aus der Heimat, aus persönlicher Erfahrung und Anschauung geholt, Erlebtes und Empfundenes enthaltend.” (Lemmermayer 683)

⁶² “Er wurzelte nirgends. An die große Vergangenheit der österreichischen Literatur konnte er sich nicht wenden, weil er gar nicht wienerisch war. Die Deutschen haßte er. Die slavischen Tradition war er entwachsen. Es gab keine Cultur, die seinem Talente gemäß gewesen wäre. Es gab keine Gemeinschaft, die er als den Ausdruck seiner Kräfte fühlen konnte.” (Bahr 106)

⁶³ “Sacher-Masoch hatte sich, lange ehe er geistig tot war, durch elendeste Pornographie litterarisch tot gemacht.” (Arent 43)

⁶⁴ “Hier [d.h. in der russischen Steppe — M.V.] lebt eine Freiheit, die niemand beeinträchtigen kann. Geist und Herz schwingen sich frei empor und lehnen sich gegen die geringste Unterdrückung und Tyrannei auf. Diese Ebenen, diese Steppen sind die Wiege der Freiheit und der Religion.” (Dolgan 270)

⁶⁵ Oosterhuis 174.

⁶⁶ Dwyer 156.

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- ⁶⁷ Oosterhuis 55.
- ⁶⁸ Oosterhuis 238.
- ⁶⁹ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 52-3.
- ⁷⁰ Dwyer 143.
- ⁷¹ Pratt 34.
- ⁷² Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 53-4.
- ⁷³ Krafft-Ebing 125-6.
- ⁷⁴ "Sacher-Masoch selbst verbindet seine pessimistische Welt- und Natur-auffassung im *Vermächtnis Kains* mit Schopenhauer — dieser und Goethe seien die 'größten Geister' Deutschlands und die Philosophie Schopenhauers finde ihre populäre Entsprechung in der Gedanken- und Vorstellungswelt der Slawen, denen in weltgeschichtlicher Perspektive die Zukunft gehöre." (Deutschmann 122)
- ⁷⁵ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus im Pelz*, 48.
- ⁷⁶ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 197.
- ⁷⁷ Polubojarinova 229-30.
- ⁷⁸ Dwyer 143.
- ⁷⁹ Dwyer 151.
- ⁸⁰ The feeling was not, however, mutual, and Turgenev ignored and mocked Sacher-Masoch's attempts to befriend him. (Finke 121-2)
- ⁸¹ Polubojarinova 237.
- ⁸² Dwyer 137.
- ⁸³ Polubojarinova 238.
- ⁸⁴ Polubojarinova 234.
- ⁸⁵ Finke 125.
- ⁸⁶ "Für die meisten seiner Zeitgenossen, nicht zuletzt Richard von Krafft-Ebing, war [*Venus im Pelz*] eine Manifestation ‚undeutscher‘ Entartung, das Hirngespinnst eines krankhaft Veranlagten." (Milojević 104)
- ⁸⁷ "Sollte [Sacher-Masoch] fortfahren, den Nihilisten zu spielen, so möchte ich ihm raten, nicht nur russisch zu denken, sondern auch russisch zu schreiben, denn im Deutschland wäre dann für ihn und seine Bücher so wenig Raum, als für die russische Barbarei, in deren Namen seine Wanda [...] ihren Liebhaber prügelt." (Farin 51)
- ⁸⁸ Dwyer 142.
- ⁸⁹ "Wie wäre es also, wenn wir statt des Großrussen Turgenjew einen Kleinrussen, einen Ostgalizier, das heißt einen Oesterreicher, d.h. einen Deutschen hatten?" (Kürnberger 49)
- ⁹⁰ "Aber die Thatsache könnte bedeuten, daß die deutsche Literatur ganz neue östliche Längengrade sich erobert, daß sie ganz neue frische Naturvölker sich annectirt hätte, welche bisher nicht deutsch geschrieben, welche aber im Laufe der Geschichte mehr und mehr es zu thun anfangen." (Kürnberger 49)
- ⁹¹ "Ein solches Volk erkennt im Fremdesten sein Eigenthum." (Kürnberger 40)
- ⁹² "Die deutsche Literatur ist alt. [...] Sie ist längst mehr geistig als sinnlich." (Kürnberger 41-2)
- ⁹³ "Beide Autoren suchten nach einer Beschreibungsweise, die es ihnen erlauben würde, die wesentlichsten Probleme der Menschheit anzusprechen und möglicherweise eine Lösung für diese Probleme zu finden." (Noyes2 150-1)

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- ⁹⁴ Sacher-Masoch, *Love: the Legacy of Cain*, 7
- ⁹⁵ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 145.
- ⁹⁶ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 69.
- ⁹⁷ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 221.
- ⁹⁸ “Der Roman kommt dadurch zustande, dass die Performativität der zitierten Bild- und Text-Quellen mit der Theatralität der Situationen langsam verschmelzen.” (Böhme 17)
- ⁹⁹ MacLeod 640.
- ¹⁰⁰ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 243.
- ¹⁰¹ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 148.
- ¹⁰² Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 152.
- ¹⁰³ Foucault, *Abnormal*, 236.
- ¹⁰⁴ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 5.
- ¹⁰⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136-7.
- ¹⁰⁶ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 11.
- ¹⁰⁷ Oosterhuis 236-7.
- ¹⁰⁸ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus im Pelz*, 7.
- ¹⁰⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 142, 149.
- ¹¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 154.
- ¹¹¹ Deleuze 76.
- ¹¹² Deleuze 18.
- ¹¹³ Smirnoff 63-4.
- ¹¹⁴ *Seiner Herrin Diener*, 41.
- ¹¹⁵ *Seiner Herrin Diener*, 84.
- ¹¹⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 152.
- ¹¹⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 153.
- ¹¹⁸ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 70-2.
- ¹¹⁹ Deleuze 20.
- ¹²⁰ Reik 84.
- ¹²¹ Reik 85.
- ¹²² Smirnoff 65.
- ¹²³ Deleuze 89.
- ¹²⁴ I would further argue that the masochist is more of a “monster” and less of an “onanist,” the historical category Foucault creates for the era of Krafft-Ebing.
- ¹²⁵ Foucault, *Abnormal*, 55-6.
- ¹²⁶ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 70-2.
- ¹²⁷ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 148.
- ¹²⁸ Dwyer 149.
- ¹²⁹ Noyes, *Mastery of Submission*, 199.
- ¹³⁰ Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 271.
- ¹³¹ “[*Venus im Pelz*] ist in eine Erzählung eingebaut, die die tröstlicheren Stereotype des Zeitalters wiederherstellt.” (Noyes, “Vernunft, Leidenschaft und der Liberalismus,” 158)
- ¹³² Vatulescu 103-110.
- ¹³³ Reik 318-19.
- ¹³⁴ Krafft-Ebing 110.

Chapter 2

Political Masochism in Fin-de-Siècle Russian Culture

1. Introduction: Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* as Political Manifesto

I fell not by yielding to a single temptation of the charm of any special woman —no, no special woman led me astray — I fell because those around me saw in what was really a fall either a lawful act, a desirable regulator for the health, or a natural and simple, even innocent, diversion for a young man.¹

—Lev Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889)

Aesthetically speaking, Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* is not a masochistic text. It is not cobbled together from repetitive, suspenseful episodes that never quite reach narrative climax — on the contrary, Pozdnyshov tells us he killed his wife out of jealousy, stood trial for the murder, and was acquitted only a few pages into the novella. Tolstoy's characters do not engage in Orientalizing fetishization of “foreign” nationalities, religious groups, or sexualities. The work is not a tissue of quotations that cites liberally from historical, literary, and artistic sources; instead, it is told entirely in Tolstoy's characteristic polemical-didactic voice, undisguised even by its filtration through a fictional protagonist.

But form alone does not a masochistic text make. Indeed, the *Kreutzer Sonata* endorses a program of painful, sexually based discipline from which the subject is supposed to derive spiritual, if not bodily, satisfaction. Tolstoy deliberately frames this prescription not as the raving of a murderous madman but as the ideal *modus operandi* for every member of society, regardless of gender, economic class, or social standing.

Though it could not be more stylistically different from *Venus in Furs*, the *Kreutzer Sonata* likewise uses the story of an apparently outlying individual to indict existing institutions and practices and propose a radical cure for the sickness these engender — namely, lifelong sexual abstinence. Yet just as in *Venus in Furs*, this cure, which Tolstoy presents as difficult but liberating and salubrious, reinforces the repression that caused the individual's problems in the first place.

Though Tolstoy portrays Pozdnyshev as a fringe case who comes to his abstinent worldview through means no Christian moralist could possibly deem justifiable, it is clear that he considers his protagonist's anguish justified in light of society's general depravity. Pozdnyshev himself emphasizes the unexceptional nature of nearly all of his behavior, with the exception of his decision to kill his unfaithful wife. His early sexual experiences, which the passage that opens this chapter describes in religious terms as a "fall," were not only acceptable to his peers, but actively encouraged by the medical and juridical establishments. Almost all existing institutions are complicit in the "fall" of men like Pozdnyshev and women like his wife, reinforcing fundamentally immoral standards of behavior even to the point of acquitting Pozdnyshev on the grounds that he was merely defending his "outraged honor [*porugannuiu chest'*]." ² Like Sacher-Masoch's Severin, Pozdnyshev is only as insane as a sick society has made him.

Tolstoy's depiction of a man who breaks with judicial and social codes but, in the process, gains access to a higher moral plane is typical for late-nineteenth-century Russian literature. In Russian cultural life and social thought, madness and eccentricity were not considered to be as synonymous with degeneration as they were in Western Europe. "Weakness of national character" and its side effect, mental instability, would

periodically dominate public discourse, but this occurred primarily during periods of political reaction, such as the years following the assassination of Alexander II or the failure of the 1905 revolution.³

True to its general nineteenth-century function as an ersatz public forum,⁴ Russian literature deployed unusual and even insane behavior as allegory for political rebelliousness, madness being one of the few available avenues of resistance to the normative values of mainstream Russian society. In a climate of political repression, only the insane, “driven by an ‘abnormally’ developed will,” could be counted upon to defy established norms.⁵ Furthermore, the prototypical Russian madman or neurasthenic was more likely than his Western counterparts to be an altruist rather than a hedonist, acting not to satisfy private desires but to promote the public good.⁶ Health professionals contributed to the image of certain types of insanity as politically motivated by attributing what they regarded as a high incidence of mental and nervous disorders to a generalized malaise that would best be treated through political, rather than medical means.⁷

This altruistic type of rebel, exemplified in figures like the protagonist of the story “Red Flower” (1883) by Vsevolod Garshin (1855-1888), typically gained little from the stands he took. To the extent that Pozdnyshev’s crime can be construed as a political statement indicting existing sexual practices, it is an empty gesture. Indeed, murdering his wife allows Pozdnyshev to extricate himself from his untenably sinful marriage, but consequently deprives him of the chance to raise his own children. As Pozdnyshev ruefully notes, this is a disaster not only for him personally, but for society as a whole. Since he will not be able to transmit his newfound insights and spiritual-social

“solutions” to the next generation, his children will “[grow] up to be just such savages as all the others around them are.”⁸

That Pozdnyshev is the product of decayed moral standards does not, in Tolstoy’s view, absolve him of responsibility for either his concupiscence or the homicidal outburst to which it leads — quite the contrary. Though most of the public outrage the novel caused had to do with its explicit treatment of sexuality, its political content was arguably even more subversive. If government, churches, schools, and medical organizations are all hopelessly corrupt, Tolstoy implicitly asks, where can the individual turn for moral and spiritual guidance? Beneath the *Kreutzer Sonata*’s lurid plot and doctrinaire prudishness is a systematic denunciation of nearly every institution in Tolstoy’s Russia. Had Tolstoy been a Prussian or Austrian, he might have articulated his anxieties about Russia’s future in terms like *Volkstod* and looked to eugenics or social Darwinism to forestall societal collapse. Instead, Tolstoy took a dim view of these countermeasures and lambasted degeneration theory as an institution-absolving falsehood, particularly in later works like *Resurrection* (1899).

Tolstoy exemplified the surprising proximity of extreme and mainstream worldviews in late-nineteenth-century European social thought. Though he vehemently rejected the concept of the “born criminal,” in other respects he followed in the footsteps of the very Western criminologists and sexologists whose theories he disdained. Much like Krafft-Ebing and his colleagues, Tolstoy systematically conflated the (sexually) abnormal with the normal, emphasizing that “only a hair’s-breadth separates an outwardly respectable married life from madness, crime.”⁹ This same sentiment lends one of Tolstoy’s two epigraphs to *The Kreutzer Sonata* a surprisingly modern subtext. Like the author of the

Gospel of Matthew, who claimed that “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart,” Tolstoy believed the boundaries among thoughts, words, and deeds to be dangerously porous. By framing all men as jealous crypto-murderers, he also inadvertently reified one the most consequential tenets of criminological theory as it was developed in Germanophone Europe: the duty of society to protect itself from *potential* as well as actual criminals. The means that Tolstoy and his Western European counterparts suggested would best shield culture and civilization from criminality, however, could not have been more different. Whereas, for instance, German legal reformers pushed for extending the state’s power to police its citizens, Tolstoy, like many of his peers in Russia, was disgusted with existing judicial overreach and argued for empowering individuals to police themselves.

Though Tolstoy was an outlier in terms of the remedies he proposed for declining sexual morality, the concerns he raised were ubiquitous among members of Russia’s professional and intellectual elites. As Peter Ulf Møller notes, Tolstoy’s contemporaries may have disagreed with his belief in total abstinence, but concurred with his societal diagnosis.¹⁰ In the debates *The Kreutzer Sonata* unleashed, the consensus was that “morality was in decline, marriage in a state of crisis and purity in short supply.”¹¹ Given the negative reception that certain aspects of Darwinist thought, including the notion of “struggle for existence,” received in Russia, it is no surprise that Tolstoy’s view that disciplined individuals rather than reformed institutions were the key to curing society’s ills was also quite widespread.

In the vacuum that remained once all traditional sources of authority were discredited, the onus fell squarely onto the shoulders of the individual to better society. To do so, he

or she had to adopt a rigorous discipline that might entail, for example, a lifetime of self-sacrificial abstinence. To behave otherwise meant not only to lose the opportunity for religious salvation, but to condemn society to further decay. The imposition on individuals of a painful, but purportedly liberating, disciplinary apparatus meant to control their most private thoughts and actions in the name of rescuing the nation marks *The Kreutzer Sonata* and the other texts discussed in this chapter as documents of fin-de-siècle Russian political masochism.

Before turning to other literary examples, it is necessary to examine the conditions that promoted the loss of confidence in institutions as agents of change in the late nineteenth-century Russian Empire. Among the most important of these were Russian responses to Darwinism, Western criminology, and degeneration theory.

2. Darwinism, Criminology, and Collective Disillusionment with Institutional Change

As in German-speaking Europe, degeneration theory was one of a number of factors — including Darwinist thought, political tensions, and a sexuality discourse displaced into literature, which acted in concert to produce the late-Imperial Russian variant of political masochism. Nordau's *Degeneration* itself, originally published in 1892, was translated into Russian by 1894 and received as enthusiastically as elsewhere in Europe.¹² Nordau's assertions about the impact of individual decisions, whether sexual or aesthetic, on society at large depended on an essentially Darwinian understanding of heredity; accordingly, the reception of Nordau's theories were correlated with attitudes toward Darwinism.

Unlike in the West, Darwinism encountered little opposition from scientists and social thinkers in Russia.¹³ Indeed, translations of Darwin's writings and other Western European scientific works enjoyed great popularity among Russia's intellectual elite, radicalizing political thought during the latter decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Darwinism in particular gave young materialists the theory of organic life they most desired — an empirical system capable of describing the development of animals and plants without invoking religious doctrine.¹⁵ However, as an 1864 controversy resulting from one theorist's attempt to extrapolate Darwinist principles of biological differentiation to humans illustrates, Russians generally found the arguments of *social* Darwinists far less persuasive than did their Western counterparts.¹⁶ Whereas Western Darwinists easily accepted Malthus' assertion that brutal intraspecies competition was an inevitable consequence of scarce resources and dense populations, Russian Darwinists resisted it.¹⁷ By the end of the 1860s, many Russian thinkers had concluded that the larger social good required that members of the same species cooperate rather than compete with one another.¹⁸

An even more important idiosyncrasy within the Russian reception of Darwinism was the rejection of the idea of the "criminal type." Even those Russian thinkers who classified degeneration as "Darwinian evolution thrown into reverse" resisted the notion that inborn qualities, rather than acquired characteristics, were responsible for social pathology.¹⁹ Their rejection of Malthusianism carried over into Russians' reception of degeneration theory, where they emphasized social and economic inequality as the most important causes of degeneration.²⁰ This preference for a Lamarckian rather than strict

Darwinian understanding of degeneration would persist into Soviet times, underpinning the biocentric body discipline at the heart of the Stalinist masochistic aesthetic.

This same tendency to soften the harsher implications of scientific theories in their application to social life is evident in the Russian reception of Lombroso, Nordau, and other degeneration theorists. Russian intellectual elites around 1900 resisted the Western tendency to root deviance in biological rather than social causes.²¹ The high incidence of crime, Russian theorists argued, owed more to social factors than to the existence of distinct genetic “types” destined to pursue lives of crime.²² The prescriptive consequence of this diagnosis was that poverty, discrimination against people of peasant origin, and institutional corruption would need to be addressed to reduce criminality.²³

The reluctance to accept the notion of the “born criminal” partly stemmed from the uncomfortable position of medical and other professionals vis-à-vis both the political administration above and the disenfranchised classes below. If, say, medical professionals accepted that social problems like prostitution stemmed from hereditary abnormalities of the body and brain, it would logically fall to them to pursue treatments or remedies. Yet any large-scale medical intervention would pit physicians against the masses, with whom they sympathized, and instead align them with an authoritarian political leadership many of them hated.²⁴ Accordingly, by 1900, Russian degeneration theorists had established that degenerates were not a “separate species” but a subset of the population disproportionately affected by social factors engendered by the Great Reforms. The call to curtail degenerative tendencies became one more voice in the general clamor for social change.²⁵

The reception of Western European degeneration theory in Russia resulted in a contradictory etiology of degeneracy and related phenomena like neurasthenia. On the one hand, many experts regarded degeneracy as “self-inflicted” and promoted a vision of personal responsibility as key to overcoming degenerative processes.²⁶ The idea that it would be necessary to remake humanity in order that Russia might enjoy a better tomorrow was firmly ingrained in degeneration discourse by 1900.²⁷ Opposed to this explanation of degeneracy was the notion that institutions rather than individuals were at fault, so that healing individual afflictions would require the overhaul all of society. Since institutions could hardly be expected to reform themselves, this task would fall to individuals, meaning that even the “societal” model of degeneration required action, and most importantly discipline, from the individual.

The decades leading up to the 1917 revolutions saw a convergence not merely of apparently disparate disciplines like biology, psychiatry, law, and literature, but of the goals of political liberals and conservatives. If society was indeed as sick as observers from a variety of professional affiliations and political camps believed it to be, then to allow individuals to continue to live as they had for centuries would be the height of irresponsibility. The problem was especially urgent because Russian experts had largely rejected the application of the evolutionary principle of “survival of the fittest” to human populations, meaning that without active intervention, deviants could not be counted upon to breed themselves out of existence (as Nordau had predicted they eventually would). This point of view conveniently jibed with the intellectual elite’s sense of its own disenfranchisement, which they ascribed not to their “weakness” as a biological class but to the unjust structure of society.

At the same time, many observers argued that the magnitude of the social and political problems afflicting Russia was such that granting more individual rights was out of the question. Instead, they claimed, Russia would benefit most from increased coercion in the name of *ozdorovlenie* [making society healthier] — an argument that recalled public discourse about legal reform in German-speaking Europe on the eve of the First World War.²⁸ Because so many had already fallen prey to various forms of degeneracy, experts asserted that it would be necessary to treat not just isolated cases of deviance but instead create a system of “permanent surveillance” targeting the mental and physical health of the entire population.²⁹ The continual blurring of the line between “actual and potential perpetrators” of crime,³⁰ an epistemological tendency Russians inherited from German and Austrian criminologists, inflated estimates of just how much of the population stood to suffer from unchecked degeneration.

The cumulative result of anxieties among liberals, radicals, and conservatives alike was a collective mistrust in self-determination, particularly political self-determination. Individual “rights” came to be regarded not as inalienable components of a just society, but as dangerous fantasies that would “enshrine the injustices of the status quo and keep the dark masses locked in stupidity, ignorance, and poverty.” No matter their specific political or professional affiliation, late-imperial Russian thinkers generally agreed that the responsibility of the individual lay in submitting to some form of order: either an internal one born of self-discipline or an external one exerted by the state — even if the state would first need to be significantly reformed.³¹

As more and more educated Russians entered professions like psychiatry, anthropology, and sociology, which sought to apply rigorous scientific methodology to

social problems, they began to conceptualize society as an “artifact” and politics as a means of sculpting it.³² If environmental factors rather than biology were to blame for social ills, it was incumbent on disciplined individuals and improved political institutions to remedy them. Yet during the reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II, significant reform of political institutions remained an unrealizable dream. In the face of their continued disempowerment, the Russian intellectual elite turned to a variety of substitutes for meaningful reform, including utopian thought and political radicalism. Another tendency involved deemphasizing the role of institutions and concentrating instead on remediating social problems through the enforcement of self-discipline. The combination of political marginalization, scientific thought, and literary production in Russia around the turn of the century thus resulted in a masochistic aesthetic with an even stronger emphasis on discipline than in the Austro-Hungarian case.

3. Resurrecting the Will

Authors like Tolstoy dramatized the contradictions in the ambient understanding of crime and degeneracy, reinforcing the idea that criminals and deviants were the product of injustices that were structural yet irremediable through institutional means. It followed that the only recourse was for individuals to direct their political will inward, reforming themselves and those around them, especially children, through strict discipline. Tolstoy had already gestured toward this thesis in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, but it was only a decade later, in *Resurrection*, that he articulated it fully.

Resurrection manifests Tolstoy’s irritation with institutionalized oppression as a systematic repudiation of the Lombrosian notion of the “born criminal.” For Tolstoy, an

unquestioning acceptance of materialism, Darwinism, and degeneration theory is not merely incorrect, but morally reprehensible: a belief in the power of heredity, he suggests, promotes a fatalistic attitude that bad actors exploit to rationalize behavior that is actually under their control. After the nobleman Dmitri Nekhliudov seduces Ekaterina Maslova, the illegitimate child of a serf woman living with his maiden aunts, she becomes so intractable that the aunts banish her from their household. To quell his guilty conscience, Nekhliudov tells himself that noblemen have been taking advantage of chambermaids since time immemorial, in particular within his own family.³³ Though Nekhliudov studiously avoids visiting his aunts out of shame for what he has done to Maslova, he cannot escape their updates on her descent into indecency, which they attribute not to their own cruelty in turning her out of their home, or Nekhliudov's poor judgment in deflowering her, but to Maslova's family history. "His aunties said that [Maslova] had gone wrong, that she was had a depraved [*razvrashchennaia*] nature, just like her mother. And this opinion of the aunties pleased him because it seemed to exculpate [*opravdyvalo*] him."³⁴ Though they mean well, Nekhliudov's aunts choose the path of least resistance, adopting the "boys will be boys" attitude to which *The Kreutzer Sonata*'s Pozdnyshev attributes the moral decay of Russia's men. Their complacency not only enables Nekhliudov to continue to live a debauched life, but also papers over their own complicity in Maslova's fate. Had they brought her up as a class-conscious member of the peasantry rather than giving her a lady's education even as they used her as a maid, Tolstoy suggests, she might have had fewer illusions about her place in the world and proven less susceptible to Nekhliudov's advances.

As a chimera of upper- and lower-class values, Maslova lacks the material and emotional resources to stay out of trouble. She turns to prostitution to support herself, becomes embroiled in the murder of a rich merchant, and ultimately falls into the clutches of a merciless judicial apparatus that, for all its intellectual sophistication, misunderstands the origins of crime just as badly as her erstwhile guardians. The prosecutor's opening statement during Maslova's trial is an incomprehensible mish-mash of fashionable theories, including "the laws of heredity and inborn criminality, [Lombroso, Tard], evolution and the struggle for existence, hypnotism and hypnotic influence [*vnushenie*], [Charcot, and decadence.]"³⁵ Though the prosecutor cloaks his arguments in scientific terms, they have no more explanatory power or moral rectitude than the speculations of Nekhliudov's aunts. Tolstoy frames every member of the judicial establishment, no matter how low-ranking, as an active contributor to a cruelly formalistic system that obscures unpleasant Russian realities with Western theories. The atmosphere of intellectualism surrounding these ideas arouses Tolstoy's particular ire because it permits their proponents to overwhelm the common-sense morality of simpler folk like Maslova — not through superior argumentation, but through casuistic sleight-of-hand.

After a chance encounter with Maslova in the courtroom where she is about to be tried, Nekhliudov decides to take belated responsibility for his youthful indiscretion and dedicates himself to rescuing his erstwhile lover from her present predicament. Thanks to his tireless advocacy and considerable influence in legal circles, Maslova's case eventually reaches an appellate court, but cannot be tried impartially even there because of the officials' sneering arrogance. One of these officials, the physically repulsive

“materialist” and “Darwinian” Skovorodnikov, regards “all manifestations of abstract morality or, worse still, religiosity not only as despicable folly, but as a personal affront to himself.”³⁶ Seeing in Maslova not a fellow human being battered by circumstances, but a prostitute getting her just desserts, the judges deny her appeal. Figures like Skovorodnikov testify to Tolstoy’s conviction that every corporate entity in Russian public life is irremediably rotten, stuffed full of benighted reactionaries who cunningly manipulate “progressive” scientific principles to oppress the poor and downtrodden.

In Tolstoy’s view, even the most depraved criminals are made, not born. Specifically, they are the products of cruel or indifferent institutions that enshrine fundamentally immoral practices in law. Throughout *Resurrection*, Tolstoy points to the social or circumstantial origins of crime, rejecting the notion of the “born criminal.” The fates of children vividly illustrate the principle of environmental influence: one little girl, exiled to Siberia alongside her mother, repeats the obscenities she hears in their common prison cell, while a boy commits increasingly severe crimes not for pleasure or profit, but because a string of tragic circumstances removes him from the care of his family and thrusts him into poverty.³⁷ Tolstoy also emphasizes the interconnectedness of structural problems in Russia, where injustices within systems of land ownership and the continued exploitation of the peasantry contribute not only to the poverty and criminality of the lower classes, but to the dissipation of the economic elite. For example, it is Maslova’s lack of social standing, a side effect of Russia’s long history of serfdom, that makes her so vulnerable to Nekhliudov’s seduction and its lifelong consequences. Meanwhile, Nekhliudov’s opulent lifestyle corrodes his morals and fills him with a sense of entitlement that allows him to seduce Maslova without compunction.

As in the *Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy's denunciation of every Russian social institution goes hand in hand with a belief that attempts to mitigate structural evils through structural means are bound to fail. Harmful entities like taverns and brothels should not be regulated by the government, but instead eliminated altogether; those who think otherwise are in the business of "[making] a regular institution of lewdness [*uchrezhdaiut pravil'nyi, akkuratnyi razvrat*]," as Pozdnyshev puts it.³⁸ As Nekhliudov discovers when he follows Maslova into exile, "all those vices which developed among the prisoners [...] were not accidents or instances of degeneration, the criminal type, or monstrosity — as obtuse scientists argue, playing right into the government's hands — but the inevitable consequence of the odd misapprehension that people have the right to punish one another."³⁹

The political prescription at the heart of *Resurrection* is even more radical than the permanent, universal abstinence Tolstoy proposed in *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Whereas the latter denounced specific institutions for their contribution to a state of generalized debauchery, the former attacks the idea of the institution itself. For the Tolstoy of 1899, Russia's prisons, courts, brothels, and taverns, and perhaps even its churches and schools, were corrupted beyond all improvement and deserved to be shut down. To simply open new prisons and courts in their stead would solve nothing, however, because Tolstoy did not believe state-enforced law capable of deterring crime. The inculcation of moral values in individuals could not, in his view, be left to anyone but these same individuals themselves. Following the example of Nekhliudov or Maslova, each person would do better to develop their own moral apparatus rather than relying on external authorities for guidance.

Tolstoy believed that an elemental morality slumbered within every human being, even where society stunted or obscured it. Indeed, the purity of Nekhliudov's character only begins to decay when he "[stops] believing in himself and [starts] believing others."⁴⁰ If a person could reawaken his or her natural morality, ethical behavior would result, even in the absence of externally generated rewards or punishments. Such radical individualism would not, however, lead to the atomization of society, but to its triumphant union under the banner of a common faith. As an old peasant man Nekhliudov meets on his Siberian journey states, "Every faith sings its own praises. That's why everyone has scattered around like a bunch of blind kittens. There are many faiths, but one spirit [*dukh*]. In you, in me, in him. If each trusted his own spirit, we would all be united. Be each for himself, and all will be as one [*bud' vsiak sam sebe, i vse budet zaedino*]."⁴¹

Yet the path Tolstoy suggests individuals follow to achieve this state of spiritual health relies on the same repressive, top-down discipline that so enrages him when practiced by judges or prison wardens. Correctly applied, Tolstoyan discipline has the advantage of greater effectiveness than the one governments impose on their subjects, since it comes from within. When Nekhliudov finally manages to convince the incarcerated Maslova of his good intentions toward her and rouses her dormant self-respect, she begins to fear his disapproval even more than the possibility of being sentenced to exile and hard labor.⁴² The rediscovery of her inner moral compass may make Maslova insensitive to external disciplinary imperatives, but it also strips her of pleasures she had previously enjoyed, though Tolstoy dismisses these as inherently sinful. The feelings of liberation and virtuous satisfaction that supposedly replace these

pleasures, however, leave much to be desired in terms of enjoyment. The new and improved Maslova may be less afraid of earthly judges, but the most fearsome judge of all now inhabits her own mind, keeping her in a state of constant vigilance.

To help with the development of an internal disciplinary apparatus, Tolstoy recommends keeping a regular diary, which enables “conversation with oneself, with that true, godly self that lives inside every human being.”⁴³ For Nekhliudov, writing in a journal is part of the painful process of expiating his sins against Maslova, a means of interrogating and policing his wayward desires after years of unreflectively indulging them. It is not difficult to discern the continuity between this form of diary writing and the practices of the Soviet 1920s and 30s, when citizens used their journals as workshops where they could shape their subjectivities as members of a Bolshevik collective.⁴⁴

Another important component of Tolstoyan discipline is the renunciation of physical and especially aesthetic pleasure, which, as Pozdnyshev’s wife discovered in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, lies fatally close to the joys of sensuality.⁴⁵ Only one “legitimate” source of enjoyment remains: the constant self-flagellation necessary to maintain moral rectitude. As Nekhliudov realizes toward the novel’s close, to follow the righteous path is to joyously cultivate a feeling of constant guilt “before God,” which not only cleanses the soul of pride but also promotes spiritual independence from man-made institutions that blasphemously usurp the divine right to judge and punish.⁴⁶ Typically for a masochistic stylist, Tolstoy chooses to end his novel shortly after Nekhliudov comes to this revelation, stating that only time will tell where his hero goes in this new chapter of his life.⁴⁷ By presenting a complete disciplinary model couched in an unsatisfyingly incomplete narrative, Tolstoy emphasizes the didactic nature of his creation. It is up to

the reader to internalize Nekhliudov's mission and carry it to completion within his own reality rather than simply witnessing a transformation that remains confined to the page.

Though the vogue for explicitly "Tolstoyan" behavioral scripts would fade at latest by the dawn of the Soviet era, the author's strong influence on Bolshevik utopianism is undeniable. One quality Tolstoy's prescriptions have in common with early Soviet thought is their indebtedness to Darwinism. Tolstoy's skeptical attitude toward Darwinism notwithstanding, his preferred form of discipline rests on an unmistakably evolutionary understanding of human development. In *Resurrection*, this Darwinian inflection is particularly evident in Tolstoy's consistent use of animal metaphors. For example, when Nekhliudov first encounters Maslova in court, the narrator compares his reaction to that of a puppy whose nose has been rubbed in its own excrement to teach it a lesson.⁴⁸ Later, an encounter with society ladies leaves Nekhliudov feeling like a "horse" being "caressed to make it submit to having the bit put in its mouth and be harnessed."⁴⁹ Humans are also variously compared to crabs, chickens, and bees.⁵⁰ One character, a revolutionary socialist, sees all "exceptional" people as rivals and "would happily dispatch them the way older male apes dispatch younger ones."⁵¹

Tolstoy maintains his anti-Darwinian stance even as he repeatedly compares humans to animals, implying that the animalistic behavior in which Nekhliudov and others engage does not proceed from a deep kinship between humans and their animal forefathers. Instead, it testifies to the devolution afflicting a society governed by corrupt institutions, which alienate people from their own humanity, ultimately rendering them feral. Man is only wolf to man when society compels him to be, which is why animalistic "[wildness]" flourishes among those who have been deliberately kept "cold,

hungry, idle, infected with disease, debased, locked up.”⁵² As Nekhliudov observes, the more people outsource the daunting task of self-discipline to institutional authority, the greater the likelihood of succumbing to a Lamarckian devolution.

As one of Nekhliudov’s Siberian interlocutors puts it, prisons are the worst offenders among degradation-promoting institutions, since “people are meant to eat bread by the sweat of their brow,” but prison “[locks] them up like pigs and feeds them without work to turn them into animals [*chtob oni ozvereli*].”⁵³ The solution to this state of affairs, as the same man articulates, is entirely consistent with a masochistic *modus operandi*: “be your own master [*nachal’nik*], and then there won’t be any need for masters.”⁵⁴ In Tolstoy’s portrayal, it is not nature, but rather human institutions that transform humans into animals, in which condition their behavior really is governed by evolutionary principles. What separates humans from animals is their moral conscience, which, when (re-)awakened, permits them to enact social and spiritual progress through the application of their will.

As Tolstoy expresses it in *Resurrection*, the remedy against ubiquitous human misery lies not in reforming institutions like courts or prisons, which are hopelessly misconceived. Nor is it enough to adhere to a Thoreau-style program of “simplification” and asceticism, though as Nekhliudov and Maslova both discover, renouncing creature comforts and sexual pleasure contributes significantly to spiritual awakening. Morally righteous individuals must practice a discipline derived from the will, Tolstoy argues, but, as his repeated use of animal metaphors suggests, this strategy works best when it is imprinted not only on the mind, but also on the body. In this scheme, the role of sexual abstinence is to provide a pristine physical vessel for the mind and spirit.

Tolstoy's vision of a purgative moral discipline that will obviate not only prisons and courts, but ultimately the government that administers them, that will allow each individual to liberate him or herself while maintaining strict norms of behavior, particularly abstinence, only apparently confirms the Darwinist principles he so passionately hated. In fact, his views have much more in common with a distinctly anti-Western voice: the philosophy of the utopian cosmist Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903).

4. Space Case: Nikolai Fedorov and Biocentric Bodily Discipline

As articulated in his *Philosophy of the Common Task* (published between 1906-1913), Fedorov's views are not only consonant with those of contemporaries like Tolstoy, but also prefigure the biocentric, sacrificial habitus to which the Stalinist state would demand that its subjects adhere (see Chapters 4 and 5). Furthermore, Fedorov's opposition to scientific progress for its own sake and to the "blasphemous" profit-seeking of the industrialized West marks him as a "reactionary modernist" (see Chapter 3).⁵⁵

Though Fedorov's ideas occupied the fringes of late nineteenth-century Russian social thought — both because his writings were known only to a small circle of followers during his lifetime, and because of the eccentricity of his prescriptions — there was a sense in which his thinking was quite mainstream. Like many of his contemporaries, he believed in personal transformation as a conduit to political action and harshly criticized atheism, materialism, Lombrosian criminology, and Darwinism, which he considered some of the greatest scourges of his age. Not only did these intellectual currents cause people to forget "philanthropy and humanism," but they also encouraged an insalubrious capitulation to nature through their acknowledgment of the

inevitability of “struggle [*bor’ba*].”⁵⁶ A more productive attitude toward nature, in Fedorov’s view, was to understand that humans are superior to animals and thus duty-bound to exploit nature’s resources to its own benefit. Until humans acted as nature’s “will” and “reason,” Fedorov claimed, it would oppose us in blind enmity, though the situation was not hopeless: assuming humans triumphed over it, nature would serve them as an “eternal friend.”⁵⁷ To accomplish this goal, Fedorov recommended uniting all existing sciences under the umbrella of a new astronomy, which could then be deployed to physically resurrect every male human who ever lived and died on Earth. The resulting immortal army, finally free from the burden of mourning its departed ancestors and the exigencies of sexual reproduction, would joyfully colonize space.

Fedorov’s vision may have been unique in its particulars, but he shared with many of his fellow utopian thinkers the conviction that realizing a wholesale transformation of humanity would require dramatic and decidedly undemocratic intervention. As Ilia Stambler writes, “the ‘common task’ of fighting death requires universal conscription, and must be directed by a ‘psychocracy’ grounded in absolute monarchy.”⁵⁸ For Fedorov as for Tolstoy, then, society had to be thoroughly disciplined before it could be saved.

Though Fedorov considered a strong, centralized government indispensable to the quest for universal resurrection, he cautioned against individual apathy, atomization, and an overreliance on external authority. He was particularly concerned about the overspecialization of scientific disciplines in the service of what he called “manufacturing” — that is, the production of consumer goods in the industrial economies of Western Europe and America. Like the opponents of “Americanism” in interwar Germany, Fedorov decried Western “civilization,” with its “attachment to manufactured

toys” and its harmful obsession with “personal freedom,” which Fedorov dismissed as a path to enjoying the frivolous toys produced in industrial capitalism without taking account of morality.⁵⁹ Patterns of Darwinian behavior, in his view, resulted not from immutable natural laws, but from the West’s hedonistic materialism, which pitted individuals against one another in a never-ending struggle for scarce resources.

Individualism stood to harm humanity wherever it prevailed over common interests, contributing to the pernicious condition of *nerodstvennost’* [lack of relatedness]. Fedorov saw *nerodstvennost’* everywhere, most of all among the “learned,” who were at once humanity’s greatest hope for salvation and its greatest obstacle because of their propensity to work separately on discrete problems rather than uniting to tackle the Common Task.⁶⁰

Typically for the male-centered nature of Fedorov’s vision, he traced the excessive individualization afflicting the scientific community to the ubiquity of “feminine caprice [*zhenskaia prikhot*],” explaining that women’s acquisitiveness drove all the great industrial manufacturing economies.⁶¹ Only by renouncing the temptations of congress with the opposite sex could men and women fulfill their respective roles in the project of universal resurrection. Men would be responsible for “collecting the scattered particles” of everyone’s ancestors from all corners of the universe through the “art and science” of “cosmo-metallurgy,” while women would be tasked with putting these pieces together according to the principles of “physiology and histology,” ultimately restoring the bodies of all the world’s departed.⁶² For all its radicalism, then, Fedorov’s vision disturbed few traditional hierarchies; though resurrection would render sexual reproduction obsolete,

the women of the distant future would be just as subordinate to men as they were in 1890s Russia.

Like many of his contemporaries, Fedorov believed the world could be saved neither by individualism, which he feared would ultimately produce a “war of all against all,” nor by institutions (especially economic ones), which he felt encouraged greed and concupiscence. At the same time, though he rejected the idea that greater individual freedom would be beneficial to humanity and championed an autocratic form of government, Fedorov regarded societies that “could not do without supervision, coercion, and punishment” as “immature” in the Kantian sense of the term.⁶³ Like Tolstoy, he emphatically rejected the notion that human beings had any right to punish the violations of their fellows, either through juridical or economic means:

All crimes and transgressions, from the smallest insult to murder, spell the destruction of life. Juridical retribution, however, does not restore life. Economic payment for goods and services is also invalid. It is true that we can pay in kind for the services and goods we receive from others, that is, with similar services or goods, but we cannot repay the effort [*sily*], the part of life, which has been spent on their production; the exchange does not entail a reciprocal repayment of spent life force [*zhiznennye sily*], but leads to mutual ruination [*razorenie*], to death. It follows that the content of a debt is always life, and so the satisfaction of debt can only involve the restoration of life — resurrection.⁶⁴

To combat the rampant alienation of men from each other and themselves, Fedorov recommended some of the same remedies as contemporaries from Tolstoy to Otto Weininger, including sexual abstinence. In Fedorov’s view, abstinence was a prerequisite for strengthening the spirit of brotherhood that he hoped would propel human beings toward the fulfillment of the Common Task of universal resurrection. As a religious thinker, Fedorov found sexual desire inherently filthy and immoral; as a resurrection-oriented cosmist, he believed that men’s “exclusive cleaving [*prileplenie*] to

wives” caused them to “forget their fathers” and consequently “introduce[d] political and civil conflict [*vrazhda*] into the world.”⁶⁵ To achieve societal “maturity,” Fedorov claimed, humans paradoxically needed to sustain sexual immaturity into adulthood, for only the privileging of brotherly and filial love over sexual love for the opposite sex could positively contribute to the world’s “purification” through resurrection.⁶⁶

Sexual pleasure was only one of the sources of enjoyment Fedorov believed it crucial for humans to learn to forgo. Using language strikingly similar to that Werner Sombart deployed in his inflammatory First World War pamphlet, “Merchants and Heroes,” which contrasted the soulless British passion for the stultifying comforts of “civilization” with the lofty soulfulness of German “culture,” Fedorov denounced Western pleasure-seeking. According to Fedorov, a preoccupation with enjoyment not only enfeebled human beings, but also neutralized science by transforming it into industry’s handmaiden. In addition, it debased the “purest bliss” of true art (which Fedorov predictably defined as any aesthetic activity that glorified men’s ancestors) and rendered aesthetics “pornocratic.”⁶⁷ The renunciation of pleasure in the service of the Common Task was thus all-encompassing: any aesthetic, interpersonal, or intellectual activity enjoyed for its own sake, rather than as a conduit to universal resurrection, was necessarily destructive. Difficult as the process of breaking society’s dependence on these pleasures would be, it was the responsibility of every individual to commit to doing so even in the absence of institutional support.

Fedorov’s age was rich in apocalyptic predictions for the future, and the philosopher himself was no exception to the trend of prophesying dire consequences for humanity should it elect not to observe his prescriptions. At the moment when humans ceased

trying to conquer their baser instincts — including the drive toward atheism, unleashed by the proliferation of Darwinist ideas — Fedorov thought they would succumb to apathy, waiting passively for evolution to take its course and produce “superior beings” instead of actively working to become those superior beings. In the end, acknowledging that they themselves were animals would lead humans literally to “transform into animals.” The ultimate result would be a technocratic dystopia in which “technology, having become an inert [*bessoznatel’nyi*] set of techniques” would “triumph.” This unspiritual form of science would serve only base ends like personal enrichment or the facilitation of consequence-free (non-procreative) sex. Naturally, in this scenario the all-important project of resurrection would be shuttered, since it would only present an obstacle to unrestrained hedonism. Having ragefully destroyed any object or setting that recalls the importance of ancestors (such as cemeteries or temples), the last generation of this doomed humanity would then commence destroying itself, ceasing only with the arrival of “*dies irae* [*den’ gneva*].”⁶⁸ Paradoxically, it is by recognizing its kinship with animals that humanity, according to Fedorov, risks becoming most “unnatural,” forgetting even conventional family ties (to say nothing of the more radical concept of *rodstvennost’*) and sinking into a heretofore unprecedented level of vice enabled by rudderless technological progress.

Like Tolstoy, Fedorov conceived of the discipline necessary to forestall global societal collapse (and produce the restoration of universal brotherhood) as fundamentally corporeal. This commitment to physicality contributes to his rejection of Darwinism, which Fedorov considered, among its other flaws, disrespectful to the human body. The body, he argues, is not brute, animal material subject to the same laws that govern the

behavior of beasts, but godly matter to be shaped by an internalized divine will. “Our body,” he averred, “must be our task [*nashe telo dolzhno byt’ nashim delom*]” — our deliberate creation. To allow our bodies to follow their natural desires is to permit our will to be conquered by “a blind power” that will ultimately cause death to triumph over life.⁶⁹ To attain the wisdom and scientific competence necessary to enact Fedorov’s vision of interplanetary colonization, humans would need to take total control of their physical functions and organs through what he called “psychophysiological regulation” or the “management [*upravlenie*] of spiritual and bodily phenomena.”⁷⁰ So profound would be the ideal form of discipline that it would allow humans to command what was previously involuntary.

While many of Fedorov’s contemporaries, including Tolstoy, were concerned with spiritual renewal, Fedorov was unique in his insistence on literal resurrection: people were not to be restored in spirit or memory only, but physically revived. The discipline keeping them from squandering their precious life force on pleasures of the flesh thus had to be anchored in the body. Fedorov directly critiqued Tolstoy in his *Philosophy of the Common Task* for the spiritual and metaphorical nature of the author’s restorative vision, calling him the “greatest enemy of resurrection” and accusing him of subverting “true resurrection” by applying the name to an “unimportant” and “completely fruitless” moral transformation.⁷¹

Accordingly, whereas Tolstoy was preoccupied with society’s spiritual rottenness and considered the troubles afflicting physical selves an ancillary consequence thereof, Fedorov was haunted by the idea of physically rotting biological matter. To cleanse the environment of this dead matter, for instance by cremating the dead, would deplete the

world's collective life force, but to allow it to decompose naturally would lead to "epidemics." Unless humanity banded together under the banner of the Common Task, Fedorov warned, it would be left with one choice only: whether to die from famine or disease.⁷²

Fedorov's philosophy combined the sexuality-related and environmental concerns of many of his Western European counterparts (including Nordau and Weininger) with a Slavophilic mistrust of the West and a Nietzschean vitalism. He channeled these diverse intellectual currents into a program that emphasized the importance of developing a strong will — not in order to fight for progress within existing institutional confines, but to discipline the self in the name of an infinitely deferred future to be enjoyed beyond the bounds of Earth and the limits of mortality. In the process of striving toward this future, the energies previously dedicated to erotic or economic purposes would ideally be sublimated into the "common task" of universal resurrection.

Fedorov's graphic descriptions of the alternative future that would result should humanity fail to dedicate itself to the Common Task may seem far-fetched, but attitudes of apocalyptic pessimism were widespread in Europe around 1900. The turn toward aestheticism animating movements like Symbolism was, in part, a response to the anxieties about the imminent decline of humanity that plagued a majority of the Russian intellectual elite. Russian thinkers continued debating role of the will in overcoming the dangers of a purely animalistic existence into the new century, with fiction providing an arena for assorted thought experiments. The next sections will examine two seemingly disparate critiques of turn-of-the-century Russian mores. For all their stylistic and philosophical differences, Anton Chekhov's (1860-1904) *The Duel* (1893) and Fedor

Sologub's (1863-1927) *Petty Demon* (1907) both promote an essentially masochistic mode of behavior, showing the pervasiveness of this model in late-Imperial Russia.

5. Chekhov's *Pragmatist Masochism*: The Duel

Chekhov's *Duel* is a consummately masochistic text that provides insight into the Russian reception of degeneration theory and, moreover, hints at the form fears of and remedies for degeneration would take in Soviet discourse. In a small seaside town in the Caucasus, the dissipated nobleman Laevskii struggles to leave Nadezhda, whom he seduced away from her marriage but no longer loves. Laevskii's acquaintance, the young zoologist von Koren, despises him as a degenerate specimen and ultimately challenges him to a duel. Though the duel leaves both men physically intact, it has profound spiritual effects: Laevskii finally marries Nadezhda and becomes a sober and disciplined person; meanwhile, von Koren finds his dogmatic scientism challenged by Laevskii's dramatic transformation.

The Duel displays many of the formal traits the previous chapter described as typically masochistic: an ethnographic bent (expressed the story's setting in the Orientalized south of Russia); an emphasis on discipline; the construction of narrative from quotations; and the elision of climax. The latter two aspects are especially pronounced and contribute particularly to the work's disciplinary message.

The Duel's heavily citational quality is one of its most salient characteristics, with each character positioning him or herself as a representative of a literary or scientific movement. Whereas Laevskii's preferred sources are literary or aesthetic, von Koren tends toward Spencerian philosophizing, which Chekhov deliberately marks as departing

from Spencer's actual thought in essential points.⁷³ Indeed, von Koren's zeal for extermination — he compares Laevskii to a "cholera microbe" and baldly states that humanity would be better off without him⁷⁴ — may be Spencer-inspired, but is rather "misplaced," in the sense that Spencer himself did not consider evolution in need of "helpers" like von Koren.⁷⁵ As Michael Finke notes, Laevskii and von Koren are not as different from one another as the latter would like to believe: indeed, both men speak in the vocabulary of degeneration theory and "[make] no ontological distinction between data drawn from literature and those drawn from life."⁷⁶

The Duel's formal qualities and plot are also borrowed from well-known sources. The story's title, for instance, calls to mind famous duels in Russian literary history, including those in which both Pushkin and Lermontov lost their lives. This association with the Russian classics is strengthened by the self-stagings of the characters themselves, particularly Laevskii, who cultivates a bathetic "superfluous man" persona updated with the neurasthenia, fatigue, and hysteria that Nordau considered part and parcel of modern life.

The plot, too, is driven by a series of hoary clichés, including a duel over a trifle and an unfaithful woman being discovered *in flagrante delicto* by her lover. The narrative, including the salvation of all three protagonists, proceeds through the chance confluence of "hackneyed plot devices," most importantly the deacon Pobedov's interference in the duel.⁷⁷

The duel itself is worth examining closely, since it encapsulates the second most significant masochistic element of Chekhov's narrative — namely, the delay or elision of climax. By calling his story "The Duel," Chekhov creates the expectation that a duel

will, in fact, occur. Having sown the seeds of suspense at the start, Chekhov then postpones both the titular event until the last pages of the story, where its trappings and preparations are described at length, further delaying the expected climax (we suspect that von Koren will, in accordance with his eugenicist principles, happily exterminate Laevskii). Just when the climactic moment seems imminent, Chekhov avoids it entirely:

“It’s over,” thought Laevskii. The muzzle of the gun, pointed right in his face, the expression of hatred and contempt in von Koren’s pose and his entire figure and this murder that a respectable person would now commit in broad daylight in the presence of respectable people, and this silence, and the unknown power that forced Laevskii to stand still instead of running — how mysterious all this is, how incomprehensible, how frightening! The time it took von Koren to aim seemed longer than the [previous] night to Laevskii. He looked at the seconds pleadingly; they were still and pale. “Hurry up and shoot!” thought Laevskii and felt how his pale, quivering, pitiful face must arouse even greater hatred in von Koren. “I’m going to kill him now,” thought von Koren, aiming at the forehead and already feeling the trigger under his finger. “Yes, of course, I’ll kill him.” “He’ll kill him!” a desperate shout sounded suddenly somewhere very close by. At that moment, a shot was fired. Observing that Laevskii was standing and hadn’t fallen, everyone looked in the direction the shout had come from and saw the deacon. Pale, with wet hair stuck to his forehead and cheeks, wet and dirty all over, he stood on the opposite bank in the corn, smiling oddly and waving his wet hat.⁷⁸

The deacon’s spontaneous intervention in what would otherwise have been, in Laevskii’s accurate assessment, a cold-blooded killing perpetrated in the name of an anachronistic honor code, is a boon for both potential victim and would-be murderer — a chance for each to begin the slow process of redemption through discipline. Formally, however, the deacon’s shout removes the scene’s narrative peak, eliding climax and rendering the duel itself a draw. All that remains in its wake is the incremental, typically Chekhovian “squeezing out” of degenerate blood drop by drop, which Laevskii and von Koren both undertake as they embark on new, more disciplined chapters of their lives. Virtue may be preserved through Laevskii’s decision to marry Nadezhda and von Koren’s

reconsideration of his rigid scientism, but the sense of expectation the title generated remains unresolved because the work that will transform all three characters lies in the future.

As the *The Duel*'s relatively happy ending and Chekhov's other writings on the subject demonstrate, degeneration is hardly the death sentence Nordau declared it to be; on the contrary, it is quite treatable.⁷⁹ The catch is that the remedy is a slow and excruciating procedure that makes the reformed Laevskii and Nadezhda appear hunched, childlike, awkward, not to mention threadbare, cold, and poor. If generalized to an entire population, moreover, this expression of Chekhov's skeptical but essentially well-meaning humanism takes on a sinister aspect. Despite his dislike for Nordau himself, whom he called a "phony," and Russian Lombrosians like Praskovia Tarnovskaia, Chekhov, typically for a masochistic stylist, contributed to the very disciplinary discourse whose more flagrant manifestations he skewered so mercilessly in his prose.⁸⁰

Indeed, in his emphasis on personal discipline, Chekhov anticipated such thinkers as the legal scholar Bogdan Kistiakovskii, who suggested in 1909 that Russians bring institutional violence on themselves through their lack of internal mechanisms of control. This same commitment to transformation through internalized discipline, which Chekhov and many of his contemporaries believed to be the only effective weapon against degeneration, would later animate the Stalinist conception of society as subject to comprehensive "re-forging" accomplished through political education, improved hygiene, "correct" labor praxis, and a panoptic "mutual surveillance" of all citizens by all citizens.⁸¹

Seen as a contributing factor to the disciplinary component of the masochistic aesthetic, degeneration theory enjoyed surprising longevity in Russia. Its influence survived the end of the Russian Empire and the transition to Soviet rule, persisting even after its idols, Lombroso among them, were denounced as “thick-skulled” and “bourgeois” in the Soviet press of the early 1930s.⁸² Ironically, but typically for Russia, the very thinkers who most opposed violence, disenfranchisement, and oppression — Chekhov among them — helped shape the ferocious disciplinary apparatuses that would make these ills endemic in Soviet society.

6. Sologub's *Petty Demon* As Fedorovian Dystopia

Sologub's well-known prose work presents a thought experiment with Fedorovian overtones, incarnating the philosopher's direst predictions in a parade of Gogol-style grotesques. Unlike Chekhov or Tolstoy, who present flawed but not unsympathetic characters whose behavior provides readers with examples of what to avoid and implicitly suggests alternative scripts to adopt, *The Petty Demon* centers on figures of irredeemable monstrosity. Their picturesque freakishness notwithstanding, Sologub conceived his anti-heroes not as entertaining exemplars of human depravity but as pedagogical tools, meant to shock readers out of their complacent acceptance of Russia's most pressing problems.

Like the other fin-de-siècle works discussed in this chapter, *The Petty Demon* emphasizes the degree to which political and social institutions promote the decay of the individuals who comprise them or live in their purview. At the same time, Sologub implicitly condemns attempts at political and aesthetic escapism. If it is immoral to

ignore societal problems and also impossible to remedy them through collective action and existing structures, it follows that the only remaining path is to divest external authorities of influence and become, to paraphrase the dictum of the old man Tolstoy's Nekhliudov encounters in Siberia, one's own exclusive master.

The Petty Demon's stylistic peculiarities, particularly the "flatness" of its characters and the repetitive nature of its plot, obviate the possibility of a distanced aesthetic reflection and compel readers to face up to the ugliness of the age.⁸³ As Sologub wrote in a preface to the book's second edition, published in 1908, his creation was a deliberate attempt to force society to contemplate its flaws in a "mirror" of searing exactitude:

It is about you, my dear contemporaries, that I wrote my novel about the Petty Demon and his terrifying Touch-Me-Not [*Nedotykomka*], about Ardalion and Varvara Peredonov, Pavel Volodin, about Daria, Liudmila, and Valeria Rutilov, Aleksandr Pyl'nikov and others. About you. This novel is a mirror, skillfully crafted. Long did I polish it, fastidious was my labor. The mirror's surface is even, its composition pure. Measured many times and carefully tested, it possesses no distorting curves. It reflects the deformed and the beautiful with equal accuracy.⁸⁴

By emphasizing the technical sophistication of his "mirror," Sologub implies that his project leaves nothing to chance, torturing the reader with a precisely calibrated apparatus. In the aftermath of the failed revolution of 1905, it would no longer be enough to prophecy or suggest; the time had come to shock the collective will into action. But what, exactly, is the pedagogical content of Sologub's tale? What is the nature of the societal disease he seeks to diagnose, and what cure does he recommend?

Over the course of the novel, Sologub's repellent protagonist, the gymnasium teacher Peredonov, experiences a gradual loss of humanity and succumbs to a pattern of debilitatingly mechanized behavior. A small-town tyrant, Peredonov is both stupid and

cruel, harassing students, female admirers, and his fiancée, Varvara, with equal alacrity. Though his mean-spirited nature and overwhelming selfishness make him fundamentally unsuited to his role as a shaper of impressionable young people, Peredonov believes himself worthy of significant career advancement and stakes his hopes on the post of gymnasium inspector, which he intends to win not on his own merits, but by manipulating establishment networks.

Sologub stresses that, exceptional though Peredonov's laziness, cruelty, and stupidity may seem, they are entirely within the bounds of normality as defined within his social milieu. "Peredonovism," as Sologub called it, "is not an accident but a widespread illness which constitutes Russia's contemporary reality [*byt*]." ⁸⁵ So ordinary does Peredonov seem to those around him that no one notices the danger lurking beneath his quirks until they crescendo into a murderous paroxysm. In fact, Peredonov is not merely tacitly accepted as a part of the provincial landscape, but actively valorized. As the critic Vladimir Botsianovski (1869-1943) observed in 1910, Peredonov is a valued member of his provincial community:

By the end of the novel, what frightens us is not this maniac, Peredonov himself, but that society which is no better than he is. Mothers and brides compete to entice him into joining their families. Everyone gets along with him quite swimmingly. ⁸⁶

For all his outlandish behavior, Peredonov retains his position as a (relatively) well regarded colleague, fiancé, and companion until almost the very end of the novel, when a fit of paranoia compels him to slaughter his friend, the giggling simpleton Volodin.

True to Fedorov's warning about the brutalizing consequences of accepting a Darwinian model of human society, Peredonov invokes the concept of "struggle for

existence” both to justify his mistreatment of others and to explain away the aggression he believes others direct toward him. “It is nasty to live among envious and hostile people. But what can you do — not everyone can be an inspector! It’s the struggle for existence!”⁸⁷ Peredonov uses his (admittedly perfunctory) understanding of fundamental Darwinist principles not as evidence of man’s perfectibility over time but in order to absolve himself and others of responsibility for cruelty. Taken to its limit, the logic of social competition feeds Peredonov’s burgeoning paranoia and drives him to murder.

Through his unpleasant characters, Sologub expresses his skepticism toward a Darwinist worldview and toward the related currents of degeneration theory and criminology, all of which he frames as aligned with Russia’s most reactionary elements. Much like the court officials in Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, the petty demons inhabiting Peredonov’s town deploy popular versions of the latest social-scientific advances to legitimize their illiberal political views and vicious personal behavior. For example, a prosecutor of Peredonov’s acquaintance funnels vague notions of heredity into an argument for the death penalty and against social mobility:

“Capital punishment is not barbarism, my dear sir!” he shouted. “Science has acknowledged the existence of born criminals. That says it all, my friend. They should be liquidated, not fed by the government. [...] Heredity is a great thing! [...] To fashion nobles out of *muzhiks* is stupid, ridiculous, wasteful, and immoral. [...] Educate the *muzhik* as much as you like, just don’t give him any titles for it. Because then the peasantry will lose its best members and forever remain rabble [*chern’*] and trash [*bydlo*], while the nobility also incurs damages from the influx of uncultured elements. Back in his village he was better than the others, but once among the nobles, he’ll imbue their estate with something crude, unchivalrous, ignoble. He’s concerned first and foremost with profit [*nazhiva*], with the interests of his belly.”⁸⁸

In railing against the hypothetical, undisciplined *muzhik*, the prosecutor is actually describing himself and his fellow provincial noblemen, each of whom personally

disproves the notion that high social class reliably correlates with good character. By garbling scientific principles for polemical purposes, Peredonov and his friends not only represent how harmful these ideas can be in the hands of ignorant laymen who misunderstand or misuse them, but unwittingly demonstrate the fallaciousness of these ideas themselves. After all, despite their supposed status as products of superior breeding by the “fittest” members of society, they are clearly “rabble” of the worst kind, their lust for profits and exclusive preoccupation with the “interests of the belly” overwhelming their ostensibly high level of education and relative economic well-being.

Just as Fedorov might have predicted, as soon as Peredonov and his ilk begin to consider themselves members of the animal kingdom rather than morally superior beings animated with the divine spark of reason, they lose what little conscience they had to begin with and descend into a zombie-like existence. Though his environment is hardly the technocratic dystopia of Fedorov’s nightmares, Peredonov nonetheless suffers from an automatization of gesture and affect, slowly discarding his human characteristics in favor of mechanized substitutes. Thoroughly incapable of controlling his instincts, he comes to resemble an “oddly large doll” that has been “wound up to dance,” that is, a being fully in the thrall of an external force that fully divests him of agency.⁸⁹

Many of his friends suffer from variations of the same affliction, their gestures and words acquiring automaton-like features. This signals that Peredonov’s odd behavior results not from a personal idiosyncrasy but constitutes one of the diseases of the age. The merchant Tishkov, for instance, has an irritating habit of weaving his interlocutors’ words into a harmonious but uncommunicative tapestry of rhyme.

Tishkov did not care if [anyone] listened to him or not. He just couldn't resist snatching words other people said and rhyming them, and he functioned with the steadfastness of a cunningly devised boredom machine [*mashinka-dokuchalka*]. After a while spent looking at his brisk, precise movements, one might think that this was no living person, that he had already died or never even lived, that he saw nothing in the living world and heard nothing except inanimately ringing words.⁹⁰

Tishkov's bizarre behavior marks him as a Fedorovian degenerate: he is a man with no memory who is accordingly dominated by the spirit of death. He is also entirely self-absorbed, his mechanical affect proceeding from complete indifference to those around him. Though he produces a nominally pleasing form of speech — a rhythmic discourse that recalls the “word-weaving [*pletenie sloves*]” technique commonly employed by Russian bookmen in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries — its aestheticism is deceptive. In a historical chronicle or a saint's *vita*, *pletenie sloves* was meant to concentrate the reader's attention on points of particular moral, historical, or religious significance, the better to imprint them onto his or her mind. By contrast, Tishkov's babbling distracts and obscures, its nominal beauty not only not saving the world, but actively draining it of meaning.

Tishkov's complete disregard for others is one of the most pronounced symptoms of the disease Sologub dubs “Peredonovism.” Except when they gravely injure or kill one another, Peredonov and his ilk rarely react to external stimuli. Rather, as Diana Greene observes, “each character merely incorporates others into his or her endlessly repeated activity — like gears in a machine that mesh without ever interacting.”⁹¹ Peredonov's reality is thus a Fedorovian technocracy in spirit, if not in form: a technologically backward but nevertheless mechanical social order whose dehumanized participants are so alienated from one another that they are blind not merely to the underlying

“relatedness” of all human beings, but even to their own blood ties. Peredonov, for instance, violates the incest taboo by marrying his distant relative, a fact that only causes halfhearted outrage. Though they repeatedly refer to the impropriety of the couple’s relationship, the townsfolk mostly seem interested in it as a potential lever that they could use to manipulate Peredonov. Others are too busy committing sins of their own to care about Peredonov’s: Liudmila Rutilova, a decadently idle young woman, seduces an underage boy, while the sadistic mother of one of Peredonov’s young students conspires with him to have her son whipped for her own sexual gratification. These behaviors are so ubiquitous that they must be regarded not as isolated anomalies, but as indications of systemic dysfunction.

The fate awaiting a world populated predominantly with Peredonovs, Varvaras, and Rutilovas is necessarily bleak. To the extent that he is capable of imagination, Peredonov envisions the distant future as a time when life will have become radically simpler through automatization. In a conversation with his friend (and future murder victim) Volodin, he asks,

“You think that in two or three hundred years people will still be working?”

“How else can it be? If you don’t work, you can’t get any bread. You only get bread for money, and money has to be earned.”

“Well, I don’t want bread.”

“There won’t be buns or cakes, either,” Volodin said, giggling. “Won’t be anything to buy vodka with, or to make into cordial.”

“No, people themselves won’t work,” said Peredonov. “There’ll be machines for everything: turn the handle, like on a music box, and there it is...though it’ll be boring to turn the handle for long.”⁹²

Peredonov’s perfect world closely resembles a Fedorovian apocalypse: labor has become unnecessary, while technology promotes base tendencies like gluttony and drunkenness instead of serving a higher purpose. As Peredonov makes clear, even the minimal effort

required to operate the automatic bread-producing machines of the future would likely be beyond people like him. Having lost sight of everything beyond his own immediate whims, he would find activities requiring the slightest foresight unbearably “boring.”

His will weakened by vice and the influence of erroneous ideas like Darwinism, Peredonov falls prey to the unmanageable “blind power” Fedorov associated with a nature unreformed by human intervention. Peredonov’s failure to relate to others directly affects his capacity for self-awareness, so that even when he acts in his own self-interest, he has no more volition than a “corpse propelled by external forces.”⁹³ His refusal to observe the social contract does not even advance his goals; instead, it quickens his descent into madness by rendering his surroundings completely incomprehensible and hence terrifying.

Toward the end of the novel, Peredonov has become trapped in a vicious cycle as his growing cruelty provokes equal but opposite reactions in others. Lacking the insight to interpret these attacks as logical responses to his own behavior, Peredonov can only use them as fuel for paranoia. Murdering Volodin is the apotheosis of his spiritual devolution; though the crime is premeditated, it nonetheless proceeds from a moment of spontaneous, animalistic reaction. True to the principle of “struggle for existence,” Peredonov feels he has no choice but to exterminate a man he believes to be competing for the same narrow niche in their common ecosystem.

One symptom of the progressive dulling of Peredonov’s already crude internal operating system is his inability to distinguish reality from fantasy and especially metaphor.⁹⁴ Long plagued by the unsubstantiated belief that Volodin is attempting to undermine him, Peredonov fixates on the idea that his rival will physically replace him,

winning both Varvara's heart and the post of gymnasium inspector in his stead. To ensure that others will always be able to distinguish him from his enemy, Peredonov inks his chest, stomach, elbows, and other body parts with the letter "P." This procedure has a purely ritualistic function, since "P" could just as easily stand for Volodin's first name, Pavel, as for "Peredonov."⁹⁵

Peredonov's cognitive enfeeblement causes him to confuse Volodin, whom the narrator has compared with a ram throughout the text, with an actual ram, a convenient fiction that enables him to extinguish Volodin's life without compunction. The schoolteacher's fatally literal interpretation of Darwinist principles recalls the pseudo-rational reasoning of Chekhov's von Koren, who not only classifies Laevskii as a "bacillus" and reasons that society would be better off without him, but appoints himself to the position of executioner. Without a powerful will or active intellect to temper them, Sologub suggests, theories like Darwinism are capable of engendering a range of deleterious behaviors, from indifference to moral violations to outright violence.

Mapping Fedorov's philosophy onto Sologub's novel produces a complete clinical picture of "Peredonovism." Arising from a combination of moral torpor, intellectual laziness, and thoughtless absorption of Western scientific innovations, the disease causes a progressive mechanization and loss of memory that culminates in egregious brutality. Sologub reveals his alignment with Russian Symbolism by portraying the disempowerment of Logos as contributing to the entropy engulfing Peredonov's town. While semi-conscious creatures like Tishkov merely deaden the spoken word, Peredonov, fearing for his political reputation but unable to distinguish subversive texts from anodyne ones, plays it safe by burning every piece of printed matter in his possession.⁹⁶

When he does appeal to the written word, it is not to tap its intellectual content, but to exploit its ritual value — hence the letter “P,” which becomes a pictographic talisman rather than a simple label. Beyond his forays into book burning, Peredonov is a destroyer of Logos in a more general sense. Unlike the protagonists in Chekhov’s *Duel*, who deliberately construct themselves as literary archetypes, Peredonov and his comrades may be described as “anti-artists” who bring disharmony and chaos into their surroundings.⁹⁷

The unredeemed and endemic nature of the spiritual ugliness in Peredonov’s community enhances the novel’s pedagogical function, in particular cutting off the possibility of escape into an alternative, apolitical universe of refined aesthetics — both for Sologub’s characters and his readers. Even figures who are not completely insensitive to the appeal of art or literature, like Liudmila Rutilova, are so morally bankrupt that they turn their love of beauty to amoral ends, furthering societal decay.

After Peredonov rejects Liudmila Rutilova, the youngest and prettiest of his numerous potential brides, she turns to more accessible sources of male attention. Her chosen companion is one of Peredonov’s gymnasium students, Sasha Pyl’nikov, whom she befriends just as Peredonov begins a bizarre campaign of slandering his students to their parents with the aim of observing the boys’ ensuing whippings. That these two subplots develop in parallel, with one seemingly acting as an “outgrowth” of the other, implies a kinship between the relatively sophisticated Rutilova and the brutish Peredonov.⁹⁸ Though Rutilova’s search for sexual gratification proceeds through more pleasant means than Peredonov’s — she entices Sasha with perfume, beautiful clothes, and conversations about poetry — it still relies on deception, entrapment, and the

exploitation of weakness. Though some of Sologub's contemporaries did not code Rutilova's relationship with Sasha as pedophilic, instead citing it as the novel's sole representation of pure love, the deliberate manner in which the author juxtaposes Rutilova's actions with Peredonov's, inviting comparisons between the two, suggests that she is no more innocent than he is.⁹⁹

Unlike Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Fedorov, Sologub does not explicitly propose a solution to the problem he calls "Peredonovism," perhaps because the possibility of redeeming Russia without radically overhauling existing social and political structures seemed even more distant after 1905 than in the 1880s and 90s. Yet even in the absence of an explicit program for improvement, it is possible to discern a positive message behind *The Petty Demon's* panoply of negative examples. Relinquishing responsibility for one's own behavior, either as an individual or as a member of a group, produces internal chaos that easily spills over into arson, bloodshed, and rabble-rousing. The implied remedy is a single-minded, self-motivated discipline rooted in a clarifying logocentric order that prevents the mind from losing itself in either the involutions of an abstract aesthetics or in solipsistic hallucination.

7. Conclusion: Paving the Way to Soviet Masochism

In the late 1980s, Boris Groys proposed that Stalinist socialist realism coopted and realized the discursive and political strategies that undergirded the modernist avant-gardes.¹⁰⁰ Though the framers of Stalinist aesthetic orthodoxy purported to erect their conceptual edifice on the shattered remains of their artistic and literary forbears, Groys argued that they were not the avant-garde's destroyers, but its successors. A similar

continuity obtains in the transition from the masochistic habitus of fin-de-siècle Russian culture to the seemingly dissimilar political masochism of the Soviet 1920s and 30s.

Oppressed by the depredations of erratic and reactionary autocrats, members of the late-nineteenth-century intellectual and professional elite developed strategies for Russia's survival based on the assumption that the venality of existing institutions was too profound to mitigate. Conditioned by their reception of Darwinism and Western criminology, sexology, and degeneration theory, observers' diagnoses of the ills plaguing Russian society emphasized environmental factors over hereditary ones, all while disavowing the possibility of significantly improving the environment. This contradictory worldview, articulated in a wide range of literary and philosophical texts, resulted in behavioral scripts that placed the burden of changing society on individuals. Each person was called upon to forge a new and better world not by taking on entrenched inequality and corruption directly, but by first reforging his or herself. To appropriately contribute to accomplishing these large-scale goals, individuals were responsible for cultivating a steely imperviousness to pain and a stoic indifference to pleasure, the better to sublimate their energies into intellectual labor or spiritual transformation. That rigorous discipline was regarded as a liberating and even joyful alternative to the moral, physical, and spiritual decay that otherwise awaited Russian society testified to the inherently masochistic nature of this model.

The groundwork for Soviet political and literary masochism was thus laid during the Russian fin-de-siècle. Having nominally dispensed with autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationality, the Bolshevik state absorbed and politicized many of the ideas the disenfranchised late-imperial Russian intelligentsia had popularized. This continuity was

maintained with especial ease in what Beer calls the “human sciences,” whose practitioners “continued to elaborate and refine theories of biopsychological deviance in the early years of the Soviet regime.”¹⁰¹ Even where early Soviet thinkers rejected pre-revolutionary social, political, and scientific thought as quaint or even degenerate, they followed many of the conceptual trajectories their predecessors had mapped out. The most prominent among of these trajectories rested on the “assumption that human material could and should be remolded.”¹⁰²

This interventionist idea combined with the psychiatric, sexological, and criminological legacies of Germanophone Europe, as well as the Lamarckian interpretation of Darwinism at which Russian scientists arrived, to produce the sacrificial, biocentric labor discourse of the late 1920s and 30s. Political discipline, necessarily filtered through art and literature, became the preferred method of accelerating individuals’ evolution into productive Soviet citizens.¹⁰³ Like the Fedorovian and Tolstoyan techniques that preceded it, the Bolshevik disciplinary apparatus relied on a rhetoric of transformation from the inside out, glorifying individuals who internalized the values of the state and used them to optimize their energies in the service of the radiant socialist future.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

¹ Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata*, 15.

² Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata*, 47.

³ Sirotkina 126.

⁴ Miller 15.

⁵ Sirotkina 130.

⁶ Sirotkina 134.

⁷ Sirotkina 135.

⁸ Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata*, 37.

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- ⁹ Møller 194.
¹⁰ Møller xvii.
¹¹ Møller 231.
¹² Vroon 85.
¹³ Rogers, "Darwin and Russian Scientists," 382.
¹⁴ Rogers, "Darwinism, Scientism, Nihilism," 11.
¹⁵ Rogers, "Darwinism, Scientism, Nihilism," 16-17.
¹⁶ Rogers, "Darwinism, Scientism, Nihilism," 21.
¹⁷ Todes 168.
¹⁸ Rogers, "Darwinism, Scientism, Nihilism," 23.
¹⁹ Beer 45.
²⁰ Beer 62.
²¹ Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 129-30.
²² Beer 102.
²³ Beer 121-2.
²⁴ Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 132.
²⁵ Beer 59.
²⁶ Beer 59.
²⁷ Beer 60.
²⁸ Beer 22-3.
²⁹ Beer 56-7.
³⁰ Beer 194.
³¹ Beer 24.
³² Beer 4.
³³ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 70.
³⁴ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 70-1; translation adapted from Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 101.
³⁵ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 78; translation adapted from Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 111.
³⁶ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 286; translation adapted from Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 428.
³⁷ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 115, 128.
³⁸ Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata*, 15.
³⁹ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 246; translation adapted from Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 639-40.
⁴⁰ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 53.
⁴¹ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 431; translation adapted from Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 648.
⁴² Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 319.
⁴³ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 135.
⁴⁴ Hellbeck 4-5.
⁴⁵ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 138.
⁴⁶ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 455.
⁴⁷ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 458.
⁴⁸ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 83.
⁴⁹ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 103; Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 150.
⁵⁰ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 349, 362.
⁵¹ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 412.
⁵² Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 449.

⁵³ Tolstoy, *Voskresenie*, 451.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 53.

⁵⁶ «XIX век [...] — век отрицания филантропии и гуманизма, что особенно видно в учениях современных криминалистов; отрицая филантропию и усвоив дарвинизм, нынешний век признал борьбу законным делом и из слепого орудия природы стал сознательным ее орудием, органом.» (Fedorov 93)

⁵⁷ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 519.

⁵⁸ Stambler 15.

⁵⁹ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 301-2.

⁶⁰ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 58.

⁶¹ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 59.

⁶² Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 419.

⁶³ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 156.

⁶⁴ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 164.

⁶⁵ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 64.

⁶⁶ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 119.

⁶⁷ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 91.

⁶⁸ Fedorov, *Filosofia*, 279.

⁶⁹ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 120.

⁷⁰ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 500.

⁷¹ Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 494.

⁷² Fedorov, *Sochineniia*, 351.

⁷³ Laevskii himself refers to Tolstoy, and Von Koren perceptively advances the idea that Laevskii sees himself as a Faust, a “second Tolstoy,” and an Onegin-style “superfluous man.”

⁷⁴ “ ‘Laevskii is without question harmful and just as dangerous to society as a cholera microbe,’ continued von Koren. ‘To drown him would be a service.’” In the original: «—Лаевский безусловно вреден и так же опасен для общества, как холерная микроба, — продолжал фон Корен. — Утопить его — заслуга.» (Chekhov, *The Duel*, 332)

⁷⁵ Knapp 290.

⁷⁶ Finke 110.

⁷⁷ Knapp 293.

⁷⁸ «"Кончено!" — подумал Лаевский. Дуло пистолета, направленное прямо в лицо, выражение ненависти и презрения в позе и во всей фигуре фон Корена и это убийство, которое сейчас совершит порядочный человек среди бела дня в присутствии порядочных людей, и эта тишина, и неизвестная сила, заставляющая Лаевского стоять, а не бежать, — как все это таинственно, и непонятно, и страшно! Время, пока фон Корен прицеливался, показалось Лаевскому длиннее ночи. Он умоляюще взглянул на секундентов; они не шевелились и были бледны. "Скорей же стреляй!" — думал Лаевский и чувствовал, что его бледное, дрожащее, жалкое лицо должно возбуждать в фон Корене еще большую ненависть. "Я его сейчас убью, — думал фон Корен, прицеливаясь в лоб и уже ощущая пальцем собачку. —

Да, конечно, убью..." — Он убьет его! — слышался вдруг отчаянный крик где-то очень близко. Тотчас же раздался выстрел. Увидев, что Лаевский стоит на месте, а не упал, все посмотрели в ту сторону, откуда слышался крик, и увидели дьякона. Он, бледный, с мокрыми, прилипшими ко лбу и к щекам волосами, весь мокрый и грязный, стоял на том берегу в кукурузе, как-то странно улыбался и махал мокрой шляпой.» (Chekhov, *The Duel*, 396-7)

⁷⁹ Finke 107.

⁸⁰ Finke 119-20.

⁸¹ Kharkhordin 110.

⁸² Beer 209.

⁸³ Greene 56-7 and 93.

⁸⁴ Sologub, "Predislovie."

⁸⁵ As quoted in Silard 154.

⁸⁶ «Страшный образ Передонова в конце концов становится настолько кошмарным, что его нельзя не признать за душевнобольного, страдающего манией преследования. Но под конец романа вас уже страшит не этот маньяк, не сам Передонов, а то общество, которое несколько не лучше его. Матери и невесты наперебой стараются его залучить в свою семью. Окружающие преспокойно с ним уживаются.» (Botsianovskii, "O Sologube")

⁸⁷ Sologub, *Melkii bes*, 54.

⁸⁸ Sologub, *Melkii bes*, 80.

⁸⁹ Sologub, *Melkii bes*, 182.

⁹⁰ Sologub, *Melkii bes*, 76.

⁹¹ Greene 57.

⁹² Sologub, *Melkii bes*, 239.

⁹³ Sologub, *Melkii bes*, 224.

⁹⁴ Greene 74-5.

⁹⁵ Greene 61.

⁹⁶ Sologub, *Melkii bes*, 47.

⁹⁷ Greene 85.

⁹⁸ Greene 64-5.

⁹⁹ Vladimirov, P.S. "Fiodor Sologub i ego roman 'Melkii bes.'"

¹⁰⁰ See Groys 3-13.

¹⁰¹ Beer 168.

¹⁰² Beer 207.

¹⁰³ Beer 199.

Chapter 3

The Organic Turn: Labor, Technology, and the Body in Robert Walser and Franz Kafka

1. Introduction

As previous chapters showed, masochism emerged at the intersection of literary aesthetics, medical science, legal reform, and the politics of empire in late-nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary and Russia. This chapter will discuss the evolution of masochism as a discursive and political category after 1900, arguing that what began as a psychosexual ailment named after Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870) contributed to a shift I call the "organic turn." The organic turn, in which bodies were reconceived as primarily biological, rather than mechanical, entities, shaped German fascism and conditioned Soviet Russia's move toward High Stalinism. Because of the centrality of aestheticized bodily discipline within the biological understanding of humanity, this shift produced the masochistic subjects of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

Literature provides significant insight into the development of twentieth-century German and Soviet political masochism. Prose fiction symptomatically reflects and occasionally impacts discursive processes, as in Krafft-Ebing's invention of the term "masochism" on the basis of Sacher-Masoch's erotic fiction. Before addressing Robert Walser and Franz Kafka, my literary case studies here, I will briefly return to *Venus in Furs* as a first data point in the organic turn.

Considered as Sacher-Masoch intended, that is, as a contribution to contemporary debates around gender relations and imperial politics rather than as an erotic novella, *Venus in Furs* describes how one man overcomes a deleterious sexual inversion — he

enjoys receiving pain rather than giving it — by following his proclivities to their logical conclusion. Severin becomes so subservient to Wanda that she manages to trick him into submitting to abuse by a man, which falls outside the carefully drawn lines of his ideal masochistic staging. After the Greek whips him mercilessly and takes off with Wanda in tow, Severin realizes that subjugation to a female abuser is a dangerous fantasy in the patriarchal culture of his day. This insight appears in Severin's statement to the frame narrator at the novel's conclusion:

Woman, as Nature has made her and as Man educates her at present, is his enemy and can only be his slave or despot, *but never his companion*. This she can only become when she has the same rights as he, when she becomes his equal through education [*Bildung*] and work. At present we have only one choice — to be the hammer or the anvil, and I was an ass to make myself into the slave of a woman, do you understand? Hence the moral of the story: he who allows himself to be whipped deserves to be whipped.¹

Facing life as either a “hammer” or an “anvil,” Severin reluctantly adopts the Greek's *modus operandi* — sadism toward women — just as the norms associated with his class and race would prescribe. In so doing, he returns to the model of manhood Sacher-Masoch associates with (Greek) antiquity, definitively rejecting the degenerate “Slavic” aspect of his identity.

As he turns away from masochism, Severin also discards its trappings: the fur, the whip, and the ladies' shoe. These he replaces with other objects, which symbolize the rigid, still essentially masochistic discipline to which he now chooses to subject himself. His new instruments of self-torture are not aesthetic and personal, but rather pragmatic and generic: the thermometer, barometer, hydrometer, chronometer, plus various instructive volumes — Kant and Plato to educate the soul, Hufeland and Hippocrates to heal the body, and Knigge to foster good manners. This is not a simple exchange of one

set of props for another. Whereas the whip, the furs, and the Slavic lady are indispensable to Severin's masochistic fantasy, the hydrometer and other modern technical instruments merely aid him in enacting a discipline that he has internalized. They are tools, not fetishes. Thus *Venus in Furs* depicts not only Severin's evolution from perversion to sexual "normalcy," but also from a slavish reliance on objects, including the sculpture- or painting-like Venus herself, to judicious use of technology toward goals that it promotes, but does not essentially constitute.

As Severin's periodic fits of malaise indicate, he remains a masochist, no matter how "cured" he may claim to be. However, his masochism is now generalized beyond his sexuality and decoupled from fetish objects. Though he recognizes the injustices of the existing social order, he not only does nothing to mitigate them, but even ceases to subvert them in private. Previously an idle pervert, Severin now sublimates his masochistic energies into an assiduous work ethic and becomes a docile political subject. He no longer needs to feel the lash because he has become it — for himself and, where necessary, for others.

The shift from treating technology as a panacea, fetish, or prosthesis to regarding it as an optional aid to physical discipline underpins the ideological reconfiguration of the human being that occurred in both German-speaking Europe and Russia between 1900 and the late 1930s. This shift unfolded within discourse on labor, a central concern in Germany and Russia during the economically volatile 1920s. As America rose to what seemed like unprecedented economic dominance in the years before the 1929 crash, European observers became preoccupied with "rationalization," that is, the modification of labor practices and laborers themselves in the service of economic prosperity and

national prestige.

Germany and Russia both rejected the technocratic aspects of American efficiency doctrine, which they variously considered exploitative, impractical, or obstructive to nationalistic ends. Under the aegis of organizations like the German Institute for Technical Work Training [*Deutsches Institut für technische Arbeitsschulung*, or Dinta] and the banner of Stakhanovism, respectively, each state developed a vision of rationalization privileging not technology, but the worker's bare biological essence. Bodies and minds would have to be molded from the inside out for optimal production outcomes, with technology occupying an ancillary role at best. The transition from a technocratic to a biological understanding of the working body created as obsessive a surveillance of the individual by the state as any seen in degeneration-fearing Austria-Hungary.

There would be no masochism as a medical category, or as political subjectivity, without literature, which mediated between "perverted" individuals and a state that sought to regulate their desires. Positioned midway between private speech and public discourse, decorative art and government policy, early twentieth-century German-language literature offers insight into the origins of the highly aestheticized totalitarian regimes of the 1930s and 40s. Accordingly, tracing the formation of masochistic subjectivity up to 1933 requires close reading of fiction, particularly fiction from the Germanophone periphery. It is here, and not in the mainstream, that the boldest experimentation was taking place. Yet for all their apparent rejection of political, social, and cultural conventions, authors like Robert Walser and Franz Kafka contributed to the constitution of a discourse that would ultimately aid in manufacturing mass consent to

Nazism.

Walser has only recently attained the fame that had eluded him in life. His rise to canonicity began in the 1970s, when Jochen Greven and his team of philologists decoded the microscripts the author crafted before retreating to an asylum for the last 27 years of his life. Kafka, whom critics since Max Brod have elevated to legendary status, nonetheless lived out his life, and produced his works, on various margins: of Empire, of cultures, of languages, even of physical health. At the same time, the peripheries both authors inhabited remained vitally connected to the center: Walser spent several formative years in Berlin, while Kafka's work in the accident insurance industry placed him on the cutting edge of European social policy. Before delving into these authors' writings, I will consider their cultural milieu — the fluctuating legal, sexological, and political landscape in German-speaking Europe after 1900.

2. From Perversion to Neurasthenia: Evolving Narratives of Decline

Among the factors contributing to the development of masochistic subjectivity in late-nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary was the proliferation of narratives of decline and degeneration. Sexologists and legal reformers marshaled these theories to argue that individual cases of perversion were a cumulative threat to European civilization, a threat that could only be mitigated through powerful state-sponsored measures, on the one hand, and strict individual discipline, on the other.

These fears of decline, for all their appearance of overwrought gloom, responded to real political turmoil in the waning Austrian Empire and the still-inchoate *Kaiserreich*. Anxiety around the true meaning of "Germanness," which had plagued Germany since

before 1871, did not diminish in the Wilhelmine era. Indeed, it intensified when Germany joined the race for colonial holdings and military authority in an effort to catch up to older empires like Britain and France.² A declining, enfeebled German *Volk* would be a greater danger to German political ambitions than ever before; accordingly, finding and rooting out obstacles to progress was more important than ever.

After 1900, narratives of degeneration and decline began to change under the influence of scientific advances. After decades of abstract fear-mongering by the likes of Lombroso and Krafft-Ebing, whose alarmist predictions of decline reverberated through popular culture, degeneration theory came under scrutiny by such figures as psychiatrist August Forel (1848-1931) and physician Iwan Bloch (1872-1922) in the first years of the twentieth century. As Freud wryly noted in 1905, “It has become the fashion to regard any symptom which is not obviously due to trauma or infection as a sign of degeneracy.”³ Scientifically minded theoreticians agreed with their predecessors about the existence of a crisis in sexual morality, but took issue with countermeasures they regarded as superstitious, sensationalized, and unsystematic. Their proposed solutions were social and racial hygiene, population policy, and “rational” reproductive policies like eugenics.⁴ By 1910, the popularization of the Freudian concept of neurosis and the rediscovery of Mendelian heredity principles had rendered the previous generation’s explanations of degeneration theory obsolete.⁵

Yet even with the rise in standards of scientific rigor and the formalization of disciplines like engineering, sexology, and sociology, narratives of decline did not disappear, but only evolved. One reconceptualization of degeneration was neurasthenia. The term itself had been in use since 1869, when the American physician George Miller

Beard (1839-1883) published an article entitled “Neurasthenia, or nervous exhaustion” in *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. Beard defined neurasthenia as a uniquely American affliction, which, as a dedicated materialist, he attributed to the somatic cause of “nervelessness,” a literal lack of nerves.⁶ Unlike the British and the French, who were slower to catch on, German-speaking Europeans responded to Beard’s work with immediate enthusiasm.⁷ After Beard’s *Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)* appeared in German in 1881, the disease acquired a clinical and popular “ubiquity” above all other disorders affecting intellectual energy, sexual vitality, and the capacity for work.⁸ It also gradually lost its American stamp, so that by 1900, Germans had fully adopted it as a “typically” German illness.⁹

Most prone to nervousness among civilized city-dwellers were supposedly the operators of novel technical affordances, like typists. Experts developed a set of profession-specific descriptors designating the muscle cramps characteristic of neurasthenia, such as writing-cramps [*Schreibkrampf*], milking cramps [*Melkerkrampf*], and sewing-machine cramps [*Nähmaschinenkrampf*].¹⁰ That these words are compounds is a function of German linguistic rules; however, it also shows the strength of the discursive link between neurasthenic symptoms and modern work conditions. Besides operators of new technologies, so-called “brain workers [*Hirnarbeiter*]” were also considered especially susceptible to neurasthenia.¹¹ Thus, neurasthenia was constructed as a disease of economic and intellectual privilege, just as Krafft-Ebing and his followers had viewed perversion as the province of “civilized” man (and, paradoxically, the reason for his ongoing decline). The more cultivated the person, the more likely he or she was

to develop the disease — a belief Freud confirmed with his psychoanalytic theories, which arose from his observations of patients belonging to social and economic elites.

Since the term first gained currency, neurasthenia had been considered both a physical and mental disease, associated with physical fatigue as well as disordered morality and insufficient willpower.¹² Krafft-Ebing's professional cohort believed that nervousness was congenital and blamed its allegedly increasing incidence on sexual perversions.¹³ By the 1910s, however, those who thought that perverted sexuality led to neurasthenia were in the minority. Instead, most experts, among them Freud, took the causality to be reversed — neurasthenia, they claimed, might be exacerbated, but is not primarily caused, by perversion.¹⁴ This meant that the harmful societal consequences previously ascribed to perversion alone could be subsumed under the umbrella of neurasthenia.

Freud's early ideas about the connections among sublimation, neurosis, and perversion deserve special attention here, not only because he was one of the most prominent shapers of twentieth-century sexuality discourse, but also because he did not break with predecessors like Krafft-Ebing as fundamentally as he, or we, might like to believe. First, like the sexologists and criminal reformers of Krafft-Ebing's generation, Freud blurred the line between normalcy and deviance, arguing that even "normal sexual processes" contain the "rudiments" of perversion.¹⁵ Second, though he departed from Krafft-Ebing's view on the causal relationship between neurosis and abnormal sexuality, Freud's belief that sexually based neuroses are almost universal among "cultured peoples [*Kulturvölker*]" focused his attention squarely on sexuality, whether normal or perverse, as a source of much of the malaise he observed in his contemporaries.¹⁶

In a 1908 essay entitled “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness [Die ‘kulturelle’ Sexualmoral und die moderne Nervosität],” Freud argued that culture owed its major achievements to sublimated sexual energy. In so doing, he aligned himself with the emerging notion of the “human motor” — a figuration of the human being as a collection of energies that must be correctly disciplined to overcome the diseases of modernity and unleash their full productive potential.¹⁷ Sublimation itself is by now a worn-out Freudian cliché, and it recurs throughout Freud’s corpus, but its appearance in the 1908 essay is notable because of the specific connection Freud makes between sublimation, culture, and perversion. He begins by describing three stages in the development of the sex drive: in the first, desires unrelated to procreation “may be freely exercised;” in the second, only procreative urges are permitted.¹⁸ The third and final stage, which allows only “*legitimate* procreation” as “a sexual aim [emphasis in original],” corresponds to “‘civilized’ sexual morality.”¹⁹ Individuals who do not make it to this third stage — perverts stuck in the first stage and homosexuals, whose desires Freud describes as “deflected” from the “normal sexual aim” — face unpleasant consequences. Assuming they have a “comparatively weaker” sex drive, perverts may “succeed in completely suppressing those tendencies which bring them into conflict with the moral demands of their level of civilization.”

But this [...] remains also their only achievement, because for this repression of their sexual instinct they make use of all those energies [*Kräfte*] which otherwise they would employ in cultural activity. They are at once inwardly stunted [*in sich gehemmt*], and outwardly crippled [*gelähmt*].²⁰

Around 1900, the term *Kraft* (plural: *Kräfte*) was commonly used as both the opposite of “fatigue or exhaustion,” and as shorthand for *Arbeitskraft*, the energy available for

work.²¹ Freud had been writing on the sexual origins of neuroses for almost two decades by 1908, and continued to refine his theories through approximately 1917.²² Ultimately, he came to the conclusion that both “actual neuroses” (neuroses rooted in sexual disturbances in the patient’s present-day life) and “psychoneuroses” like hysteria derived from disbalance among sexual fluids and/or libidinal energies. Without drawing a sharp distinction between physical discharge and the release of mental or emotional *Kräfte*, Freud argued that excessive masturbation and excessive abstinence alike led to debilitating psychosexual symptoms.²³

The above passage from the 1908 essay thus suggests that sublimation, which Freud considered responsible for all major Western cultural achievements, could only be accomplished through the channeling of *healthy* sexual energies. Those perverts and homosexuals cursed with a strong sex drive, meanwhile, must spend most of their thermodynamically balanced *Kräfte* on rising to the challenge of appearing “civilized” and have nothing left over for contributions to culture. Instead, perversions are filtered through the unconscious to become their own “negatives,” that is, neuroses.²⁴ True to the protean nature of nervous disorders as they were understood in Freud’s time, the consequences for those affected involve both “inward” and “outward” aspects.

Perverts thus imperil civilization for Freud in 1908 just as much as they did for Krafft-Ebing in the 1880s. Of course, Freud expressed increasing skepticism as to the absolute value of civilization as the years wore on, whereas Krafft-Ebing seemed earnestly to regard it as an incontrovertible, if imperfect, good. Furthermore, though he placed the emphasis on “neurosis” rather than “perversion” *per se*, Freud, like Krafft-Ebing, maintained that the number of abnormal individuals in society was constantly

rising due to the ever-greater “stringency of sexual restraint.” Freud’s view on the balance between civilization and perversion bears similarities to Krafft-Ebing’s: both believed that civilization produces perversions through the corruption of “natural” impulses. For Krafft-Ebing, this was an unfortunate paradox (since lack of civilization also led to degeneracy). Freud, meanwhile, believed civilization, for all its downsides, to be preferable to the barbaric alternative.²⁵ In his essential definitions, Freud differs from Krafft-Ebing mainly in the placement of rhetorical accents (on nervousness rather than perversion) and in tone— where *Psychopathia sexualis* is horrified and censorious, Freud’s “‘Civilized’ sexual morality” is matter-of-fact.

Freud’s sexuality-focused explication of neurasthenia, though it had achieved considerable popularity by 1908, was just one among an array of causes potentially responsible for the disease. Others, besides the very general bugbears of urbanization and unhealthy (usually white-collar) work conditions, included loss of religion or excessive materialism; the perceived glorification of psychological illness and perversion within the arts; the technologically enabled, supposedly excessive speed of modern life; and sharper-than-ever class distinctions and increasing wealth inequality.²⁶

Diverse as they were, most treatments of the subject in German-speaking Europe agreed on one thing: the urgency of raising the next generation to have nerves of steel, so that they might better advance German geopolitical interests.²⁷ The prevailing view was that young people should avoid sacrificing their health to ephemeral professional success, which notion laid the groundwork for the later popularization of techniques meant to precisely and harmoniously align the worker with his or her task, like the psychotechnical aptitude testing that became popular during the 1920s.²⁸

Unsurprisingly given the connections commentators made among neurasthenia, biochemical energetics, and work, many of the recommended cures pertained to labor practice. Moreover, treatments for neurasthenia emphasized the moral aspects of the disease and the importance of helping the patient develop stronger willpower.²⁹ The approach to treating neurasthenics thus focused on re-tooling the body and mind, freeing both from illusion, superstition, and archaic or infantile habits while strengthening the moral bases that would keep symptoms from returning.³⁰

Even as they became increasingly insistent on scientific rigor in matters pertaining to sexual and mental disorders, physicians continued to struggle with the syndrome's mutable symptoms, which defied easy diagnosis or treatment. In the absence of an agreed-upon physical test for neurasthenia, experts were forced to rely on the same written patient confessions that had formed the basis of Krafft-Ebing's psychiatric practice. Neurasthenia, like perversion before it, was a fundamentally *textual* disease: it required careful reading on the part of the specialist and conscientious writing on the part of the patient.³¹ For this reason, and because aestheticized writing had been closely associated since Lombroso's time with sexual perversion, moral insanity, and degeneration ("graphomania"),³² the clinical and legal layers of neurasthenia discourse were naturally adjacent to literature.

Fears of decline, eventually couched in explicitly racialized terms like "death of the *Volk* [*Volkstod*]," persisted through the end of the Wilhelmine age and into the Weimar period, when the advent of birth control, a skewed gender ratio brought on by the losses of the First World War, and rising life expectancy created the impression of a rapidly aging population.³³ These demographic factors contributed to a rightward political shift

over the course of the 1920s as proponents of the *Volkstod* theory argued that demographics in combination with social welfare measures would interfere with natural selection, causing physically and mentally unfit segments of the population to drag down their genetic betters.³⁴

In sum, even when degeneration theory as such had lost its appeal for many German-speaking Europeans, it was quickly supplanted by alternative theories rooted in essentially the same set of anxieties. With the revival of biological or racial theories of degeneration following the First World War, the remedies for “neurasthenia” or other types of moral and physical enfeeblement would focus increasingly on creating, through breeding and discipline, political subjects able not merely to resist perversion, but to strengthen the German nation through an unstinting commitment to personal and collective discipline.

3. Rationalization, Technology, and the “Organic Turn” in 1920s German Discourse

Like perversion or degeneration, neurasthenia was a fluid concept that evolved continuously in the decades after its invention, with two major changes occurring around 1900. The first of these relocated the seat of the disease from the body to the mind. This change accelerated after the First World War, coinciding with a decline in the number of neurasthenia diagnoses across Europe.³⁵ In a second, related move, experts began to claim that neurasthenic symptoms proceeded not from constitutional weaknesses but from the constant excitement of modern city life.³⁶ This transferred responsibility from the patient’s past to his or her present: if lifestyle, not heredity, was to blame for neurasthenia, then it was the sufferer’s responsibility to harness enough mental and

physical discipline to resist the malady's progress. In particular, modern labor, purportedly one of the worst offenders among neurasthenia-producing lifestyle choices, quickly became a focal point in discussions of causes and treatments.

Though the term itself fell out of fashion by 1920, the physical symptoms associated with neurasthenia did not disappear. On the contrary: specialists concurred that human bodies, particularly in defeated Germany and splintered Austria, continued to show signs of fatigue, wear, and decline, while minds seemed weaker and more nervous than ever. In Weimar Germany, demographic factors like a shortage of able-bodied younger men and a crowded labor market contributed to fears of either impending "death of the people [*Volkstod*]" or, conversely, unending misery for a burgeoning "people without space [*Volk ohne Raum*]." ³⁷

Anxiety about national prestige reached a peak after the First World War, fed by the right-wing myth of the "stab in the back [*Dolchstoß*]," renewed interest in Lombrosian degeneration theory, and an increasingly racialized nationalist discourse. The geopolitical and demographic woes plaguing German-speaking Europe at the start of the 1920s demanded fundamental solutions that went beyond improving the standard of living or normalizing relations with Britain and France. The ideal remedy would be global in scope, dramatically raising the *Volk*'s profile in Europe and beyond. For many, the rationalization movement, which had been gaining momentum since before the First World War, seemed to hold the key to this grandiose goal. ³⁸ In its Weimar incarnation, which strived for American prosperity while eschewing American investment in technology and its liberal social values, rationalization promised to increase economic productivity without sacrificing the German soul.

Over 700 organizations were involved in German rationalization in the 1920s.³⁹ Their overarching aim was to replicate the American economic miracle in the absence of America's huge domestic market or its high wages, an unattainable luxury for impoverished postwar Germany. Germans were also emphatically disinterested in importing American political ideology or social conditions. The very same people who greeted Henry Ford's *My Life and Work* (1922) with rapturous enthusiasm — a marked contrast to the cool reception F.W. Taylor's writings received — saw American men as naïve figures not unlike the noble savages of colonialist discourse.⁴⁰

American women, meanwhile, were heaped with opprobrium for their independent attitudes and enthusiasm for sports. In general, the “American” preoccupation with body culture struck German observers as unseemly and uncultured.⁴¹ Even as body-glorifying fads like the Müller exercises soared in popularity, critics like the conservative sociologist Werner Sombart (1863-1941) decreed sport to be un-German. Sombart's inflammatory wartime pamphlet, *Händler und Helden [Merchants and Heroes]* (1915), claimed that the British, his chief example of a “mechanistic,” purely mercantile nation (as opposed to the “organic” German state), invented sport to compensate for a dearth of “spiritual values [*geistige Werte*].”⁴² In sum, Germans admired American manufacturing and management practices but disdained their allegedly superficial, uncultured, and undisciplined culture. Achieving American growth without damaging the German *Volk* and its transcendent *Kultur* would thus require the domestication of American practices.⁴³

The first step was to rename efficiency, the core principle of American production in the 1920s. Definitions of the substitute term, rationalization, varied widely.⁴⁴ For some, rationalization amounted to Taylorism *tout court*. Others understood it to mean

technological advancement combined with mass production, which they hoped would help streamline labor processes. Others still considered rationalization a political program that would erase class differences through social engineering, managerial knowhow, and increased productivity.⁴⁵

Fordism, the crown jewel of American efficiency praxis, was regarded as unsuitable for wholesale import into Germany. Experts worried that Fordized work was both too intense (and therefore detrimental to the nervous system) and, because much of it relied on unskilled piece-labor, too monotonous for German workers.⁴⁶ On the other hand, Fordism seemingly avoided what workers most disliked about Taylorism: laborious time-and-motion studies, wage incentives (bonuses), and minute supervision by engineers.⁴⁷ Regardless of how workers felt about them, engineers soon became a fixture of rationalized workplaces, gaining in status and pay over technically unsophisticated foremen.⁴⁸

The engineer was not only a key figure in the scientifically managed workplace, but also a powerful rhetorical tool in ideologies like Nazism. Right-wing political thinkers constructed an image of the engineer as “the tireless benefactor of mankind, the brilliant inventor of technologies that would turn age-old dreams into concrete and steel.”⁴⁹ Unlike the impractical theoretician, the engineer would redeem Germany through a “creative and heroic immediacy” that would bring about prosperity without idolizing capital.⁵⁰ Despite their veneration of engineers, however, German labor reformers aimed to achieve peak rationalization not through “expensive technology,” but through “intensified labor” enacted “in a context of austerity.”⁵¹ Unlike American workers,

German ones would not enjoy high wages and cheap consumer goods. Their goal, and reward, would be collective: the revival of the *Volk* through economic growth.⁵²

Deemphasizing technology in rationalization was partly a concession to the situation on the ground: a humiliated, reparations-paying Germany was in no position to invest in infrastructure or machinery on an American scale. But the claim that men meant more than machines in industrial production also aligned with the anti-technological glorification of Germanic *Geist* [mind or spirit] and *Kultur* that had, since around 1900, constituted the cultural phenomenon Jeffrey Herf calls “reactionary modernism.”

Reactionary modernism — the German Right’s paradoxical embrace of technology as part of an essentially anti-positivist, anti-rational ideology — emerged in a wide-ranging debate about technology during the 1920s.⁵³ Figures like Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), Hans Freyer (1887-1969), and Werner Sombart positioned technology as German, pragmatic, ancient, instinctive, and non-mercantile, rescuing it from a reputation as Jewish, theoretical, modern, and materialistic. By metaphorically wresting it away from soulless Jewish society [*Gesellschaft*] and reclaiming it for Germanic community [*Gemeinschaft*],⁵⁴ these thinkers did more than simply recuperate technology so that it could be deployed without contradiction in right-wing rhetoric and ultimately harnessed to craft both guns and gas chambers. They also contributed to its aestheticization and, even more importantly, invented a technological discourse centered not on machines, but on the human body. The rejection of technology in Weimar-era rationalization may have begun as a pragmatic response to harsh postwar realities, but it quickly developed into a political program emphasizing that the “correct” way to rationalize an economy was, in fact, the “German” one.

The political Right, and later the Nazis, would often cite “quality work” as a distinguishing feature of German goods.⁵⁵ Yet how to maintain this elusive attribute in modern production? Absent wage incentives or investment in technology, the only remaining levers were psychological and physical training of workers themselves.⁵⁶ Just as the penal reforms of the preceding fifty years had aspired to tailor punishments to individual criminals,⁵⁷ so too did Weimar labor practice aim to match work tasks to suitable workers. The means for this selection included satisfaction surveys and psychotechnical aptitude tests, which sought to identify the friendliest saleswomen and most servile bank clerks.⁵⁸

German psychotechnics and work physiology were distinct from American and European counterparts in two ways. First, they responded to a particularly German glorification of the bourgeois expert that dated back to the *Kaiserreich*. Second, German psychotechnics, like eugenics, represented the utopian vision of a future endlessly perfected through science and social engineering.⁵⁹ Part of this social engineering was so-called “company social policy,” a set of incentives and training opportunities companies offered workers in an effort to render them useful to capital and industry while maintaining their political malleability.⁶⁰ To promote American-style prosperity while respecting German constraints, managers built worker loyalty through non-monetary perks like cultural events or membership in recreational associations, which extended companies’ influence to the employee’s entire family.⁶¹

Collectively, tactics like aptitude testing, vocational advising, and apprenticeship training, which all downplayed technology and relied on molding bodies and minds directly, were to help maintain “German quality” in production and produce a new breed

of German worker: indefatigable, cheerful, disciplined, and politically suggestible.⁶² As Anson Rabinbach puts it, “the rationalization of production was predicated upon the rationalization of the body.”⁶³ The move away from technological intervention in work practices and toward unmediated modification of bodies was a hallmark of German rationalization.

Unlike Taylorism, whose trademark time-and-motion studies featured *graphic* decompositions of movement, German rationalization relied on a *logocentric* corpus of questionnaires, aptitude tests, and training manuals. These materials documented dissatisfaction, diagnosed fatigue, determined how existing capabilities could be optimally applied within the company and established how new ones could be developed, ultimately seeking to reshape the worker as a human being. Success in the workplace would be the natural outcome of a physical and mental training regime covering the entire expanse of the worker’s life.

That rationalization was an ideology as well as an economic doctrine is clearly visible in such constructs as the “rationalized home.” The new German working-class family was to support the efficiency of its *paterfamilias* through rationalized scheduling, home furnishings, and recreational activities. Like the rationalization of work, the rationalization of the domestic sphere was to proceed without new technology, cheap consumer goods, or sexual liberation, but instead through the sheer willpower of its inhabitants.⁶⁴

Nowhere was the “organic turn” in Weimar rationalization more evident than in the activities of the German Institute for Technical Work Training, abbreviated Dinta. The right-wing engineer Karl Arnhold (1884-1970), one of the organization’s founders, saw

his profession as crucial to the transformation of workers into a “new industrial species, [the] carrier of a German ethos from the old Germanic epoch.”⁶⁵ Arnhold’s vision of the new German worker involved reforming not just production practices or those who enacted them, but the working-class family as a whole.⁶⁶ Dinta’s strategies were pedagogical: to teach the new worker and his family about joy in work [*Arbeitsfreude*] and win his allegiance to “correct” (that is, right-wing) political causes.⁶⁷

Dinta retained its influential position even after the advent of the Third Reich. Its rhetoric “resonated with that of the Nazis,” forming an ideological “bridge” for many of its members as Germany transitioned into Nazism.⁶⁸ In 1935, Dinta itself became part of the German Labor Front [*Deutscher Arbeitsfront* or DAF], the consolidated trade union organization that replaced all independent unions after the fall of the Weimar Republic.⁶⁹ Under the auspices of a DAF subsidiary, the Bureau of Beauty and Labor [*Amt Schönheit der Arbeit*], work and aesthetics converged as factories were remodeled and industrial design brought echoes of labor into the home. The DAF’s “Strength Through Joy [*Kraft durch Freude*]” program, a tourism operator, rewarded German workers with pleasure travel, so that the joy of laboring for the German state could now extend beyond *Arbeitsfreude* proper and into daily life. Of course, fascist pleasure was to be as purely aesthetic and as indefinitely deferred as possible, since a striving for “bodily well-being” and “material welfare” — in short, comfort — was, as Sombart had already pointed out in 1915, decidedly un-heroic, unmanly, and thus un-German.⁷⁰

The Nazis benefited from the popularity of rationalization during the 1920s in two ways. First, rationalization neither dramatically raised the standard of living nor revitalized the German economy; thus, it was a convenient scapegoat for Germany’s

economic implosion after 1929. This, in turn, contributed to a loss of faith in workers' movements and a general weakening of the Left, to which Dintz and similar organizations actively contributed by publicly criticizing the exploitation of workers in Fordism or Taylorism. Second, for all their anti-modern rhetoric, the Nazis borrowed liberally from the playbook of rationalization, adopting "distinctly modern and rationalized" labor and management practices.⁷¹

Drawing public attention toward an aestheticized vision of the human body and away from machines or the goods and services these could provide became particularly important to the Right during the Depression. Even as the number of available jobs dwindled, a "romantic metaphysics of labor" glorified work as mystical and heroic, so that paid labor and a laborious, if not necessarily paid, striving for the greater glory of Germany blurred together.⁷² Within this framework, it was not enough to be racially pure and fully committed to advancing the cause of the *Kulturnation*. The ideal Germanic citizen also had to possess an internal, machine-aided (but not mechanical) discipline that expressed itself, full of beauty and joy, in every movement and thought. All possible professions converged into the sex-segregated occupations of Germanic conqueror or conqueror's noble consort. The engineer was reimagined as an ancient craftsman channeling Germanic spirit into every invention, while the politician, as Goebbels noted in a 1932 speech, was like an artist shaping human "raw material."⁷³

The interweaving of politics, aesthetics, and labor-centered bodily discipline during the 1920s produced an imperative toward pleasurable sacrifice of self to state in the service of nationalistic accomplishment. The importance of aesthetics to this discourse of pleasure in sacrifice was not merely symptomatic of what Walter Benjamin described as

the fascist “aestheticization of politics.” It also continued the tradition of mutual influence among literature, medicine, and law, which had become increasingly pronounced in German-speaking Europe since the 1860s. To show how literature helped reify the organic turn in discourse, contributing to the formation of masochistic culture, I will now turn to Robert Walser and Franz Kafka. The sexual masochism of both authors’ protagonists dovetails with such hallmarks of proto-fascist discourse as nostalgia for archaic modes of craftsmanship, the re-casting of German-speaking Europe as “Oriental,” and fears of modern technology, demonstrating the proximity of reactionary modernist anxieties to the fascist ethos of joyful self-sacrifice.

4. Robert Walser, “handwerklicher Romancier”

When I obey her, responding to the commanding tone of her voice, I can’t help laughing all the while, for it clearly gives her pleasure to see how willingly and swiftly I obey. And now when I ask her for something, she snaps at me but then does kindly give in, perhaps feeling a bit of vexation at the fact that I have petitioned her in such a way that it isn’t possible to deny me. I am always hurting her just a little, thinking: It serves her right! Go on! Keep hurting her, just a little. It amuses her. It’s what she wants. She isn’t expecting anything different! [...] If she only knew, the one sitting here beside me, what I’ve been writing! One of my most ardent desires [*brennendsten Wünsche*] is to have my ears boxed by her as soon as possible, but I doubt, painful as this is to realize, that she’s capable of it. A resounding slap in the face [*eine klatschende Ohrfeige ins Gesicht*]: If I could experience this, I’d gladly give up all kisses I might hope to expect.

⁷⁴

—Robert Walser, *The Tanner Siblings* (1906)

He dashes up to [Wanda] and seizes her hand, whispering: “Milady [*Gebieterin*].”⁷⁵

—Robert Walser, *The Robber* (1925-6)

Were they to appear without attribution, these lines could easily be mistaken for

quotations from *Venus in Furs* — almost, but not quite. Not only does Walser possess a knack for subtlety that Sacher-Masoch lacks, but his masochism is more nuanced than his predecessor's. In a letter to his brother, Simon Tanner, the peripatetic protagonist of one of Walser's earliest novels, records his impressions of his most recent employer: a stern lady who plucks him from the street and compels him to domestic servitude. Though he clearly takes pleasure in both obeying and crossing her, buried in his stereotypically masochistic description of the joy of subjugation is a surprising reversal: "I am always hurting her just a little." Simon, as it turns out, delights in subverting his mistress' expectations of mastery almost as much as he enjoys following her orders (though even this he does ironically, "laughing" all the while). Almost as quickly as he reveals his wish to dominate his Domina, Simon reverts to masochistic boilerplate, luxuriating in the illicit nature of his writing and fantasizing about the "resounding slap" he believes is his due. Yet the earlier pseudo-sadistic admission reveals his frustration with the arrangement, which lacks the punishment he desires. Simon's Domina, it seems, does not follow his preferred script; she is behaving poorly and deserves to be punished herself.

This wrinkle on the countenance of what we might call "classical" masochism — the aggressiveness lurking behind the obsequious mask — distinguishes Walser's model of servitude from Sacher-Masoch's. As is well documented in the secondary literature, the self-effacement of Walser's characters tends to dissolve itself even as it reaches a crescendo, producing a threatening rather than servile impression.⁷⁶ Asserting the self through acts seemingly designed to erase it was something of a specialty for Walser, who deployed this strategy in his life as well as in his aesthetics. The heroes of his major

novels — Simon Tanner, Jakob von Gunten (from the novel of the same name), Joseph Marti (of *The Assistant*), and the Robber — may all be characterized as servile aggressors who disrupt authority by adopting an attitude of “sly civility” toward social superiors.⁷⁷

The dynamics of servitude occupy pride of place in Walser’s *oeuvre*.⁷⁸ He was particularly interested in master-servant arrangements with unstable roles, where power’s natural ebb and flow triumphed over rigid transactionality. This preference aligned with Walser’s rejection of technology in favor of an archaic “craftsmanship [*Handwerklichkeit*]” — as in the epithet he chose for himself, “craftsmanlike novelist [*handwerklicher Romancier*]” — to produce a political stance anticipating the positions of Germany’s mainstream reactionary modernists. Walser’s old-fashioned *Knecht* [knave], who serves his master or mistress not for material gain, but for the sheer pleasure of subjugation, prefigures the organic turn in German interwar discourse by romanticizing a mythical golden age in which personal fealty trumped mercantile self-interest. His male protagonists glory in suffering, reject modern labor practices as soulless, and idealize a pre-technological past — all attributes of the perfect political subject in fascism.

Walser’s writing moves seamlessly between masochistic topoi and nostalgia for archaic models of servitude, as the short prose piece “Three Stories” (1925) demonstrates. In lieu of a conventional plot, “Three Stories” brings us three tales the narrator invents on the basis of titles gleaned from a glance at a bookshop window. The first, “Under the Whip of the Polish Lady [*Unter der Peitsche der Polin*],” is explicitly masochistic, while the others are more obliquely so. The schoolboy hero of “The American Educational System” learns the pleasure of fearing a superior, while the

princess of “The Princess and the Cowherd” is a Domina-like figure, if a rather gentle one.⁷⁹ Walser uses masochistic cliché to decry the commodification of literature, which turns exciting stories into window-shopping trivialities. This theme received even more direct treatment in an earlier work, *The Walk* (1917), in which a restless writer escapes his solitary garret and spends the day wandering his small Swiss town. In one episode, he convinces a bookseller to bring him the year’s number one bestseller and then ostentatiously declines to buy it — precisely because of its status as a popular must-read.⁸⁰ This vignette encapsulates Walser’s view that writing produced for personal gain, fame, or any other short-term goal was “for the birds [*für die Katz*].” Only that which survives “in spite” of its present-day use value, Walser contends, is truly “immortal.”⁸¹

The critique of “usefulness” in “For the birds [*Für die Katz*]” (1928/9), as this short piece is known, recurs frequently in Walser’s works, most prominently in *The Robber*. The novel’s innumerable digressions and elisions, which eschew linear storytelling in favor of humorous anecdotes and lyrical asides, celebrate the small, incidental, and apparently “useless.” The Robber himself offers this justification to a lady accusing him of living too idly: “Perhaps one is of great use with one’s uselessness, my dear Madam, for haven’t quite various forms of usefulness, in the past, proven harmful?”⁸²

Walser’s love of the apparently “useless” finds further expression in his favoring the old-fashioned valet or servant [*Diener*] over the modern clerk, petty bureaucrat, or traveling salesman [*Commis*]. Walser himself had the chance to sample both professions, and in a letter to his sister Fanny (1882-1972) from 1902, he articulated his preference for the former: “I am jobless, damned jobless. I probably have to become a servant [*Diener*] again, beat rugs and serve food. Which is quite a bit better [*schöner*] than being a

traveling salesman [*Commis*].”⁸³ Though the word “schöner” here means “better,” the word’s aesthetic implications are inescapable, particularly in view of Walser’s Masochian preoccupation with style in servitude. As Simon Tanner cleans up shards from a platter his lady has broken, he thinks,

I understand your anger. It is I who bear the guilt for breaking the platter you dropped. I broke it. How this must pain you. [...] My cheeks are brushing against your dress. Every shard I gather up says to me, ‘You wretched creature,’ and the hem of your dress says to me: ‘O happy one!’ [...] Your silk dress is beautiful [...] Your hands are beautiful hanging down toward me in all their length. I hope you’ll box my ears with them some day. Now you’re leaving already, without having scolded me. When you walk, your dress giggles and whispers on the floor.⁸⁴

The thrill Simon derives from the menial task is not just emotional (being unjustly blamed for the broken platter) or sensual (the feel of the shards in his hands or the soft cloth on his cheek); it is explicitly aesthetic. The lady’s regal beauty literally animates the objects around him until these seem to speak, “giggle,” and “whisper.”

The work of the *Commis* or *Angestellter* [salaried employee], meanwhile, offers little of this vital pleasure. Instead, it transforms bodies from organic assemblages into stiff machines, as in “Helbling’s Story” (1913), a first-person account of a mundane working life. “When I stand in the office,” the clerk Helbling complains, “my limbs slowly turn to wood, which one would like to set on fire in order that it might burn away: over time, desk and man become one.”⁸⁵ Whereas sexually tinged enslavement to a lady anthropomorphizes the inanimate, office work has a dehumanizing effect, transforming flesh into expendable fuel that deserves to be immolated. The early prose piece “Germer” (1910), another tale of cheerless white-collar labor, is similarly pessimistic about the impact of office work on humanity: “He whose sour daily bread only falls on

the table of his monthly salary [*Monatssalärtisch*] in this manner must feel himself duty-bound to gradually become a contractually regular machine.”⁸⁶

The resentment Helbling and Germer feel toward their occupations is mild, however, compared with Simon Tanner’s program of active resistance. No job can hold his interest for long; after a few weeks as a bank clerk, for example, he arrives to work an hour late, having spent the morning admiring his brother’s astonishingly lifelike paintings of nature scenes. When his rudeness escalates this misdemeanor into firing, Simon is unrepentant. “I was not made [*geschaffen*] to be a writing or calculating machine,” he declares, “I am quite happy to write, to calculate, I find it desirable to behave with decency toward my fellow men, I am gladly industrious and obey passionately whenever this is not injurious to my heart. I would know how to submit to certain laws, if it came to that, but for some time it has not come to that for me here.”⁸⁷ Simon denounces work as a mechanized cog within a corporate apparatus, preferring instead lofty “creation [*Schaffen*]” — as practiced, for instance, by his own divine maker. Obedience and even harsh discipline are not in themselves distasteful to Simon; on the contrary, he later characterizes himself as “made [*geschaffen*] to be scolded.”⁸⁸ What he cannot abide is obedience without agency, exchanged for meager monetary wages in the service of distant commercial goals. Labor can only be meaningful if it is practiced in a community of peers, a state of affairs Simon calls “creation among people [*das Schaffen unter Menschen*].”⁸⁹ As long as the transactional element is absent, Simon is willing to take on any task, no matter how small or seemingly humiliating — up to and including cleaning a lady’s fur-trimmed slipper.

As Simon’s siblings remind him, his attitude toward work is eminently impractical,

almost childish. Yet for Walser, this last quality is a virtue rather than a fault. To be boylike [*Knabenhaft*] is to proudly resist what Sombart might call the mercantile logic of modernity, to remain attuned to one's own creative energies and open to the world. Simon explicates the key differences between *Mann* and *Knabe* [boy] in a daydream involving his sister Hedwig's abduction by a mysterious stranger. As Simon imagines him, the stranger is

no man, but a mixture of boy [*Knabe*] and giant. It does not hurt a man to find himself overwhelmed by sentiment [*Empfindungen*], but it hurts a boy who wants to be more than an honestly feeling man, a boy who wants to be a giant, wants to be only strong and not at times also weak. A boy has chivalric virtues that a man whose thoughts are reasonable [*vernünftig*] and mature will always cast aside, seeing them as superfluous [*unnütz*] in the festival of love. A boy is less cowardly than a man since he is less mature, for maturity can easily make one dastardly and selfish. You need only to observe the hard [*hart*], cruel lips of a boy: this outspoken defiance and the exemplified insistence on a promise he's secretly given himself. A boy keeps his word, a man might find it more appropriate to break it. The boy finds beauty in the severity [*Härte*] of his word-keeping (as in the Middle Ages) and the man finds beauty in replacing one promise he's uttered with another, which he promises like a man to keep. He is the promiser [*Versprecher*], and the boy is the enforcer [*Vollstrecker*] of the promised word.⁹⁰

Unlike the impetuous boy, the man plays a long game based on reason rather than instinct. Such a worldview may be profitable, but it lacks the creativity, the "chivalric" romance, and ultimately the morality of the boy's maximalist approach. The man does not keep his promises when they become inconvenient, whereas the boy finds "beauty" in "severity," which reveals itself in the "hardness" of his physical form (Walser writes "hard [*hart*]" in both instances). Young in years, the boy is at the same time an archaic, almost mythical figure, especially in his chimeric union with the "giant." Simon admires the era in which the boy's values are rooted precisely because it is unlike his own, which privileges profit over authenticity and machinelike "calculation" over honest, organic,

human labor.

Walser associated the anachronistic role of medieval page not only with masochistic scenarios rife with opportunities for punishment, but also with his own occupation as a writer. In “Simon: A Love Story” (1904), Walser describes the writer as a “page’s page:”

It’s an arduous business to tell stories. Always running after some long-legged, mandolin-playing, romantic rascal and listening in on [*hören*] whatever he’s singing, feeling, and saying. And the coarse villain of a page is always running, and we must run after him as though, truly, we were the page’s page.⁹¹

The writer is thus in the lowliest position of all, lower even than the page himself.

Elsewhere, Walser makes explicit the similarity of writing to serving a Domina. In “Portrait of a Lady” (1928/9), a lady “possesses” a page “whose poetic adroitnesses [*Geschicklichkeiten*] she occasionally allowed to sing her praises in that she permitted [the page] to sit on an ottoman at her feet.”⁹² As in the earlier piece, writer and lowly servant are one and the same; yet “Portrait” goes even further than “Simon: A Love Story,” fully identifying submission to one’s mistress with writerly production. It is not by actually writing that the page glorifies his mistress in poetry, but instead by sitting at her feet, not making a sound. Walser’s ideal form of servitude is thus archaic and non-transactional (unless one manages to extract payment in slaps). It is also fundamentally anti-technological, as “Germer” and “Helbling’s Story” illustrate. Similarly, Walser’s ideal of authorship, in which he is a mere “page’s page” running after his own characters, relies not on high-minded theorizing but on *Handwerklichkeit* — literally, craftsmanship performed with hands.

This allegiance to spontaneous, authentic craftsmanship might appear incongruous in view of Walser’s most famous writing technique: microscript. As he practiced it, this

discipline demanded repetitive drudgery and meticulous planning. Yet if we recall that Walser used the “pencil method” to free his *Geist*, the capacious German term for mind or spirit, from the oppressive noise of higher consciousness, this apparent contradiction disappears.⁹³ As an end in itself, microscript could be soullessly mechanical; but as a tool of Walser’s creative will, it became liberating.

This is not to say that writing is painless or uncomplicatedly enjoyable. On the contrary, Walser swapped his pen for a pencil and switched from legible penmanship to microscopic shorthand precisely to cope with the pain his calling visited upon him. Pain was a *sine qua non* in Walser’s internal economy, no less indispensable to producing literature than slaps and scolding to Simon Tanner’s ideal workplace. Walser described the process of acquiring the discipline necessary to write in a 1915 piece about Hölderlin’s descent into madness.

As the man [*Mensch*] in him despaired, as his being [*Wesen*] bled from numerous wretched wounds, his artistry leapt like a richly clad dancer high into the air, and even as Hölderlin felt he was going under, he made the most delightful music and poetry. He sang of the destruction and demolition [*Zertrümmerung*] of his life using the instrument of language.⁹⁴

Hölderlin’s poetic self gains strength in proportion to the decline of his body and mind. The more life force the man himself loses, the greater the “heights” his poetry attains: pain is sublimated into art. Walser himself pursued this ascetic ideal assiduously. His friend and longtime correspondent Frieda Mermet, for example, reported that when he lived with his sister Lisa in the small Swiss town of Bellelay, Walser did not even attempt to write because he found life there too pleasant.⁹⁵

Walser’s belief that literature should proceed from the body, specifically the hands, underlies the comparisons of his writing practices to the production methods used in a

“watchmaker’s atelier” or “a tailor’s or cobbler’s workshop.”⁹⁶ He did not, he avowed, so much compose his pieces as “tailor, cobble, forge, plane, knock, hammer, or nail” them together.⁹⁷ By the beginning of the 1920s, however, most shoes and watches were made not by dedicated craftsmen in small workshops, but by low-skilled workers in large factories. Watchmakers, tailors, or cobblers unable to price their wares competitively were likely to be forced out of business despite their commitment to high quality. As mentioned earlier, the fear that “German quality” would be lost with the adoption of mass production lent legitimacy to organizations like Dinta, which emphasized communal, nationalistic aims over individual, mercantile ones. Walser, for all his apparent remoteness from German rationalization movements, shared these values.

Like some of his counterparts in artisanal occupations, Walser redoubled his enthusiasm for his craft even as the public seemed to lose interest in his products.⁹⁸ And, like these counterparts, he also struggled with the instruments of his trade, the hand and the pen. Though he once jokingly wrote to the poet Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914) about his wish to augment his fountain pen with a “machine” that would smack it at the first sign of “artistic indecency,” he never seriously considered entrusting his muse to any technology more sophisticated than the pen or pencil.⁹⁹ When his hand began to betray him, becoming a “malingerer [*Dienstverweigerin*],” he recommitted himself to *Handwerklichkeit* by developing his “pencil method.”¹⁰⁰ As Walser documented in “Pencil Sketch” (1926/7), the pencil method saved him from a debilitating “[nervousness]” by allowing him to delay committing his thoughts to the “certainty [*Bestimmtheit*]” of ink. This “detour [*Umweg*]” was as pleasurable as it was laborious. Ultimately, it restored him to writerly “health.”¹⁰¹

The language of health and illness, and particularly the invocation of nervousness, is telling here. As Peter Utz has written, nervousness became a perennial theme in Walser's prose just as it rose to prominence in contemporary discourse.¹⁰² *The Robber*, though it dates to a period when neurasthenia's popularity was waning, skewers the disorder's lingering status as an upper-class distinction, even a "moral norm."¹⁰³ When the Robber refuses to be nervous, he comes under scrutiny from his small community, which finds his very lack of suspiciousness suspicious. Yet even as he mocked the fashionable illness of nervousness, Walser seemed to succumb to it. His chosen remedy, moreover, precisely matched the recommendations of experts: a return to archaic labor and leisure practice, complete with salubrious Alpine hikes. Indeed, rural Switzerland, which Germans had long admired as a bastion of independence and a repository of "true" Germanic spirit,¹⁰⁴ became one of the emblems of the burgeoning *Heimat* [homeland] and *Heimatschutz* [homeland preservation] movements.

Originating in Germany around 1900, these prescribed agrarian life as an antidote to the degeneration afflicting denizens of industrialized cities. Typically for reactionary modernism, such discourse overlooked that, without industrialization, the intensive tourist traffic that helped popularize the myth of "traditional" Alpine life beyond Swiss borders would have been impossible.¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, to those who could not afford to heal their frayed nerves at an expensive Swiss resort, *Heimatliteratur* offered a cheaper, virtual alternative.¹⁰⁶

Walser himself treated *Heimatliteratur* and the idea of *Heimat* itself with disdain, once comparing the Alps to a lacy brassiere in a mockery of the heroic image of "Homo Alpinus."¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, his own work reveals that he subscribed to the same

narratives of decline as the *Heimat-littérateurs*. Degeneration unleashed by industrialization propels the plots of several of his novels. The Tanner parents, for example, both deteriorate after they abandon their rural home and move to the city to seek their fortunes. The modicum of economic security they attain comes at a heavy cost: exposure to “idleness, false pageantry [*Prunk*] and fraud [*Betrug*].”¹⁰⁸ These moral poisons adversely affect their offspring, who end up deracinated (Simon, Kaspar, and Hedwig), depressed (Klaus), or insane (Emil). Seen in this light, Simon’s uncompromising pursuit of freedom is not just a protest against the mercantile values of his time, but also an attempt to forestall degeneration. Servitude to a strong-willed mistress anchors Simon amid the tumult of modern life.

A similar dynamic drives the plot of *The Assistant*, which chronicles the fall of a business headed by the engineer Karl Tobler from the point of view of his assistant, Joseph Marti. Tobler’s bourgeois tastes mark him as an imperial subject, but as an engineer, he is in a distinctly forward-looking profession. Moreover, he lives largely on credit, a twentieth-century practice.¹⁰⁹ These traits serve as narrative warning signals, though they do not doom the Tobler clan on their own. Rather, it is Tobler’s worshipful treatment of technology that undermines both his business and his household.

As his affairs worsen, the engineer’s inventions begin to usurp human qualities. His Advertising Clock seems to “[sprawl] on the ground in defeat, wailing for a bit of solvent capital,”¹¹⁰ while the Marksman’s Vending Machine appears to “[beckon...] in annoyance but also imploringly.”¹¹¹ These inanimate objects do more than divert human feelings from other humans and toward themselves — they begin to exert physical influence over their owners. Thus, a “steep bill” Tobler receives impresses itself in the

“furrows on [his] brow” with “almost mathematical precision,” so that the exact amount he owes may be read directly from his forehead.¹¹² During a tense family dinner, Mrs. Tobler, ignoring her husband’s already evident anger, denounces one of her sons through a mouth that opens “as if it were on springs and had been mechanically activated,” whereupon Tobler punches the boy in the head.¹¹³

The weakening of human feelings like compassion and the identification of human bodies with technical inventions is directly proportional to the empowerment of these objects. By dedicating himself to the profits he thinks technology will generate, Tobler dooms his family to ruin when the capricious winds of capitalism inevitably cease blowing in his favor. At the same time, his weak patriarchal authority fails to deliver on the promise of archaic lord-vassal relations. He treats Marti less like a slave (he is well fed, comfortably housed, and never subjected to corporal punishment) and more like a piece of office equipment.

It is Tobler’s wife rather than Tobler who becomes Marti’s mentor. As the business continues to founder, she remarks that her husband “would have done much better if he had never struck out on his own, had never set himself up independently, but rather had gone on quietly in his modest position as technical assistant.”¹¹⁴ In this interpretation, Tobler’s fault lies in the presumption that it is possible and desirable to rise above a subordinate role. Accordingly, Mrs. Tobler’s parting advice to Marti is to “accustom [himself] to overcoming wounded feelings in silence.” After all, she adds, “women are compelled to do this every day, and it is worth considering for men as well.”¹¹⁵

Like *The Assistant*, *Jakob von Gunten* centers on waning masculine power and familial degeneration. The von Gunten clan has gradually lost their noble status and

become merely bourgeois, while their youngest offspring, Jakob, dreams of life as a “complete zero [*kugelrunde Null*].”¹¹⁶ Yet his decision to become a servant, though it seems to require mind-numbing training, is more than an act of mourning for a disappearing aristocratic order.¹¹⁷ Like Simon Tanner, Jakob sees servitude as a means of breaking out of the network of rationalized, transactional relationships to which modern man is condemned.¹¹⁸ It is better to be the personal plaything of a capricious lord than an expendable, anonymous worker in a capitalist enterprise. In the words of the titular hero of “Tobold (II)” (1917), a trainee servant at a lord’s country estate,

Isn’t it true that our lives first take on beauty when we’ve learned to be unassuming, to forget or set aside individual wishing and desiring, and instead give ourselves over with all our liberated, willing hearts to a precept [*Gebot*] and lifelong service [*Dienst*], to satisfy people with our conduct, and meekly and boldly [*sanft und kühn*] forgo beauty? For when I forgo something beautiful, does not a never-before-imagined and a thousand times more beautiful beauty come flying toward me in reward for my display of goodwill and my kind, strongly felt self-denial?¹¹⁹

This passage encapsulates Walser’s paradoxical understanding of submission, which he almost always couches in aesthetic language. The “beauty” of life only reveals itself to those who “forgo” it, adopting instead an attitude of obeisance. It is this choice, rather than pursuit of money or power, that is truly “bold.” Like the boyish abductor of Simon Tanner’s daydream, whose inexperience and refusal to compromise are sources of strength, the servitor is far more empowered than his lowly social status implies. Indeed, as the protagonist of “The Equestrienne [*Die Kunstreiterin*]” (1930) attests, under the right circumstances, the “punctual, joyful fulfillment of commands” can feel downright “dominant [*herrschend*].”¹²⁰ Conversely, those in the dominant position, like Tobler or

Simon's lady, often prove themselves weaker than their servitors, a fact that affords servants aesthetic pleasure in its own right.¹²¹

The empowerment of the *Knabe* proceeds partly through voluntary submission to dominant women, and partly through the discrediting of the *Mann* and an enfeebled, compromise-ready patriarchal order. Thus, in *Jakob von Gunten*, the student (Jakob) rescues the teacher (Herr Benjamenta) from his collapsed Institute, while in *The Assistant*, Marti walks away from Tobler's villa hand in hand with the engineer's previous assistant, the drunken Wirsich, presumably to labor for wages no more. In *The Tanner Siblings*, the most prominent representative of fading patriarchal authority is the mysterious Agappaia, husband to Simon and Kaspar's friend Klara.¹²² Agappaia, as Klara confesses to Simon,

has gambled and lost everything. He's fallen into the hands of swindlers. The house has already been sold, it's been bought by your Ladies' Association [*Frauenverein*] for the Public Good and Moderation. The ladies are going to create a woodland health spa for the working class. Agappaia has thrown in his lot with a group of Asian explorers and will be traveling far away with them soon to discover a sunken Greek city somewhere in India.¹²³

Colonial practices have not borne out their promise of enrichment, forcing Agappaia back to the Oriental edges of European empire with an apparently scientific mission. Another indication of waning masculine authority is the takeover of Agappaia's home by a *Frauenverein*, which aims to restore the shattered nerves of urban workers by exposing them to nature. Agappaia is also coded as unmanly in his personal life. He fails to produce a child with Klara and even the bullets he fires in the woods at night serve no purpose, expressing only his dismay at his wife's apparent infidelity.¹²⁴ Agappaia's

impotence contrasts with the virility of Klara's Turkish lover, who treats her like his "vassal [*Knechtin*]" and impregnates her before returning to his homeland.¹²⁵

The "Turkish" theme recurs several times in Walser's fiction, most notably in "Farewell [*Abschied*]" (1909). This story, written from the point of view of the recently ousted Turkish sultan, predicts that Western "cleansing [*reinemachen*]" of the Orient can only do it harm.

Go on, cleanse the land, if you can, but see to it that the Orient doesn't die under the very hand that does the cleansing. [...] Poor Orient, ah, now they will kill you. I was just a petty murderer, I killed my own creatures, but they kill half the world. For what will we be once they have civilized us?¹²⁶

"Farewell" presents a complex vision of colonialism. To be sure, Walser's Turkish sultan is a paternalistic Western cliché — a barbaric, but ultimately "petty" Eastern tyrant. However, Walser uses this cliché to critique colonialism, which enacts atrocities on such a vast scale that the Turkish sultan's poor treatment of his subjects pales in comparison. Moreover, behind Walser's pessimistic denunciation of Western ways is an admiration for the youthful potency of the East.

For all that they are cast as "Oriental," the Turkish sultan and his state are actually stand-ins for a declining West, as Walser's invocation of the word "civilized [*zivilisiert*]" suggests. The antipode of *Zivilisation* in contemporary discourse was *Kultur*. This binary had a long history in German thought, but gained new currency after the second industrial revolution and again in the interwar period.¹²⁷ In 1887, the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) had incorporated *Zivilisation*/ *Kultur* into a dichotomy of his own — that of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Modernity was defined, Tönnies claimed, by

the conflict between mercantile, mechanistic *Gesellschaft* and archaic, organic *Gemeinschaft*.¹²⁸

On closer inspection, the exoticism in Walser's parable turns out to veil a fear familiar to his German-speaking contemporaries: that of losing one's authentic cultural soul as civilization advances. The sultan goes on to imply that civilization is inherently a form of colonialist oppression: "The Turks will put on caps and look like Germans. They will force us to do business [*Geschäfte machen*], and if we aren't capable of it, we'll simply be shot."¹²⁹ The word *Geschäfte* is as suggestive as the word *zivilisiert*, prefiguring the distaste for soulless finance capitalism exhibited in texts like Sombart's *Merchants and Heroes*. The sultan may not exactly be a "hero," but his distaste for capitalism pits him definitively against "merchants."

Walser's identification with the Oriental other is part of the contemporary turn away from rationality in German-speaking Europe, which the First World War only exacerbated. Like the failed colonizer Agappaia, Western *Zivilisation* is sterile. Only a highly cultured, non-Western order will be able to revive it. Seen in this light, Walser's prose continues the logic of Sacher-Masoch's: Western man is sick, and the cure is servitude to some form of Other — a Slavic woman or an entire nation possessing *Kultur*. Moreover, whereas Sacher-Masoch considered preference for receiving punishment to be perverse, Walser cast it as a longing for the only medicine capable of restoring a floundering *Geist*.

Walser's fiction offers a snapshot of a shift in German-speaking self-conception vis-à-vis "the East" that took place between the 1860s and the 1920s. For Sacher-Masoch's contemporaries, the "Orient," a broad category encompassing such diverse locales as

Turkey, Russia, and India, was the source of non-German perversion. By the time Walser wrote “Farwell” and especially after the First World War, German-speaking Europeans begin to conceive of themselves in opposition to the Anglo-American West, and thus to identify themselves with “the Orient” (although, ironically, the Nazis would class the Slavs among the inferior races). Like the adherents of Pan-Slavism in Russia, German-speaking Europeans began to see themselves as carriers of a brutal, manly energy that would redeem overly rational *Zivilisation* from enfeeblement and decline, by force if necessary. One of the most influential figures in the Weimar Republic’s “conservative revolution,” Moeller van den Bruck, explicitly “contrasted the ‘young peoples’ of the ‘East’ — Germany and Russia — with those of the capitalist and materialist ‘West.’”¹³⁰ This recasting of “true” Germanness, paradoxically, coexisted with rising xenophobia affecting even the famously independent “voluntary nation [*Willensnation*]” of Switzerland, which drifted politically rightward after 1920.

In a 1909 letter to a director of the *Assicurazioni Generali*, Franz Kafka remarked that Walser (or his literary stand-in, Simon Tanner) had remained trapped in the past, hopelessly out of step with the forward march of history.¹³¹ In fact, this was only half-true: it is precisely Walser’s yearning for archaic models of servitude that marks him as fully integrated into the central paradigms of his time. Walser’s commitment to *Handwerklichkeit*, his rejection of transactionality, and his privileging of boyishness over maturity and servitude over white-collar work all situate him within contemporary debates around *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* and their respective social settings, *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. Most importantly, his mistrust of technology and belief in bodily

discipline position Walser on the cusp of German-speaking Europe's organic turn and the concurrent development of masochistic subjectivity in fascism.

5. Phoning it in: Labor, Gender, and New Communication Media in Franz Kafka

I could never work as independently as you seem to; I slither out of responsibility like a snake; I have to sign many things, but every evaded signature seems like a gain; I also sign everything (though I really shouldn't) with FK only, as though that could exonerate me; for this reason I also feel drawn toward the typewriter in anything concerning the office, because its work, especially when executed at the hands of a typist [*Schreibmaschinistin*], is so impersonal.¹³²

—Franz Kafka, letter to Felice Bauer (1912)

The workplace virtues of Felice Bauer (1887-1960), the addressee of the letter from which these lines are drawn, were not limited to the “independence” her correspondent and sometime fiancé Franz Kafka ascribes to her. Indeed, by the time the two met at the home of Max Brod in August of 1912, Bauer, a “highly competent” typist, was already a chief clerk [*Prokurist*] — incidentally Josef K.'s job in *The Trial*.¹³³ This short passage displays several elements exemplifying Kafka's attitudes not only toward office work, but also toward women and the new media of his time. As a female employee of the Carl Lindström Company, which manufactured gramophones and dictation-recording devices called Parlographs, Bauer herself was a perfect embodiment of all three of these entities. Kafka's ambivalent attitude toward Parlographs, along with other modern conveniences like the telephone and typewriter, is characteristically present here. The typewriter, operated by hands not his own, relieves him of responsibility even as it distances him from his own identity, imbuing his office work with a mechanistic “independence.”

It is the quality of “independence” that Kafka felt was lacking in his creative process: in a diary entry from 1921, Kafka lamented the “helplessness” of fiction writing, which he found to be slavishly dependent on external contingencies like the “chambermaid who heats the room.”¹³⁴ By contrast, as the above excerpt suggests, the mediation inherent in office work renders it independent from everything but apparatuses and those who work them. As it passes through the fingertips of the typist [*Schreibmaschinist*] — or, more likely, a *Schreibmaschinistin* — the work of the male *Koncipist* (law clerk or legal secretary, the position Kafka occupied at the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute, or AUVA) is smoothed out into typeface and anonymized, as is appropriate for bureaucratic prose.¹³⁵ At the same time, this passage, considered alongside the 1921 diary entry, effects a conflation of the machine with the woman operating it: in the letter, it is Bauer who is described as “independent,” a quality whose absence the diary entry imputes to creative writing.

The nexus of femininity, writing, and new media has received extensive treatment in the vast secondary literature on Kafka.¹³⁶ The scholarship tends to cast these issues in terms familiar even to non-specialists: terror of women as destroyers of the grave-like solitude and “total concentration” necessary for writing;¹³⁷ a lifelong oscillation between “approach” toward and “deflection” of desire, which is productively channeled via writing;¹³⁸ and for his fictional protagonists, marginalization of women in oppressive bureaucratic systems in the name of purely masculine aims.¹³⁹ Did Kafka experience “homoerotic longings” that “[required] sublimation” into copious literary production?¹⁴⁰ Were female typists, as Wolf Kittler suggests, his special “muses,” which Kafka, like his male protagonists, instrumentalized for personal gain?¹⁴¹ These and other speculations on

Kafka's sexual predilections, fears of technology, and the reflection of these predilections and fears in his written corpus stipulate a rigid binary that pits an anxious, emasculated Kafka *against* the trifecta of sexuality, women, and technology.

Yet Kafka's stance on the union of new media and women, like Walser's mistrust of modernity, is less idiosyncratic fearfulness and more considered participation in contemporary German-speaking discourse. His fiction illuminates the emerging linkages between new communication media, work discipline, and changing definitions of femininity in Austria-Hungary before and between the World Wars. In particular, Kafka's conception of working bodies — male or female; engaged in office work or creative writing — reveals a gendered dimension to the “organic turn,” in which Kafka participated through his treatments of technology. In identifying women with the new media that increasingly became their domain in white-collar workplaces, Kafka acquiesced to what he perceived as the dominance of “feminine” energies in modern labor practice. Kafka's professional women, like gramophones, produce a disturbing but not necessarily unpleasant noise — not unlike the childlike singing his alter ego K. hears on the line when trying to telephone the Castle.¹⁴² Kafka conceived of this noise as destructive to certain types of activity (especially creative writing) but constitutive of modern communication, whether personal or professional. In so doing, he reflected contemporary fears of a burgeoning technocratic order that threatened to swallow up men lacking sufficient discipline to resist it. This position aligns Kafka with such seemingly distant writers as the novelists of the German *Freikorps*, who, as Klaus Theweleit has shown, were petrified of being dissolved in a flood of enfeebling feminine energy. Like Kafka, the men of the *Freikorps* saw women as oceanic forces threatening to engulf the

integrity of the male mind and body, and writing as a form of discipline could forestall their degenerative influence.¹⁴³

Of course, for Kafka, writing itself could be treacherous. His reluctance to commit his name to paper, much in evidence in the passage from his December 1912 letter to Bauer, is just one reflection of his well-documented mistrust of words as transmitters of meaning: “All writing seems worthless to me, and it is worthless,” he would write to the translator and journalist Milena Jesenská in 1920.¹⁴⁴ Kafka was not the only one suffering from disillusionment in language in the German-speaking “discourse network” of 1900, to borrow Friedrich Kittler’s term. Nor was he the only such sufferer in his home city of Prague; by September 1912, when he wrote his first major work, “The Judgment,” the *Sprachkrise* [crisis of language] was well underway, responding not least to “the multiethnic, multilinguistic environment” of the decaying Austrian Empire.¹⁴⁵ Prague, with its mostly Jewish German-speaking minority living in the city center and a periphery populated by increasingly nationalistic Czechs, was a natural setting for skepticism about the capacity of language to reduce confusion in communication.¹⁴⁶

Kafka himself famously exemplified this tension between languages and cultures, as the child of a mother who preferred to speak German and a father who was more comfortable in Czech; when he called German his “mother tongue [*Muttersprache*],” he meant it literally.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, in his capacity as an employee in the worker’s accident insurance industry, which mediated relations among managers, workers, and the technologies that maimed the latter while enriching the former, Kafka had an insider’s view into the dire straits into which the seemingly unassailable fortress of official German now arrived. The antiquated practices and language of the Austrian bureaucracy

could not keep up with growing populations and the increased number of documents flowing through various agencies after 1900. The resulting floods of paper, incomprehensible official style [*Amtsstil*], and bizarre disappearances and reappearances of documents became staples of Kafka's fiction.¹⁴⁸

But the *Sprachkrise*, while illuminating, gives only partial insight into Kafka's mistrust of language. What is missing is a sense of how the roles of men and women as political, social, and economic actors were changing around 1900. That the communicative issues brought to light in the *Sprachkrise* were intimately connected to "the woman question" is evident from Kafka's epistolary communication with his romantic interlocutors, especially Bauer and Jesenská. As vividly as Kafka articulates the impossibility of "serious" writing (often summing up whole days in his diary with the damning "nothing written"), nowhere is he more eloquent about the impotence, or even the dangers, of writing than in his letters to women. As his romance with Bauer soured, Kafka, who had previously peppered her with questions and demanded that she answer his letters punctually and voluminously,¹⁴⁹ abruptly commanded, "And from now on don't write to me so much. A hectic correspondence [*ein großer Briefverkehr*] is a sign that something is wrong."¹⁵⁰ He promised that as they approached the "increasingly stronger ties [*immer stärkere Verbindungen*]" of formal engagement, letters would become "laughable [*lächerlich*]." Though any possibility of connection [*Verbindung*] between men and women through writing reveals itself to be a cruel joke, Kafka felt incapable of renouncing the pen.¹⁵¹

By the time he was writing Jesenská, long after he and Bauer were no longer in contact, Kafka had become convinced that, as he wrote in 1922, "All the misfortunes

[*Unglück*] of [his] life” could be traced back to “letters or the possibility of letter writing.”¹⁵² Not only is letter-writing a “traffic [*Verkehr*] with ghosts,” it may be used against the sender in cases where “one letter corroborates [*erhärtet*] the other and can refer to it as a witness” — a reference, perhaps, to the 1914 breakup of Kafka and Bauer’s engagement, an episode he described as a “tribunal [*Gericht*].”¹⁵³ The 1922 letter to Jesenská further distinguishes between technologies that facilitate human connection and those that hamper it:

In order to eliminate [*ausschalten*] as far as possible the ghostly element between people and to create a natural communication, [humanity has invented] the railway, the motorcar, the airplane, but it doesn’t help anything, these are evidently inventions being made at the point of crashing [*Absturz*], the opposing side is so much calmer and stronger; after the postal service it invented the telegraph, the telephone, the radiograph.¹⁵⁴

Kafka establishes a clear polarity between inventions that physically bring humans closer together, like trains, planes, and automobiles, and those that only appear to bridge distance, creating channels through which information will travel only imperfectly, reaching its addressee in no less distorted form than “written kisses.” Even hand-written documents, with which Kafka had once identified his own person and which he considered far less suspect than typed ones — indeed, the typewriter was for him a mechanism of “castration” — have become infected with the pernicious information-leaching ghosts native to modern communicative channels.¹⁵⁵

Rumination about the nature of written communication was only natural given Kafka’s choice of romantic-epistolary interlocutors. Both Bauer, the office worker, and Jesenská, the Czech journalist and translator, were communicators by trade. As Peter-André Alt notes, Kafka’s decision to type out his first letter to Bauer on his office

typewriter reflects his “intuitive” creation of a “circuit [*Stromkreis*]” between himself and a woman whose “professional activity [was] connected to the world of modern office media.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, Bauer, who finished her vocational training in 1908 and went on to work as a typist at the Odeon Gramophone Company and then as a *Prokurist* with Carl Lindström, joined a growing cohort of female employees staffing the complex managerial systems that had emerged between 1850 and 1920. In the workplaces of Kafka’s time, the “informal and primarily oral mode of interaction” that had characterized earlier office structures “gave way to a complex and extensive formal communication system depending heavily on written documents of various sorts.”¹⁵⁷ Even outside the office, new technologies like the telephone, telegraph, and pneumatic post systems (*Rohrpost*) enabled speedier informational traffic in large cities like Prague, which by 1899 boasted 55 kilometers of *Rohrpost* infrastructure.¹⁵⁸

Burgeoning urban bureaucracies required efficient technologies of administration and communication; accordingly, “quill pens and bound volumes gave way to typewriters, stencil duplicators, and vertical files that aided in creating, copying, storing, and retrieving documents.”¹⁵⁹ As telephones, typewriters, and dictation tools like the Parlograph entered standard office inventory, so did a new class of mostly female workers. By 1907, when Kafka was just entering the workforce, numerous occupations that had, until 1850 or so, been the exclusive province of men were now opening up to women. The period between 1907 and Kafka’s death in 1924 saw a threefold increase in the numbers of female white-collar workers.¹⁶⁰

The preferential staffing of positions connected to new media with women was no coincidence: many of these jobs were coded “female” and considered subordinate,

dispensable roles in a male-supervised workplace. As Ute Frevert has written, the tasks entrusted to women, including the “operation of new office machines,” were largely “routine and simple,” while quantitative or managerial jobs typically went to men.¹⁶¹ Gradually, what had been an economic and, later, scientific management-based ethos of division of labor and allocation of resources (women could be paid less than men and fired at will) acquired an ideological underpinning. Working with typewriters or telephones was perfect for women, managers reasoned, because of their greater manual dexterity, more melodious voices, and better social graces.¹⁶² Increasingly, men avoided working as shorthand typists, “fearful of becoming mere letter-writing machines.”¹⁶³

Because the rise of white-collar culture occurred in tandem with both the advent of new-media communication devices and the entry of women into the workplace, the two soon became closely associated in the public imagination, which transformed them into human-machine chimeras capable of “transmitting and recording script and speech.” These hybrid apparatuses had to be innovatively managed, their advent necessitating changes in office power relations—even if, practically speaking, much of the power remained with male bosses.¹⁶⁴

Despite “natural” limits on women’s careers such as low pay, poor job security, and the expectation that marriage would end any workplace ambitions, many of Kafka’s contemporaries saw even modest gains in female social and economic independence as a threat, not just to male office workers, but to masculinity in general. Kafka’s well known fears of female influence on his writing—for example, his tortured ratiocination around the question of marriage to Bauer, dating to 1913, which hinges on a conception of wedlock and authorial work as incompatible—fits well into contemporary rhetoric on

femininity and masculinity that considered women an obstacle to male creative productivity.¹⁶⁵ Perhaps the most iconic work in this vein was Otto Weininger's (1880-1903) dissertation-cum-*cri-de-coeur*, *Sex and Character* (1903), whose "gigantic success" waned only with the rise of anti-Semitic cultural policy in German-speaking Europe.¹⁶⁶ Weininger posited "Woman [*das Weib*]" as "the embodiment of an impersonal, subhuman, sexual drive," the "negative of the human essence of mind or spirit inhering in man and from which individuality and transcendence spring."¹⁶⁷ As she would be for fiction writers affiliated with the *Freikorps*, she is the swampy, all-engulfing environment from which the ambitious man must plot a directed escape.

Some thinkers traveled a slightly different route than Weininger, only to reach the same destination. The neurologist and phrenologist Paul Julius Möbius (1853-1907), for instance, juxtaposed the *Weib* with the lady [*Dame*] "in a diatribe against a decadent and un-German feminization" proceeding from a "ladies' economy [*Damen-Wirtschaft*]," a term recalling the reactionary-modernist *Händler-Gesellschaft*. Where woman stands at the helm of culture, according to Möbius, the total crumbling of society cannot be far behind. Thus, Möbius ascribed the ruin of the *ancien régime* to the "feminizing" influence of *Damen*-led salons.¹⁶⁸

Though we cannot know for sure whether Kafka read Weininger's misogynistic treatise, the vociferous debates around the "woman question" had reached such a pitch by the 1910s that he could hardly have avoided encountering analogous materials.¹⁶⁹ In any case, both Kafka's fiction and his private writings evince a preoccupation with the destructive influence of the feminine, a fear powerfully expressed by the Officer of the Penal Colony — that of being superseded by a swarming mass of women who have

inclined the ear of authority toward themselves. No matter when one tries to access the seat of (male) power, in this case a “balcony,” “it is too late; you never even make it onto the balcony, which is already full of ladies [*Damen*]; you want to make yourself noticeable; you want to scream; but a lady’s hand holds your mouth shut.”¹⁷⁰ The image of a lady’s hand silencing the mouth of a male speaker, even when articulated by a paranoid walking anachronism like the Officer, bespeaks an ambient concern with a masculinity threatened by a savvy, if undifferentiated, feminine mass. The Penal Colony’s *Damen*, though they lurk in the background, nonetheless shape public opinion and influence policy. In the Officer’s view, it is they who are responsible for the falling out of fashion of what he euphemistically refers to as the “procedure [*Verfahren*]” connected with his beloved execution machine, which is itself rickety and prone to collapse.

Assailed by new media apparatuses in white-collar work, men had even more to fear from industrial technology, which threatened to cause injury and devastate earning power. As an employee of the AUVA, Kafka’s task was to mitigate the latter threat. His job had two aspects: first, risk classification, which entailed establishing a schedule of fees for various firms based on statistically calculated risk; and second, accident prevention, which involved meticulous understanding of human-machine interactions. Kafka was thus at the intersection point between Foucauldean discipline, which deals with individual bodies, and regulation, which treats whole populations. His work at the AUVA also placed him within the purview of Taylorism, whose advent resulted in the creation of a satellite science aiming to scientifically manage risk through workplace regulation.¹⁷¹ If risk classification was a bureaucratic and legal matter, accident

prevention focused on the laboring body. Accordingly, the machines in Kafka's fiction spring from his professional experience with wood-planers, typewriters, gramophones manufactured by Felice Bauer's firm, and the Hollerith machine, a mechanical tabulator.¹⁷²

Even as he sought to reduce the impact of industrial machinery on workers' bodies, Kafka subjected himself to a punishing physical discipline meant to improve his own productivity, believing that writing required health and strength.¹⁷³ In 1912, he wrote Bauer that working hard at writing rendered him "no more than a well prepared instrument," the human Parlograph of some "higher power."¹⁷⁴ Such views mark Kafka as an adherent of the contemporary conception of the laboring body as a "medium through which the forces of nature are transformed into the forces that propel society."¹⁷⁵

The wish to improve his creative efficiency, whether through solitude, celibacy, diet, or exercise, aligned Kafka with the very technocratic regimes he opposed both as a compassionate industrial risk analyst and as a modernist visionary. As Elizabeth Boa has observed, some of Kafka's more obsessive pursuits belonged in the

context of body culture in the early twentieth century: the cult of youth and health, of hiking, cycling, and climbing, of dieting or [eating a high-fat, low-carb diet], of chewing food forty times (*fletcher*, [after the American Dr. Horace Fletcher]), of vegetarianism, of exercising every morning (*müllern* [after the Danish doctor J.P. Müller]), of fresh air and open windows, of naked bathing and sun and air cures.

Though these activities may have "sought to repair the perceived damage inflicted by urban industrial life,"¹⁷⁶ many of them, especially *fletcher* and *müllern*, resembled the techniques of scientific management, predicated as they were on repetitive, muscle-isolating steps aiming at the optimization of certain physical operations.¹⁷⁷

Kafka's ambivalence toward devices like the typewriter specifically points to a link between new media and women that the misogynistic discourse of his day addressed only indirectly, if at all. When Bauer complained about writing sales letters concerning the Parlograph, Kafka responded:

I am fundamentally frightened of Parlographs. A machine with its silent, serious demands strikes me as exercising a greater, crueller compulsion on one's capacities [*Arbeitskraft*] than any human being. How insignificant, how easy to control, to send away, to shout down, upbraid, question, or stare at, a living typist [*Schreibmaschinist*] is! He who dictates is master [*Herr*], but faced with a Parlograph he is degraded [*entwürdigt*] and becomes a factory worker whose brain has to serve a whirring machine.¹⁷⁸

Kafka's use of the masculine *Schreibmaschinist*, rather than the expected *Schreibmaschinistin* —the role in which Bauer started her own career — suggests that he has perhaps imagined himself into the position of the victimized, easily dominated worker. True, the dictating *Herr* is, as ever, a male figure. But his purely human masculinity is obsolete: indeed, he is about to be replaced by a technical apparatus that immediately shifts the balance of power in its own favor, subjugating and abusing the dictating man just as he once subjugated and abused the hapless typist. Some men, this passage implies, are simply erased by the advent of new media; others remain, but, all appearances to the contrary, are reduced to the repetitive, mechanistic forced labor of the factory worker.

Kafka's letters show that he found the feminine communicator to be in league with such treacherous modern conveniences as the telephone, gramophone, and typewriter. When, in a dream, an "especially spiky [*stacheliger*]" telegraph corners Kafka in his bed, it is his youngest sister, Otilie "Ottla" Kafka (1892-1943), who operates it:

But I had to telegraph you due to some excessive worry [*übergroße Sorge*] over you, a wild longing, which would surely tear me out of bed, for instantaneous [*augenblicklichen*] news from you. Luckily my youngest sister was immediately [*sofort*] there and started telegraphing for me. [...] The machine [*Apparat*] was so constructed that you had only to push a button for the answer from Berlin to appear immediately [*sofort*] on the little paper ribbon. I remember how, stiff with tension, I gazed at the initially empty band as it unfurled [...] What a joy it was to see the first letters [*Schriftzeichen*] appearing on the ribbon.¹⁷⁹

Ottla Kafka and Bauer have nothing to fear from the telegraph, and in fact harness its capacities to assuage Kafka's "excessive worry," forcing the mechanism to speak in a language he can understand — that of *Schriftzeichen*, literally "script signs." The telegraph here creeps in on Kafka in his bed, an intimate space where he lies in a vulnerable state of sleepiness and possibly undress. This recalls not only Josef K.'s arrest scene from *The Trial*, but also a scene in *The Man Who Disappeared* in which a naked Karl Roßmann receives a surprise visit from the typist Therese, who sits so close to him on his bed that he must take care not to be exposed to her prying eyes. She inundates him with torrents of speech and, ultimately, of tears, gradually pressing so tightly against him that he cannot remain "hidden" under the covers and, as if their words were in a zero-sum balance, "cannot really figure out what to say to her."¹⁸⁰ Therese resembles Kafka's dream telegraph: both invade private space and produce floods of confusing verbiage, which in the dream can only be deciphered with the help of a second woman.

Kafka construes communication media and the women who operate them as natural allies. Female communicators are mysteriously and yet unmistakably affiliated with (usually male) authority figures, which for Kafka are always invisible; thus, the only chance his protagonists have of accessing powerful personages is to befriend, or romance, female messengers of power.¹⁸¹ The *Damen* of the Penal Colony, Leni in *The Trial*, and

Frieda in *The Castle* must have their buttons properly pushed before they will function properly as communication media.

Women also resemble telephones and telegraphs in that both produce technical noise, a constant annoyance for Kafka's characters in their search for authority. Yet increasingly, noise itself constituted the message passing through the channels in modern power structures, which deployed telephonic communication to maintain discipline at a distance.¹⁸² The idea that women are devices that distort information appears, among other places, in one of Kafka's letters to Grete Bloch, a friend of Bauer's. Explaining how men cease to be good friends once they are married, Kafka writes: "Anything one tells him, his wife will fine out explicitly or implicitly [*stillschweigend*], and there is perhaps no woman in existence whose head wouldn't distort [*verzerrt*] all of this in transmission [*bei diesem Übergang*]." ¹⁸³ As a sensitive channel, an expert in the detection of both implicit and explicit signals, the wife will obtain, and garble, any information the husband receives through unmediated contact (conversation) with his male friend. Her very head is a hollow space with unreliable acoustics; she is a producer of noise.

Kafka experiences two types of noise. The first is the innocuous, if irritating, "noise of life [*Lärm des Lebens*]" itself: disturbances like screaming children or card-playing relatives that preclude serious writing work.¹⁸⁴ The second type of noise, far less innocuous than the first, is the buzzing of telephones, women, and other communication media. However, though this type of noise impedes communication between men and their interlocutors, its overall effect is to enable, and even constitute, the functioning of modern information networks. "Salvation-seeking" men like Josef K. and K., though they "throw themselves" upon women, tend to be excluded from rhizomatic communication

graphs in which women like Leni and Frieda act as edges running between masculine vertices like *Trial* lawyer Huld and *Castle* bureaucrat Klammm.¹⁸⁵ Women may be marginalized as “mere means to an end,” as Theodor Adorno put it, but the confounding noise they and the communication media they operate conspire to produce not only provides them with financial independence, but also helps the world they inhabit run smoothly.¹⁸⁶ Women are indeed “[conduits]” for “male activity,” although, for all their efforts, neither Kafka nor his creations ever quite manage to “[instrumentalize]” them fully.¹⁸⁷

Kafka’s first novel fragment, *The Man Who Disappeared [Der Verschollene]* (1911-14), illustrates the author’s fear that violence, technical noise, and labor are inextricably linked to the destruction of masculine identity. It is also a masochistic narrative with many stylistic techniques in common with *Venus in Furs* — from an episodic narrative, to an emphasis on posing and staging, to heavy use of quotation. This last aspect is particularly pronounced: Kafka, who had himself never been to America, drew heavily on the travel account *America Today and Tomorrow: Travel Experiences* (1912) by the socialist critic Arthur Holitscher (1869-1941).¹⁸⁸

The prevailing trend in previous literary treatments of America within the German-speaking tradition had been to present the nation in an optimistic light, as a new world full of wonder and opportunity. By Kafka’s time, however, this view was beginning to change, primarily through the influence of critiques of capitalist greed and descriptions of the horrors industrialization visited on the disenfranchised urban poor.¹⁸⁹ In the interwar years, these fears of the dark side of American prosperity would blossom into a full-fledged reaction to *Amerikanismus*.

Working in this newly established critical tradition, Kafka wrote *Der Verschollene* as an “anti-tourist guide” that effaces locations and identities, culminating with the rebirth of Karl Roßmann, a secondary-school dropout from German-speaking Prague, as “Negro,” an actor in the Nature Theater of Oklahoma [sic].¹⁹⁰ Using exotic locales and “foreign” customs, *Der Verschollene* projects European fears of fast-moving, technocratic, urbanized modernity onto a fantasy America so far removed from the nation’s historical reality that it deserves its own name: “Amerika.”

In Amerika, New York and Boston are adjacent cities connected by a bridge over the Hudson River and the dollar, shilling, and pound are all acceptable currencies.¹⁹¹ Amerika is a place of incredible speed and technical sophistication, where people move “with the agility of gymnasts” and money opens all doors, even obviating moral strictures like the prohibition on premarital sex.¹⁹² Yet under the glittering surface, tensions among classes, races, and nationalities roil. While Karl is still under the protection of his uncle Jakob, these tensions present themselves as mere inconveniences, for example when the German Stoker draws Karl into a conflict with the man’s Romanian supervisor, delaying Karl’s progress onto land, or when traffic is diverted by a mass of striking metalworkers.¹⁹³ Yet Karl, whom Jakob soon disowns for a minor transgression, soon gains first-hand experience of life in the vast American underclass.

Amerika welcomes any and all huddled masses yearning to breathe free, provided they can pay for steam-ship passage to her shores. As the Head Cook at the Hotel Occidental, which briefly employs Karl as a lift-boy, puts it: “Anyone can come here, however bad they are.”¹⁹⁴ This pronouncement echoes the policy of the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, the afterlife-like setting Karl enters as the novel breaks off. True to this

principle of acceptance, almost every Amerikan establishment teems with rude, hurried people, like the buffet at the Hotel Occidental or the offices of Jakob's distribution company.¹⁹⁵

Outside the upper-crust circles of "Newyork," as Kafka renders it, Amerika turns out to be a land where technical sophistication masks or even enables grotesque inhumanity. In a setting where it is imperative to, as Karl puts it, "know the mechanism" of a situation in order to master it, most foreigners arrive woefully ill prepared.¹⁹⁶ Jakob's business is larger and more technically advanced than anything Karl has seen in Europe; yet the enormous wealth it generates comes at the cost of a "frantic pace."¹⁹⁷ Similarly, the telephones in the Porter's lodge at the Hotel Occidental possess supernatural powers of amplification and enable unprecedentedly swift communication between employees and clients. Yet their very technical sophistication renders their busy operators literally deaf to human suffering. Indeed, when the sadistic Head Porter takes Karl to the lodge to torture him in private, Karl instinctively understands that though the place is filled with people, they are all too distracted by their apparatuses and too dependent on the Head Porter for their livelihood to come to Karl's aid.¹⁹⁸ Meanwhile, though Karl repeatedly attempts to partake of the technological cornucopia around him, the closest he gets is working as a lift-boy, a job that condemns him to mindless switch-pulling and "button-pushing."¹⁹⁹

Karl's ambition of becoming an engineer is systematically thwarted during his misadventures, forcing him down the class ladder from hotel lift-boy, to slave, and finally to a strange nobody named "Negro," a name he adopts during the admission process to the Nature Theater of Oklahama.²⁰⁰ The misspelling "Oklahama" reveals the Theater's

sinister inspiration and lends the novel's ending a pessimistic cast: in Holitscher's book, a photograph of a Southern lynching is captioned "An idyll from Oklahama."²⁰¹ By willingly calling himself "Negro," Karl becomes not merely *déclassé*, but almost entirely worthless according to Amerikan values — or, at most, worth only the raw labor that can be extracted from his body.

Indeed, Karl, the young German-speaking subject, seems destined to endure, and ultimately willingly consent to, violence. One of Karl's earliest memories involves his mother placing her hand over his mouth to muffle his excited babbling — a gesture that prefigures the stifling *Damenhand* from *The Penal Colony*.²⁰² Things do not improve as he grows up: his emigration from Europe results from the scandal of impregnating 35-year-old Johanna Brummer, a housemaid who forces herself on him in his parents' home. In America, meanwhile, "insults" to the "lowly," a category that soon includes Karl, are such a regular occurrence that he must get used to it in order to survive.²⁰³

Though men hurt Karl's body in the New World, it is women who do violence to his identity. Klara, the daughter of his uncle's wealthy friend, morphs from a demure society lady into a terrifying dominatrix as soon as she is alone with Karl, deploying her "sport-toughened [*gestählter*]" body to wrestle him into submission.²⁰⁴ But the greatest threat to the integrity of Karl's identity is the obese singer/ prostitute Brunelda, a kind of parodic Masochian Venus who exerts her dominance over multiple men at a time.²⁰⁵ The danger she poses to Karl is evident from her name alone, which recalls both the alleged rapist Johanna Brummer and the Valkyrie Brünnhilde from Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*.²⁰⁶ Wielding a whip through her proxy, the French vagabond Delamarche, Brunelda forces her male captives to serve her constantly, although, as Karl quickly notices, what goes on

in her household resembles “slavery” more than simple “service.”²⁰⁷ Despite his intention to escape her clutches as soon as possible, Karl soon becomes so “caught up” in the work of grooming and feeding Brunelda that he supplants his comrades entirely, becoming her sole caretaker.²⁰⁸

Karl models the enthusiastic consent to suffering that Kafka prophesied would be the lot of all naïve adventurers attempting to make their fortune within a ruthless technocracy. Though he lives out his adulthood, and possibly dies, inside the borders of Amerika, Karl’s joyfully energetic acceptance of whatever violence the world sends his way marks him as an ideal German-speaking subject from the perspective of the political Right. He is the individual ready and willing to dissolve in the mass.

Kafka’s fictions, diaries, and letters provide insight into the changing conception of labor, and therefore political power, in the twentieth century. His portrayals of new media like the telephone, telegraph, and typewriter reveal these changes to be, first, gendered, and, second, themselves conducive to the emergence of a body-focused political order. Noisy, female-operated new media hasten the depersonalization of labor and, simultaneously, aid in the establishment of a discipline that transcends the workplace to seize individuals wherever they may be. Moving beyond the schematic misogyny of a Möbius or a Weininger, Kafka constructs the man of the future not as enfeebled by women, but as instrumentalized to the point of welcoming the violent treatment he receives in the hope of surviving until conditions improve.

The very existence of the term “Kafkaesque” points to the easy applicability of certain chestnuts from Kafka’s fiction, like bureaucratic (dis)organization, to everyday life. Yet the reason Kafka’s works seem so prophetic is more prosaic than metaphysical.

The Trial, *The Castle*, and *Der Verschollene* presage aspects of totalitarian rule not because Kafka was a magical savant, but because the legal frameworks, medical lexicons, and racial ideologies that underlay this rule were forming in his time.²⁰⁹

6. Conclusion

The masses have been left with only *one* liberty [...] the liberty to consent [*die Freiheit der Zustimmung*]. Parliaments and plebiscites are being transformed ever more clearly into acts of acclamation, whose manufacture replaces the free formation of public opinion [*dessen Technik die Technik der freien Meinungsbildung ersetzt*]. But this manufacture of consent signifies nothing other than the transformation of the masses from a moral agent into an object.²¹⁰

— Ernst Jünger, “On Pain,” 1934

“On Pain,” Jünger’s meditation on technology, discipline, and violence, provides a fitting endnote to this chapter. Jünger wrote the essay one year after Hitler’s seizure of power as the final installment in a trilogy that had begun with “Total Mobilization” (1930) and *The Worker: Mastery and Form* (1932). The passage quoted here crystallizes the emergence of fascist ideology from the organic turn: technology, whose usefulness to the Germanic *Volk* had been vigorously debated through the 1920s, was now being harnessed as a disciplinary means — a technique or technology [*Technik*] for the “manufacture” of mass consent.

For all their emphasis on the mass, both Nazism and Stalinism would place remarkably specific and onerous demands on individuals. In *The Worker*, Jünger had argued that the “total mobilization” of the new “race” of workers had made the individualistic hero obsolete. His successor would be the “obedient laborer of sacrifice and death.”²¹¹ A year later, his “Downfall or a new order? [*Untergang oder neue*

Ordnung?],” would assert that “the ideal of individual freedom has become meaningless over against a spirit that sees happiness in rigorous discipline and service for great deeds.”²¹² But in order to become a generalized “type,” individuals first had to come to terms with their bodies, examining them for flaws and disciplining them according to a personalized program. The transformation of individuals into cogs in the machinery of the state required as a first step their de-technologization: each person was to look inward and determine the best way to instrumentalize his or her own body. Technology, when subsequently used, would be ancillary to a discipline already inscribed in the body.

The “proper” attitude toward pain in this scheme is not the detachment [*Entfernung*] Jünger propagandizes in “On Pain” — far from it. Indifference toward the body, the state’s most important instrument, constituted sloppiness tantamount to treason. The body had to be precisely calibrated, and none could perform this calibration better than the individual him or herself. Only discipline enabled contact between the organic, elementary life force of the *Volk* and the cosmic, suprahistorical energies that fascists wanted to unleash on the world. Nor did fascist ideology allow for this often painful reforging of the body to proceed by force from the outside. Rather, it required enthusiastic consent; hence the emphasis on joy [*Freude*] as a necessary component of national strength [*Kraft*]. This was the core of the National Socialist vision: an “organic society” in which each atom willingly “integrated” itself into the objectives of the whole, using technology as a means to this end.²¹³

The shaping of self-instrumentalizing subjects had begun before the turn of the century, but it only acquired a specific telos — the restoration of archaic German spirit by whatever means necessary — toward the beginning of the 1930s. Authors in this period,

including those writing outside the popular mainstream and, indeed, outside the geographical bounds of Germany, helped this discourse coalesce. In particular, Walser's apparently idiosyncratic writing interlocks with discourse around archaic models of production and servitude, while Kafka's critiques of gendered technocracy illustrate the desensitizing potential of technologized communication. Both authors, however, ultimately settle on a masochistic standard of behavior as either the desirable (Walser) or inevitable (Kafka) order of the day.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

¹ »Nun, und die Moral von der Geschichte?« sagte ich zu Severin, indem ich das Manuskript auf den Tisch legte. »Dass ich ein Esel war«, rief er, ohne sich zu mir zu wenden, er schien sich zu genießen. »Hätte ich sie nur gepeitscht!« [...] »Aber die Moral?« »Dass das Weib, wie es die Natur geschaffen und wie es der Mann gegenwärtig heranzieht, sein Feind ist und nur seine Sklavin oder seine Despotin sein kann, *nie aber seine Gefährtin*. Dies wird sie erst dann sein können, wenn sie ihm gleich steht an Rechten, wenn sie ihm ebenbürtig ist durch Bildung und Arbeit. Jetzt haben wir nur die Wahl, Hammer oder Amboss zu sein, und ich war der Esel, aus mir den Sklaven eines Weibes zu machen, verstehst du? Daher die Moral der Geschichte: Wer sich peitschen lässt, verdient, gepeitscht zu werden.« (Sacher-Masoch 141)

² Steiner 10.

³ Freud, *Three Essays*, 4.

⁴ *Germany at the Fin de Siècle*, Repp 103.

⁵ Steiner 83.

⁶ Steiner 33-4.

⁷ *Cultures of Neurasthenia*, Introduction, 10-11.

⁸ Rabinbach 153.

⁹ Steiner 20.

¹⁰ Steiner 56.

¹¹ Steiner 49-50.

¹² Rabinbach 146.

¹³ Steiner 38, 42.

¹⁴ Steiner 59.

¹⁵ Freud, *Three Essays*, 15.

¹⁶ »Sieht man von den unbestimmteren Arten, »nervös« zu sein, ab und faßt die eigentlichen Formen des nervösen Krankseins ins Auge, so reduziert sich der schädigende Einfluß der Kultur im wesentlichen auf die schädliche Unterdrückung des

Sexuallebens der Kulturvölker (oder Schichten) durch die bei ihnen herrschende »kulturelle« Sexualmoral.“ (Freud, „Sexualmoral,“ 148)

¹⁷ Rabinbach 2.

¹⁸ “Mit Bezug auf diese Entwicklungsgeschichte des Sexualtriebes könnte man also drei Kulturstufen unterscheiden: eine erste, auf welcher die Betätigung des Sexualtriebes auch über die Ziele der Fortpflanzung hinaus frei ist; eine zweite, auf welcher alles am Sexualtrieb unterdrückt ist bis auf das, was der Fortpflanzung dient, und eine dritte, auf welcher nur die legitime Fortpflanzung als Sexualziel zugelassen wird. Dieser dritten Stufe entspricht unsere gegenwärtige »kulturelle« Sexualmoral.” (Freud, „Sexualmoral,“ 152)

¹⁹ “Dieser dritten Stufe entspricht unsere gegenwärtige ‘kulturelle’ Sexualmoral.” (Freud, „Sexualmoral,“ 152)

²⁰ “Im letzteren Falle, bei allgemein schwachem Sexualtrieb, gelingt den Perversen die völlige Unterdrückung jener Neigungen, welche sie in Konflikt mit der Moralforderung ihrer Kulturstufe bringen. Aber dies bleibt auch, ideell betrachtet, die einzige Leistung, die ihnen gelingt, denn für diese Unterdrückung ihrer sexuellen Triebe verbrauchen sie die Kräfte, die sie sonst an die Kulturarbeit wenden würden. Sie sind gleichsam in sich gehemmt und nach außen gelähmt.” (Freud, „Sexualmoral,“ 153)

²¹ Rabinbach 45.

²² *Freud Encyclopedia*, 361.

²³ *Freud Encyclopedia*, 361.

²⁴ “Die Neurosen aber habe ich als das »Negativ« der Perversionen bezeichnet, weil sich bei ihnen die perversen Regungen nach der Verdrängung aus dem Unbewußten des Seelischen äußern, weil sie dieselben Neigungen wie die positiv Perversen im »verdrängten« Zustand enthalten.” (Freud, „Sexualmoral,“ 154)

²⁵ “Wer in die Bedingtheit nervöser Erkrankung einzudringen versteht, verschafft sich bald die Überzeugung, daß die Zunahme der nervösen Erkrankungen in unserer Gesellschaft von der Steigerung der sexuellen Einschränkung herrührt.” (Freud, „Sexualmoral,“ 157)

²⁶ Steiner 52.

²⁷ Steiner 64.

²⁸ Rabinbach 278.

²⁹ Steiner 67.

³⁰ Rabinbach 155.

³¹ Rabinbach 160.

³² Anderson 178.

³³ Peukert 8-9.

³⁴ Peukert 102.

³⁵ *Cultures of Neurasthenia*, Introduction, 1.

³⁶ *Cultures of Neurasthenia*, Introduction, 21.

³⁷ Peukert 7.

³⁸ Rabinbach 253.

³⁹ Weitz 149.

⁴⁰ Nolan 35, 114.

⁴¹ Nolan 123.

⁴² “Alle geistigen Werte bedrücken sie. Und deshalb haben sie aus ihrem innersten Wesen zwei Lebensformen geboren, die als Ersatz geistiger Werte dienen können, die aber durch ihre Verallgemeinerung auch dazu verhelfen, den letzten Rest geistigen Lebens aus dem Volk auszumerzen: ich meine den Komfort und den Sport.“ (Sombart 50)

⁴³ American sport culture, too, had to be altered before it could become a credibly German fad. See Erik N. Jensen, *Body by Weimar: Athletes, Gender, and German Modernity*, and Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890-1930*.

⁴⁴ Nolan 6.

⁴⁵ Peukert 114.

⁴⁶ Nolan 93.

⁴⁷ Nolan 48.

⁴⁸ Speier 16.

⁴⁹ Peukert 243.

⁵⁰ Herf 188.

⁵¹ Nolan 10.

⁵² Nolan 220.

⁵³ Herf 18.

⁵⁴ Herf 40.

⁵⁵ Nolan 88.

⁵⁶ Weitz 151.

⁵⁷ *Germany at the Fin de Siècle*, Wetzell 59.

⁵⁸ Weitz 157.

⁵⁹ Nolan 97.

⁶⁰ Nolan 181.

⁶¹ Weitz 152.

⁶² Nolan 89.

⁶³ Rabinbach 243.

⁶⁴ Nolan 207.

⁶⁵ Rabinbach 284.

⁶⁶ Nolan 189.

⁶⁷ Nolan 192.

⁶⁸ Nolan 234.

⁶⁹ Rabinbach 285.

⁷⁰ “Dieser nüchternen Denkweise entspricht dann - scheinbar natürlich — eine ausgeprägte Neigung für körperliches Behagen, für materielles Wohlsein, für ‘Komfort.’” (Sombart 11-12)

⁷¹ Nolan 232.

⁷² Rabinbach 284.

⁷³ Herf 195.

⁷⁴ *Tanners* 230 (translation modified). „Wenn ich ihr, auf ihren befehlenden Ton hin, gehorche, so muß ich dabei lachen, denn ich bemerke, es freut sie, zu sehen, wie gern und schnell ich gehorche. Wenn ich sie nun um etwas bitte, so schnauzt sie mich an und

gewährt doch gütig, vielleicht mit ein wenig Ärger darüber, daß ich in solch einer Art und Weise bitte, der man gewähren muß. Ich tu ihr immer ein bißchen weh, und denke: ganz recht! Tu das! Tu ihr immer ein bißchen weh. Das ist amüsant für sie. Das will sie. [...] — Wenn die wüßte, die neben mir sitzt, was ich schreibe! Einer meiner brennendsten Wünsche ist, so bald wie möglich von ihr eine Ohrfeige zu erhalten, aber ich muß leider zu meinem Schmerz daran zweifeln, daß sie dazu imstande ist. Eine klatschende Ohrfeige ins Gesicht: ich möchte alle Küsse, die ich noch erwarten darf, dafür weggeben. Einer meiner brennendsten Wünsche ist, so bald wie möglich von ihr eine Ohrfeige zu erhalten, aber ich muß leider zu meinem Schmerz daran zweifeln, daß sie dazu imstande ist. Eine klatschende Ohrfeige ins Gesicht: ich möchte alle Küsse, die ich noch erwarten darf, dafür weggeben.” (GT 211)

⁷⁵ *Robber* 18-19. “Er stürzt auf Wanda zu, faßt ihre Hand und haucht: ‘Gebieterin.’” (R 195)

⁷⁶ On the paradoxical nature of self-effacement in Walser, see Kreienbrock 130 and Borchmeyer 10.

⁷⁷ Heffernan 23, 26.

⁷⁸ See Heffernan 65.

⁷⁹ SW 17, 340.

⁸⁰ SW 5, 10-12.

⁸¹ SW 20, 430.

⁸² *Robber* 72-3. “Man nützt mit Unnützsein vielleicht sehr, liebste Gnädigste, weil ja doch schon so vielfältiger Nutzen geschadet hat, oder nicht?” (R 263)

⁸³ “Ich bin stellenlos, verdammt stellenlos. Ich muß wahrscheinlich wieder Diener werden, Teppiche klopfen und das Fressen darreichen. Das ist auch um vieles schöner als Commis sein.” (Walser, *Briefe*, 17)

⁸⁴ *Tanners* 224-5. „Ich begreife deinen Zorn. Ich bekenne mich schuldig, die Platte, die du hast fallen lassen, zerbrochen zu haben. Ich habe sie zerbrochen. [...] Meine Wangen streifen dein Kleid. Jede Scherbe, die ich zusammenlese, sagt mir: »Elender,« und der Saum von deinem Rock sagt mir: »Glücklicher!« [...] – Dein seidenes Kleid ist schön [...] Deine Hände sind schön, die so lang zu mir herabhängen. Ich hoffe, daß du mir einmal eine Ohrfeige damit gibst. Jetzt gehst du schon weg, ohne mich gescholten zu haben. Wenn du gehst, kichert und flüstert dein Kleid auf dem Boden.“ (GT 204-5)

⁸⁵ “Wenn ich im Bureau stehe, werden meine Glieder langsam zu Holz, das man wünscht, anzünden zu können, damit es verbrenne: Pult und Mensch werden Eines mit der Zeit.” (SW 4, 62)

⁸⁶ “Wem das saure tägliche Brot nur so auf den Monatssalärtisch fällt, der muss sich verpflichtet fühlen, nach und nach zur kontraktlich regelmäßigen Maschine zu werden.” (SW 3, 116)

⁸⁷ “Ich bin nicht dazu geschaffen, eine Schreib- und Rechenmaschine zu sein. Ich schreibe ganz gern, rechne ganz gern, betrage mich mit Vorliebe unter meinen Mitmenschen mit Anstand, bin gern fleißig und gehorche, wo es mein Herz nicht verletzt, mit Leidenschaft. Ich würde mich auch bestimmten Gesetzen zu unterwerfen wissen, wenn es darauf ankäme, aber es kommt mir hier seit einiger Zeit nicht mehr darauf an.” (GT 42)

⁸⁸ GT 192.

⁸⁹ GT 100.

⁹⁰ *Tanners* 164-5, translation modified. "Kein Mann, sondern eine Mischung von Knabe und Riese. Einen Mann verletzt es nicht, sich von Empfindungen überwältigt zu finden, aber einen Knaben, der mehr sein will als ein aufrichtig fühlender Mann, der ein Riese sein will, der nur stark sein will und nicht auch zuweilen schwach. Ein Knabe besitzt Tugenden der Ritterlichkeit, die der vernünftig und reif denkende Mann immer zur Seite wirft als unnütze Beigaben zum Feste der Liebe. Ein Knabe ist weniger feige als ein Mann, weil er weniger reif ist, denn die Reife macht leicht niederträchtig und selbstisch. Man muß nur die harten, bösen Lippen eines Knaben betrachten: der ausgesprochene Trotz und das bildliche Versteifen auf ein einmal sich selber im stillen gegebenes Wort. Ein Knabe hält Wort, ein Mann findet es passender, es zu brechen. Der Knabe findet Schönheit an der Härte des Worthaltens (Mittelalter) und der Mann findet Schönheit darin, ein gegebenes Versprechen in ein neues aufzulösen, das er männlich verspricht zu halten. Er ist der Versprecher, jener ist der Vollstrecker des Wortes." (GT 140)

⁹¹ "Es ist ein mühseliges Geschäft, Geschichten erzählen. Immer hinter solch einem langbeinigen, mandolinen-spielenden romantischen Bengel herlaufen und horchen, was er singt, denkt, fühlt und spricht. Und der rohe Schurke von Page läuft immer und wir müssen hinter ihm herlaufen, als ob wir wahrhaftig des Pagen Page wären." (SW 2, 17)

⁹² "Sie besaß einen Pagen, von dessen dichterischen Geschicklichkeiten sie sich gleichsam bisweilen dadurch andichten ließ, daß sie ihm auf einen Schemel zu ihren Füßen zu sitzen gestattete." (SW 20, 248-9)

⁹³ In a 1927 letter to Max Rychner, editor of *Wissen und Leben*, Walser wrote, "Beim Abschreiben aus dem Bleistiftauftrag lernte ich knabenhaft wieder — schreiben." (Walser, *Briefe*, 301)

⁹⁴ "Indem der Mensch in ihm verzweifelte, sein Wesen aus vielen elenden Wunden blutete, stieg sein Künstlertum gleich reichgekleidetem Tänzer hoch empor, und wo Hölderlin fühlte, daß er zugrunde gehe, musizierte und dichtete er zum Entzücken. Die Zerstörung und Zertrümmerung seines Lebens besang er auf dem Instrumente der Sprache." (SW 6, 118)

⁹⁵ Mächler 114.

⁹⁶ SW 16, 231.

⁹⁷ SW 20, 322.

⁹⁸ Sebald 129.

⁹⁹ "Haben Sie eine Maschine, lieber Herr Morgenstern, die einen jedesmal auf dem Federhalter klopft, sobald man versucht ist, künstlerisch unanständig zu werden?" (Walser, *Briefe*, 50)

¹⁰⁰ See "Meine Bemühungen" (1928/9), where Walser writes, "Meine Hand entwickelte sich zu einer Art Dienstverweigerin." (SW 20, 429)

¹⁰¹ "So berichte ich, wie mir einfiel, meine Prosa jeweilen zuerst mit Bleistift aufs Papier zu tragen, bevor ich sie mit der Feder so sauber wie möglich in die Bestimmtheit hineinschrieb. Ich fand nämlich eines Tages, daß es mich nervös mache, sogleich mit der Feder vorzugehen; und mich zu beschwichtigen, zog ich vor, mich der Bleistiftmethode zu bedienen, was freilich einen Umweg, eine erhöhte Mühe bedeutete. Da jedoch für

mich diese Mühe gewissermaßen wie ein Vergnügen aussah, so schien mir, ich würde dabei gesund.” (SW 19, 121-2)

¹⁰² Utz 63.

¹⁰³ Utz 83.

¹⁰⁴ Schmidt 159-60.

¹⁰⁵ Utz 94-5.

¹⁰⁶ Utz 62.

¹⁰⁷ Utz 116; see also Sebald 149.

¹⁰⁸ Gößling 24-5.

¹⁰⁹ Naguib 51.

¹¹⁰ *Assisant* 141. “Die Reklame-Uhr liegt am Boden und jammert nach flüssigen Kapitalien.” (*Gehülfe* 139)

¹¹¹ *Assisant* 215. „Reklame-Uhr und Schützenautomat winkten ihm ärgerlich und zugleich hilfeflehend entgegen.“ (*Gehülfe* 212)

¹¹² *Assisant* 62 „Der hohe Betrag der Rechnung prägte sich in einem Stirnrunzeln auf Toblers Gesicht aus, und zwar deutlich, beinahe mathematisch genau, als hätte man der Stirn den genauen Zahlenbetrag müssen ablesen können.“ (*Gehülfe* 60)

¹¹³ *Assisant* 195. „die Frau tat jetzt, als ob er an einem Schnürchen mechanisch wäre aufgezogen worden, den Mund auf und erzählte in aufreizendem Tone die Geschichte und Sünde Edis.“ (*Gehülfe* 192-3)

¹¹⁴ *Assisant* 249. „mein Mann würde viel besser getan haben, wenn er sich nie selbständig gemacht, sich nie auf eigene Füße gestellt, sondern sich in seiner bescheidenen Stellung als technischer Angestellter still gehalten hätte.“ (*Gehülfe* 246)

¹¹⁵ *Assisant* 294. “Gewöhnen Sie sich daran, Empfindlichkeiten in der Stille zu besiegen. Was Frauen jeden Tag tun müssen das soll auch der Mann nicht wollen ganz außer acht lassen.“ (*Gehülfe* 291-2)

¹¹⁶ Borchmeyer 11; SW 11, 8.

¹¹⁷ See Borchmeyer 13 for a detailed explication of this claim.

¹¹⁸ Borchmeyer 2.

¹¹⁹ *Masquerade* 97, translation modified. In the original, this reads, “Ist uns nicht erst dann eigentlich das Leben schön, sobald wir gelernt haben, ohne Anspruch zu sein, individuelles Wünschen, Begehren zu vergessen oder hintanzustellen, dafür uns aber recht aus der befreiten, Gutwilligkeit erfüllten Brust heraus an ein Gebot, an einen festen Dienst hinzugeben, Menschen mit unserer Aufführung zufrieden zu stellen, sanft und kühn auf die Schönheit zu verzichten? Denn wo ich auf eine Schönheit verzichte: fliegt mir da zum Lohn für den bewiesenen guten Willen und für die freundliche und lebhaft empfundene Entsagung nicht eine gänzlich neue, niemals vorher geahnte und tausendmal schönere Schönheit entgegen?” (SW 5, 253)

¹²⁰ “Etwas Herrschendes lag im pünktlichen, glücklichen Erfüllen von Befehlen.” (SW 20, 262)

¹²¹ “Sie schien mich gerne zu korrigieren; ich wieder war mit unvergleichlicher Lust der Korrigierte und Zur-Redegestellte. [...] Schwache sehen so hübsch in der Einbildung aus, sie seien die Starken.” (SW 17, 242-3)

¹²² Gößling 55.

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- ¹²³ *Tanners* 131, GT 105.
- ¹²⁴ GT 55-6.
- ¹²⁵ GT 293.
- ¹²⁶ “Wohlan, säubert jetzt das Land, wenn ihr könnt, aber seht zu, daß euch der Orient nicht stirbt unter den Händen, die da reinemachen. [...] Armer Orient, ah, jetzt töten sie dich. Ich war nur ein kleiner Mörder, ich tötete meine Kreaturen, sie aber töten die halbe Erde. Denn was sind wir, wenn sie uns zivilisiert haben?” (SW 15, 101)
- ¹²⁷ Elias 9.
- ¹²⁸ *Germany at the Fin de Siècle*, Allen 87.
- ¹²⁹ “Die Türken werden Mützen aufsetzen und wie Deutsche aussehen. Man wird uns zwingen, Geschäfte zu machen, und wenn wir nicht fähig dazu sind, so erschießt man uns einfach.” (SW 15, 103)
- ¹³⁰ Herf 37.
- ¹³¹ Kreienbrock 34.
- ¹³² *Letters to Felice*, 115-16. “So selbständig wie Du wohl arbeitest, könnte ich gar nicht arbeiten, Verantwortungen weiche ich aus wie eine Schlange, ich habe vielerlei zu unterschreiben, aber jede vermiedene Unterschrift scheint mir ein Gewinn, ich unterschreibe auch alles [...] nur mit FK, als könne mich das entlasten, deshalb fühle ich mich auch in allen Bureausachen so zur Schreibmaschine hingezogen, weil ihre Arbeit, gar durch die Hand des Schreibmaschinisten ausgeführt, so anonym ist.” (*Briefe an Felice*, 196)
- ¹³³ Boa 46.
- ¹³⁴ “[Das] Dienstmädchen das einheizt“ (*Tagebücher* 875)
- ¹³⁵ Densky 121.
- ¹³⁶ On Kafka, technology, and women, see Wolf Kittler and Neumann, *Franz Kafka: Schriftverkehr*; Friedrich Kittler, *Draculas Vermächtnis*; Wolf Kittler, “Die Klauen der Sirenen;” Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*; Zilcosky.
- ¹³⁷ Koelb et al. 129.
- ¹³⁸ Boa 28-30.
- ¹³⁹ See Evelyn Torton Beck, “Kafka’s Traffic in Women: Gender, Power, and Sexuality.”
- ¹⁴⁰ Koelb et al. 129.
- ¹⁴¹ Wolf Kittler, “Die Klauen der Sirenen,” 513.
- ¹⁴² *Das Schloss* 36.
- ¹⁴³ Ehrenreich, Foreword, Theweleit, vol. 1, xiv-xv; Theweleit, vol. 2, 233.
- ¹⁴⁴ “Alles schreiben scheint mir wertlos, ist es auch.” (*Briefe an Milena* 100)
- ¹⁴⁵ Boa 31-2; Koelb et al. 176; Sokel 65-6.
- ¹⁴⁶ Boa 36-7; Engel et al. 37-8; Spector 4-5.
- ¹⁴⁷ *Briefe an Milena* 327.
- ¹⁴⁸ Corngold 29-30.
- ¹⁴⁹ See Canetti, *Kafka’s Other Trial*.
- ¹⁵⁰ *Letters to Felice*, 305. “Nun schreibe mir auch nicht mehr soviel. Ein großer Briefverkehr ist ein Zeichen dafür, daß etwas nicht in Ordnung ist.” (*Briefe an Felice* 446).
- ¹⁵¹ *Briefe an Felice*, 368.

¹⁵² “Alles Unglück meines Lebens [...] kommt [...] von Briefen oder von der Möglichkeit des Briefeschreibens her.” (*Briefe an Milena*, 301)

¹⁵³ Engel et al. 395. “Ein Brief den andern erhärtet und sich auf ihn als Zeugen berufen kann.” (*Letters to Milena*, 229)

¹⁵⁴ *Letters to Milena*, 229, translation modified. „Die Menschheit [...] hat, um möglichst das Gespenstische zwischen den Menschen auszuschalten, [...] die Eisenbahn, das Auto, den Aeroplan erfunden, aber es hilft nichts mehr, es sind offenbar Erfindungen, die schon im Absturz gemacht werden, die Gegenseite ist soviel ruhiger und stärker, sie hat nach der Post den Telegraphen erfunden, das Telephon, die Funkentelegraphie.“ (*Briefe an Milena*, 301)

¹⁵⁵ Engel et al. 397; Wolf Kittler, *Franz Kafka: Schriftverkehr*, 85.

¹⁵⁶ Alt 276.

¹⁵⁷ Yates xv.

¹⁵⁸ Engel et al. 390.

¹⁵⁹ Yates xv.

¹⁶⁰ Frevert 177.

¹⁶¹ Frevert 178.

¹⁶² Simonton 246.

¹⁶³ Simonton 256.

¹⁶⁴ Wolf Kittler, *Franz Kafka: Schriftverkehr*, 75.

¹⁶⁵ Kafka, *Tagebücher* 568-70.

¹⁶⁶ Stach 61-2.

¹⁶⁷ Boa 43.

¹⁶⁸ Boa 143.

¹⁶⁹ Stach 62.

¹⁷⁰ “[E]s ist zu spät; Sie kommen gar nicht auf den Balkon, der schon voll Damen ist; Sie wollen sich bemerkbar machen; Sie wollen schreien; aber eine Damenhand hält Ihnen den Mund zu.” (*In der Strafkolonie*, 230)

¹⁷¹ Corngold 40.

¹⁷² Corngold 118.

¹⁷³ Anderson 78.

¹⁷⁴ “Gibt es also eine höhere Macht, die mich benutzen will oder benutzt, dann liege ich als ein zumindest deutlich ausgearbeitetes Instrument in ihrer Hand.” (*Briefe an Felice*, 66)

¹⁷⁵ Rabinbach 2-3.

¹⁷⁶ Boa 109-10.

¹⁷⁷ Kafka was so convinced of the universal salubriousness of Müller exercises that he insisted Bauer also do them. See the letters of August 7 and 14, 1913. (*Briefe an Felice*, 438 and 445)

¹⁷⁸ *Letters to Felice*, 149. „Die arme Liebste schreibt Offertbriefe! Bekomme ich auch einen, trotzdem ich kein Käufer bin, trotzdem ich mich vielmehr grundsätzlich vor Parlographen fürchte. Eine Maschine mit ihrer stillen, ernsten Anforderung scheint mir auf die Arbeitskraft einen viel stärkern, grausamern Zwang auszuüben, als ein Mensch. Wie geringfügig, leicht zu beherrschen, wegzuschicken, niederzuschreien,

auszuschimpfen, zu befragen, anzustauen ist ein lebendiger Schreibmaschinist, der Diktierende ist der Herr, aber vor dem Parlographen ist er entwürdigt und ein Fabriksarbeiter, der mit seinem Gehirn eine schnurrende Maschine bedienen muss.“

(*Briefe an Felice*, 241)

¹⁷⁹ „Aber telegraphieren mußte ich Dir in irgendeiner übergroßen Sorge um Dich und in einem wilden, mich gewiß aus dem Bett aufreißenden Verlangen nach einer augenblicklichen Nachricht von Dir. Glücklicherweise war sofort meine jüngste Schwester da und begann für mich zu telegraphieren. [...] Der Apparat was derartig konstruiert, daß man nur auf einen Knopf drücken mußte und sofort erschien auf dem Papierbändchen die Antwort aus Berlin. Ich erinnere mich, wie ich starr vor Spannung auf das zuerst sich ganz leer abwickelnde Bändchen sah [...] Was war das für eine Freude, als die ersten Schriftzeichen auf dem Bändchen erschienen.“ (*Briefe an Felice*, 165-6)

¹⁸⁰ “[Er findet] nichts Rechtes, war er ihr sagen könne.” (*Der Verschollene*, 183)

¹⁸¹ Peters 203.

¹⁸² Gumbrecht 228-30.

¹⁸³ “Was man ihm sagt, erfährt stillschweigend oder ausdrücklich auch seine Frau, und es gibt vielleicht keine Frau, in deren Kopf sich bei diesem Übergang nicht alles verzerrte” (*Briefe an Felice*, 504).

¹⁸⁴ *Briefe an Felice*, 692.

¹⁸⁵ *Briefe an Milena*, 68.

¹⁸⁶ Adorno 277.

¹⁸⁷ Beck 566.

¹⁸⁸ Among other sources, see Anderson 113 and Harman, “Kafka Imagining America: A Preface,” 11.

¹⁸⁹ Steiner 457-9.

¹⁹⁰ Anderson 105.

¹⁹¹ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 64; 76.

¹⁹² *The Man Who Disappeared*, 137; 61.

¹⁹³ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 39.

¹⁹⁴ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 81-2.

¹⁹⁵ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 78-9.

¹⁹⁶ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 80.

¹⁹⁷ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 35.

¹⁹⁸ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 132-3.

¹⁹⁹ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 94; Corngold 211.

²⁰⁰ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 203.

²⁰¹ Anderson 113.

²⁰² *The Man Who Disappeared*, 31.

²⁰³ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 194.

²⁰⁴ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 47.

²⁰⁵ For more on Brunelda as Wanda, see Boa, “Karl Roßmann, or the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up,” 171 and 176.

²⁰⁶ Anderson 110; *The Man Who Disappeared*, 108 and 213.

²⁰⁷ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 152; 159.

²⁰⁸ *The Man Who Disappeared*, 189.

²⁰⁹ Anderson 170.

²¹⁰ Jünger 30. “Freilich darf man hier die wichtige Veränderung nicht übersehen, die darin besteht, daß diesen Massen nur noch *eine* Freiheit, nämlich die der Zustimmung, geblieben ist. Sowohl die Volksversammlung als auch die Volksabstimmung verwandeln sich immer eindeutiger in einen akklamatorischen Akt, dessen Technik die Technik der freien Meinungsbildung ersetzt. Dies aber bedeutet nichts anderes als die Verwandlung der Masse zu seiner moralischen Größe in einen Gegenstand.” (“Über den Schmerz,” 172)

²¹¹ Durst, Translator’s Preface to Jünger’s “On Pain,” xxxviii.

²¹² Quoted in Durst xxix.

²¹³ Lebovic 5.

Chapter 4

The Masochistic Aesthetic in its Stalinist Phase

1. Introduction

As a medico-legal phenomenon, masochism was invented in the crucible of Germanophone sexological discourse, which drew heavily upon literary sources like Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*. Yet masochistic subjectivity, constructed as a reaction to the political and social realities of late-nineteenth-century German-speaking empire, extends beyond the sexual or even the literary realms. The production of masochistic subjects relies on a number of specific techniques that manifest themselves in politics and ideology as well as in aesthetics. These include repetition, which causes narrative or historical time to stagnate and delays climax indefinitely; an ethnographic fetishization of ethnic, religious, or political "others" — for Sacher-Masoch, these were stereotyped Slavs; heavy use of quotation, cliché, or pastiche; a pervasive discipline that poses the body and exhaustively partitions time; and a preoccupation with legalism. As the case of Severin himself shows, though individuals may deploy these techniques in an effort to subvert political discipline, it is almost impossible to escape their very real power to subjugate.

This chapter traces the formation of a Stalinist "master text" encompassing ideology, political practice, and literature, with the latter occupying the midpoint between the former two. I claim that this "master text," to which even marginal or unpublished literature contributed, was masochistic in both form and content. Soviet culture began to cultivate masochistic political subjectivity even before Stalin's consolidation of power in the late 1920s. The manipulation of time to indefinitely delay climax already inheres in

the Soviet utopianisms. Masochistic bodily discipline, in which the subject scripts and enacts his own physical oppression with at least a show of enthusiasm, was reified in the competing but intertwined discourses of mechanical and biological re forging of the human body.

Initially, Soviet thinkers envisioned technology as the key to this re forging, with proponents of Taylorist scientific management arguing that technology would re-mold bodies even as it streamlined labor practices. Technocratic approaches like Taylorism gradually fell out of favor, however, ceding their place to direct manipulation of the human body. Manufacturing consent to physical sacrifice, up to and including death and maiming, would become an essential practice in High Stalinism. The shift from technocracy to biocentrism, which I designated the “organic turn” in Chapter Three, underlay both Germany’s transition to fascism and Soviet Russia’s move toward High Stalinism. The key expression of the Soviet organic turn was an obsession with fluidity, references to which pervade writings as diverse as Alexei Gastev’s Taylorist treatises, abstinence propaganda by Aaron Zalkind, and the prose of Andrei Platonov and Daniil Kharms. A burgeoning cultural preoccupation with liquids and flows constituted the distinctive feature of Stalinist masochism.

2. Dawn of the Pervert: Gender, Sexuality, and the Evolution of Early Soviet Social Policy

The seeds of the Stalinist masochistic aesthetic were being sown when Stalin himself was a young child, with the Soviet state inheriting and developing imperial Russia’s tendency to promote masochistic subjectivity. Nineteenth-century Russia suffered no

less than Austria-Hungary from imperial malaise, which expressed itself in the heated debates surrounding the emancipation of the serfs or in the emergence of millennialist, utopian, terrorist, and socialist currents. One peculiarity of Russian statecraft that promoted the development of fraught relationships between ruler(s) and subject — a prerequisite for political masochism— were the changes in judicial, administrative, and censorship structures following the Great Reforms, which produced a semblance of “civic community,” though its participants lacked the ability to translate their convictions into political power. The result was a public sphere of sorts, albeit one in constant conflict with the authorities.¹

Like Austria-Hungary, both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union ruled over populations of varying ethnicities and religions, which produced a situation of “internal colonization” in which (mostly male) members of the intelligentsia construed their compatriots as anthropological curiosities. Women, too, were given the ethnographic treatment, since, as Laura Engelstein points out, if “peasants were a foreign country, women were a foreign race.”²

Even before 1917, scientific, medical, and legal theorization of sexuality was underway in Russia, with the German-speaking world, which by 1900 had both invented perversion as a distinct epistemological category and established sexology as a science focused primarily on deviance.³ As it had in Austria-Hungary, scientific interest in sexuality in Russia quickly became intertwined with issues of public health, forensics, and pedagogy. On its face, the tendency to “house” sexual matters in non-sexual epistemological quarters was not a new phenomenon. Indeed, since the eighteenth

century, Russian thought on sexuality had rested on two essentially pedagogical texts: Simon-André Tissot's 1758 work on sexual self-abuse and Rousseau's *Émile* (1762).⁴ The new element after 1917 was the imperative to create a suitably Soviet sexuality politics — an imperative whose urgency promoted disciplinary mixing and matching and ensured the hybridity of Soviet sexuality discourse.

Law and medicine were instrumental in the construction of modern Russian conceptions of sexuality. Legal actors helped establish power relationships among political figures, codify state policy with respect to social life, and delineate the private and public spheres, to the extent that these existed in Russia. Medicine, meanwhile, helped invent the language necessary to regulate the private behaviors of bodies.⁵ By the turn of the century, the process of scientizing sexuality had advanced enough that Russians could make original contributions to the field of sexual research, with Veniamin Tarnovskii (1837-1906) and his wife, Praskov'ia Tarnovskaya (1848-1910) achieving international acclaim for their work on syphilology.⁶

The precedent for an intense debate around issues such as female emancipation and the proper role of sexuality in the lives of the individual and the population as a whole had thus been set well before 1917, but the ascent of the Bolsheviks to power lent new urgency to deciding gender and sexuality questions. The cause for the explosion of discourse around sexuality immediately after the revolution is not hard to discern: the grandiose revolutionary ambition to remake every aspect of the world and challenge pre-existing discourses and behaviors, whether these were social, political, and economic, naturally extended to the realm of relations between the sexes and even to the constitution

of the genders themselves.

As in late-imperial Austria-Hungary, the disciplinary regime that would culminate in the creation of a Stalinist masochistic aesthetic developed out of a nexus of political, legal, and medical concerns centering on the regulation of sexuality. Until approximately 1929, Soviet attitudes on sex fluctuated wildly. The years immediately following the Revolution saw the negation of gender difference and the glorification of male-female camaraderie, while NEP-era culture oscillated between a consumerist celebration of femininity and a conception of women as unclean obstacles to socialist society's purification.⁷ Finally, the Great Break inaugurated a period of increased policing of gender and sexuality.

Early Soviet sexual rhetoric, even as it explicitly rejected pre-revolutionary sexual mores, remained ideologically indebted to pre-revolutionary sexual discourse — for example, through continued misogyny. The “new way of life [*novyi byt*]” ushered in by the revolution was populated by a grammatically male “new person [*novyi chelovek*].” On its face, this category finally allowed men and women to inhabit a shared humanity; yet, as the masculine noun *chelovek* implies, this was only on the condition that women become “honorary men.” Anything recognizably feminine was alien to the values of the new state.⁸ Revolutionary values privileged such traditionally masculine activities as governance, industry, and construction.⁹ By virtue of their superior capacity for reason, men were supposed to be more capable than women of transforming the world around them¹⁰ — in particular, through scientific advances meant to regulate the flow of bodily fluids and energies, whose uncontrolled secretion was, in any case, coded as feminine.

A masculine directness briefly came into vogue in relations between the sexes as well. As a young female Komsomol member told the exiled German communist Ernst Toller (1893-1939), who visited the Soviet Union in 1926,

In the first years [after the Revolution] the reaction to bourgeois inhibitions and constraint was strong, people wanted to “enjoy life,” despised indirections, tender wooing, exaggerated statements, poetry in the moonlight, all of which were interpreted as bourgeois romanticism [...] If a boy liked a girl, he would ask if she wanted to sleep with him, and she answered yes or no. Or vice versa. It even happened that the boy would accuse the girl of un-communist behavior if she demurred.¹¹

If, as Toller’s informant reported, the early post-revolutionary period saw a rejection of “bourgeois” sexual reticence and an increase in casual sex for pleasure, the new norm soon became an asceticism that would have exceeded the wildest dreams of even a stodgy pre-revolutionary curmudgeon like Tolstoy’s Pozdnyshev, who saw even sex within marriage as impermissibly debauched. Because so much energy was deemed necessary for a successful reconstruction period, and because the energies available for sex and for labor were seen as interdependent, couples adhering to *novyi byt* were expected to engage in “serious, monogamous comradely love,” where sex “was not to be excessively indulged in for its own sake,” since this would deplete the vital energies necessary for work.¹²

One of the most influential figures of the period, the psychiatrist and pedagogical theorist Aron Zalkind (1888-1936), espoused the theory of “revolutionary sublimation,” according to which young people, mindful of the fact that sexuality drains strength, should practice abstinence, reserving their energies for the building of a new society.¹³ Zalkind’s best known contribution to the sexuality discourse of the 1920s was his book

The Sexual Question in Terms of Soviet Society (1926), which advocated for a “modest” sex life that would allow for the “redirection or storage” of sexual energies. This would benefit not only the individual, who would enjoy lifelong good health, but above all society, which would receive that individual’s undiverted secretions in the form of labor, a lack of criminal impulses (e.g. toward prostitution), and, eventually, mentally and physically health offspring.¹⁴ The new medical recommendations of total abstinence or at any rate extreme sexual asceticism recast what even radicals had previously considered an impossible ideal as a concrete prescription for social life.¹⁵

If men, as prospective builders of the new Soviet world, were encouraged to channel their wayward sexual energies toward labor, women were supposed to submit to a disciplinary regime with a focus was hygiene. Under the guise of ushering women into a new, enlightened, emancipated version of femininity (and particularly motherhood), the state guided them into new surveillance structures governed by male doctors and political figures. The early Soviet state did not empower or emancipate feminine sexuality; rather, it transferred control of this construct from the domain of family and church to a set of secular institutions like the Party and the medical establishment.¹⁶

Meanwhile, even as abstinence was becoming the ideologically optimal form of sexual behavior, the advent of NEP made possible certain forms of “conspicuous consumption, transient pleasures and egotism,” all of which had a distinctly feminine cast in the popular imagination.¹⁷ The resulting cognitive dissonance produced fear and hatred of what Eric Naiman calls the “ghosts” of capitalism, which were identified with the female form and feminine psychology. The “gynocidal figures” populating literature

and journalism in NEP-era Russia metaphorically cleansed women of physical and ideological filth, symbolically freeing Soviet society from the “corrupted [collective] body and the biological scars left by capitalism.”¹⁸

Early Soviet preoccupation with male sexual energies and feminine hygiene cannot be entirely ascribed to fear of the pre-revolutionary past. Indeed, Soviet rhetoric of the 1920s sometimes recalls such apparently anachronistic artifacts as Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* (1903), which had been translated into Russian in 1909 and widely criticized at the time for its misogynist rhetoric.¹⁹ Though it seemingly deserved to be thrown off the steamship of modernity along with the *Domostroi*, *Sex and Character* instead enjoyed a long legacy. Its traces appear in such diverse settings as the sexual theories of Martyn Liadov (1872-1947) and the fiction of Andrei Platonov. Both men, like Weininger, adhered to the notion of Woman as a type rather than an individual whose body was the locus of human sexuality. In addition, Platonov, Liadov, and other post-revolutionary thinkers subscribed to Weininger’s conviction that men, by virtue of their capacity for individual thought and action, had to take on the burden of counteracting Woman’s most “vital” impulse, which was to observe, experience, or facilitate as much sex as possible in the world at large.²⁰ Exemplifying the Soviet penchant for constructing apparently novel ideological objects out of a mix of old and new ideas, Liadov argued that “feminine” traits like attention to appearance and “flirtatiousness” stemmed from both biology and “the exploitative demands of men” within capitalist societies. In a Lamarckian move, he suggested that adjusting the economic climate could promote the evolution of woman into a superior specimen: in the

absence of capitalism's exigency to adhere to the latest fashions, for instance, women would revert to a state of reduced sexual availability. Following Liadov's logic to its natural limit, we see that his ideal "woman" would, in particular, no longer menstruate, and so lose one of the most obvious and paradigmatic markers of cis-womanhood. Although Liadov endured a harsh reprimand in *Izvestiia* in 1925 for his bad science, his outlook nevertheless echoes the Weiningerian thesis that the key to harnessing dangerous sexual forces was to tame the sexualities of women.²¹ Early Soviet sexuality discourse thus mapped political, legal, and medical concerns directly onto male and female bodies, situating its theories and prescriptions within a broader drive to forge a socialist consciousness.

The end of NEP and the beginning of forced industrialization and collectivization predictably brought about changes in Soviet conceptions of and policies toward sexuality. Female labor in the factory and on the land gained new importance, so that women could finally participate in the Soviet project in a positive way instead of merely abstaining from ruining it with their physiological needs. At the same time, masculinity became concentrated at the top of the Soviet leadership structure, with Stalin in the role of "ultimate father figure."²² The positioning of Stalin as the "great leader and teacher [*velikii vozhd' i uchitel'*]" was not accidental: High Stalinism would deploy a masochistic pedagogy similar Sacher-Masoch exhibited in his letters to Emilie Mataja, instructing childlike citizens in how to dress, behave, and write so as best to serve the state. It is no coincidence that 1928 saw the opening of the Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure, which featured an array of pedagogically inclined statuary. As Mikhail Zolotonosov has

written, Gorky Park's naked figures reminded the viewer that he or she was a child "reliably protected by the world of 'grown-ups' (leaders [*vozhd*], supervisors, bosses)" who would confer protection in exchange for unquestioning obedience.²³ The infantilization of the Soviet subject, which increased even as he or she was called upon to perform ever more heroic deeds, may be seen in even the smallest details of daily life, like the use of thin, coarse school notebooks by an array of adults, from casual diarists to Daniil Kharms. On the one hand, writing on bad paper was the only option given the unavailability of better stock.²⁴ Yet it was also a constant reminder of one of the most important obligations of the Soviet citizen under Stalin: to perform continual self-improvement through ideological schooling.

Because high Stalinism re-coded Soviet society as one large family with Stalin as the father of the peoples, individual families, too, were re-invested with value, just as the radical egalitarian rhetoric of the immediate post-revolutionary period was finally being jettisoned. In 1930, Stalin declared the "woman question" solved and, accordingly, abolished the *Zhenotdely* (women's departments), which had provided working-class and peasant women with services from literacy classes to health education.²⁵ Other measures bolstering "traditional" family values followed: homosexuality again became a criminal offense in all Soviet republics in 1934 (it had been de-criminalized in 1920, and re-criminalized in select Central Asian republics starting in 1923),²⁶ 1935 saw the introduction of laws complicating the path to divorce, and in 1936, all abortions except the medically necessary were prohibited.²⁷

In a striking return to pre-revolutionary notions of gender difference, women were encouraged to follow their biological destiny and become mothers, preferably many times over. Family life, which had been previously relegated to a position subordinate to the life of the collective, was now touted as indispensable to the health of the nation. Couples no longer had to strive for platonic comradely affection but could exhibit a “loving rapport.”²⁸ As the 1930s wore on, the female body was partially recuperated, escaping “the veil of horror” that had earlier shrouded it. Yet even as a chronic shortage of workers made it amply clear that women’s help would be required if industrialization was to proceed at the clip Stalin desired, the government maintained a clear division between “men’s” and “women’s” work by maintaining industry quotas and reserving certain lines of work exclusively for women.²⁹

In sum, between 1917 and 1930, sexuality came into the purview of the state as never before, succumbing to regulation that was by turns medical, biological, and ideological. Over this period, rhetoric that minimized gender difference, negated the family in favor of the collective, or disavowed the altogether gradually disappeared. In its place arrived a discourse reinforcing “traditional” gender roles, including the “virtue” of motherhood and constantly reinforced the link between the Soviet mind and its corporeal envelope.³⁰ As ideology coalesced into a “general line,” so too did the expectation that individual sexualities would follow a specific path. Early Soviet debates around sexuality, though they ended with the abandonment of many of the radical sexual values promulgated just after the revolution, had nonetheless served the convenient, if unstated, end of

politicizing the domain of sexuality.³¹ The outcome was a sexuality policy in which even minute deviation from narrowly defined “norms” was punishable by law.³²

3. Everything Flows: Fluids in Soviet Bodily Discipline

The invention of specifically Soviet sexual norms, with laws to match, was a necessary but insufficient condition for the emergence of a Stalinist masochistic aesthetic. Laws alone cannot produce the pleasure in painful service to the state that defines masochistic political subjectivity. The internalization of state values required to at least simulate this pleasure occurred through the mediation of state policy by culture, which state policy then re-absorbed and mirrored. It is in this connection that scientifically based bodily discipline gained importance.

Throughout the 1920s, fiction, official statements and plans, and philosophical theories debated the best techniques for “improving” the human body. In this setting, three overlapping discourses, all with roots in pre-revolutionary thought, contributed to the eventual constitution of Soviet masochism: a biological rhetoric that combined a utopian interest in rejuvenation and immortality with a Lamarckian understanding of evolution; the project of uniting man and machine; and discussions of scientific management, which channeled the broader concern with redressing the damage to industry and infrastructure wrought in the Revolution and Civil War.³³

Production, and its necessary human component — labor — was a top action item for the Soviet people not just in the post-revolutionary period but also in the rapidly industrializing 1930s. The flourishing cult of labor required not only vociferous

propaganda and laudatory representation in the media and in literature, but also a strong scientific underpinning.

Worship of scientific and industrial progress was not the Bolsheviks' invention. A desire to participate in the lively scientific communities outside Russian borders had been propelling Russians abroad since Petrine times (and Peter himself, of course, established and exemplified this trend). By the end of the nineteenth century, Russian university graduates interested in scientific research regularly sojourned in Germany, France, or England, returning home several years later to implement or re-create what they had learned. Germany exercised an especially significant influence on the pre-revolutionary Russian scientific establishment, in particular determining the administrative organization of universities and other research organizations.³⁴

Science also led the charge to subject the potentially volatile, politically charged forces and drives of sexuality to state control.³⁵ Conversely, certain research directions, even if they had not begun that way, became functionally sexualized. For example, rejuvenation and immortality experiments, which relied on the manipulation of animal gonads and which, if successful, were supposed to greatly enhance libido, gradually became associated with sex in the public mind.³⁶ The overlap between the quest for immortality and state attempts to regulate sexuality was more than coincidental: both pursuits hinged on a desire to create rigidity and stasis in areas of human life — sex and aging — where flux and fluidity were the rule. This wish to pose living individuals and freeze them in rigid tableaux is typical of the bodily discipline inherent in the masochistic aesthetic.

At the same time as sexuality was becoming “scientized,” the scientific establishment was developing an ever closer relationship to the state. Because science was seen as the key to ensuring Soviet geopolitical dominance, the Bolsheviks were generous in their funding and ideological support of scientific pursuits. Initially, the relationship between scientists and the state was harmonious, with scientists enjoying independence and even retaining a degree of influence in science policy. As the “general line” emerged, however, scientific inquiry was increasingly called upon to hew to a communist model.³⁷

One possibility for maximizing labor production was to make human bodies eternally young and immortal. Accordingly, the 1920s saw the rapid proliferation of scientific research and fictional writing on rejuvenation and immortality; between 1923 and 1925 alone, biologists and other scientists published numerous related books and articles.³⁸ This surge in interest proceeded not only from revolutionary utopianism, but from the new possibilities the life sciences had acquired around 1900 through an “experimental revolution” that destabilized existing definitions of life and death, health and disease.³⁹ Moreover, the first decades of the twentieth century had seen the entry of science into the popular sphere through newspaper articles and the new genre of science fiction.⁴⁰ In the Bolshevik state, the convergence of scientific inquiry, state interests, and literature occurred more rapidly than elsewhere in Europe, with nearly every biomedical experiment of the 1920s finding immediate reflection in the popular press and in literature.⁴¹ Science fiction was a useful tool in the quest to popularize previously esoteric knowledge, which in turn promoted a cheerful, forward-looking worldview — after all, the next scientific breakthrough could be just around the corner.⁴²

Rejuvenation gradually acquired a sexual cast in the popular imagination. However, whatever the image of this therapy in the public mind, its primary purpose was not to enhance male potency. Rather, it was conceived as a means of combatting neurasthenia, the paradigmatic disease of modernity that seemed to originate in the very technical advancements and “scientific” work environments that the Bolsheviks most wanted to foster. Neurasthenia, a disease the U.S. neurologist George M. Beard had popularized in the late nineteenth century, had already had a long history of treatment and investigation in the West by the time it came into the purview of Bolshevik science. The malady itself had utopian overtones, associated as it was with the spread of modern technology and in particular with fatigue and an urban “race against time.”⁴³ In the Soviet medical literature, rejuvenation as treatment for neurasthenia was presented as a compromise between conditioning the body and forcing it to evolve more rapidly into a Soviet New Person. In practice, these therapies involved treatments like the implantation of monkey glands and endocrine injections.⁴⁴ Another popular method was blood transfusion, one of whose most important proponents and practitioners, Alexander Bogdanov (1873-1928), also happened to be, along with the cosmist-philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov (1829-1903), one of Platonov’s greatest literary influences. Not coincidentally, rejuvenation treatments, which were of especial interest to the state since they stood to extend the life of Soviet “human motors” (a term French physiologist Jules Amar (1879-1935) coined in his eponymous 1920 volume on ergonomics), relied on the proper channeling and balancing of bodily fluids.

The idea that environmental causes, including the surgical interventions and chemical “therapies” used in rejuvenation treatments, could cause an individual organism to evolve within its own lifetime is unmistakably Lamarckian. It is not hard to see why, even before the programmatic adoption of Lysenkoism in the 1930s, Soviet thinkers would be attracted to a Lamarckian variety of Darwinism. In part, Soviet neo-Lamarckianism responded to such cultural touchstones as the writings of Chernyshevskii and Engels’ critiques of Darwin.⁴⁵ However, it held two more important ideological advantages. First, Lamarckianism allowed for the possibility of state control over human evolution by privileging environmental factors over chance natural ones. Second, it spoke to utopian ambitions by suggesting that radical evolutionary changes could occur over short periods of time. Darwinian evolution could take thousands, even millions of years — but if the tenets of neo-Lamarckianism were sound, “collectivized body discipline of the human mechanism” could force them to occur within just a few years.⁴⁶ As Stalin put it in 1931, “we are fifty to one hundred years behind the front-rank [*peredovye*] nations. We must cover that distance in ten years [*my dolzhny probezhat’ eto rasstoianie*]. Either we do this or we will be crushed [*nas somnut*].”⁴⁷ One of most important aspects of the bodily discipline necessary to endure this “run” toward geopolitical glory was judicious use of bodily fluids and energies, which were to be reserved primarily for labor.

It was the insalubrious and unproductive waste of these energies that pro-abstinence campaigns led by the likes of Nikolai Semashko (1874-1949), Liadov, and Zalkind were meant to combat.⁴⁸ Sex was viewed as among the most volatile and individualistic of human activities, and the one with no equivalent in the world of machines. The very

existence of the socialist New Person was continually threatened by the uncontrolled sexualities of ideologically alien elements, some treacherously operating from inside his own body. Like the abstinence campaign, rejuvenation research, of especial interest to the state because of its promise to extend life and increase labor productivity, was intimately concerned with bodily fluids, whether human or animal — as was the literature that represented this scientific pursuit. Untrammelled flow of fluids like blood and semen, like the free exchange of ideas, stood to endanger Soviet ambitions of international technological and economic supremacy as these coalesced toward the end of the 1920s. Accordingly, scientific, governmental, and cultural actors alike sought to develop techniques of controlling those energy-carrying substances that could be channeled into socialist construction.

If the life of the laborer could not be infinitely extended (immortality) or constantly renewed (rejuvenation), then productivity would have to be maximized within the confines of the standard human lifespan. The 1920s correspondingly saw intensive research into mechanical as well as biological means of energetic optimization in labor practice. If people could not be biologically engineered to live forever, perhaps they could be melded with the stronger material of machines or at least learn to mechanize their movements and thus maximize their work output. The unspoken truth of the matter was that symbiosis between humans and their machines was not only desirable, but inescapable in the wake of the Revolution, when few technologically advanced apparatuses, either agricultural, industrial, or consumer, were available to the Soviet laborer. Actions that machines performed in more technically advanced nations were, in

the early Bolshevik state, foisted upon the human body — like the “stomach and guts” of an “elderly taster,” which serve as “an instrument for testing [machine] fuel” in Platonov’s “Motherland of Electricity” (1926).⁴⁹ Erasing the boundary between man and machine would, moreover, streamline sublimation, enabling the kind of automated conversion of sexual energy into work productivity embodied in the mechanical masturbation aid Platonov described in “Antisexus” (1926).

One particularly vivid example of the mutual aid people and machines would need to offer one another following the ravages of the revolution is the dream of electrifying the entire country, one term in Lenin’s famous dictum on the components of communism (the other being “Soviet power”). When Lenin made this pronouncement in 1920, total Russian electrification was an idle fantasy, since, for instance, whereas the US boasted 5,221 electric stations, Russia had only 220.⁵⁰ Thus, this “most potent metonym of vitality” was, like many other benefits of the promised Soviet land, subject to indefinite delay.⁵¹ The heat and light electricity could have provided had it actually been accessible to the Soviet citizenry were instead transformed into a virtual energy that animated such textual presentations of electrification as “Motherland of Electricity.”

No single figure better represents the drive for man-machine mutualism than Alexei Gastev, pioneer of Soviet scientific management and founder of Moscow’s Central Institute of Labor (TsIT) in 1921.⁵² Before the Revolution, Lenin had denounced Taylorism and similar management regimes as exploitative.⁵³ Yet by the mid-1920s, he had authorized the local implementation of Gastev’s scientific organization of labor, called NOT [*Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda*], across Russia.⁵⁴ Most likely, Lenin’s

acceptance of Taylorism was a pragmatic response to scarcity of resources and the necessity of wrangling an “unskilled and barely literate labor force.”⁵⁵

Rejecting the Western European and American Taylorism that he believed made workers susceptible to fatigue and neurasthenia, Gastev devised his own type of rationalization, one based in careful calculation and measurement and designed to change not merely work output, but human beings themselves. Properly applied, Gastev’s special form of “conditioning [*trenirovka*],” NOT, would affect workers’ minds as well as their bodies, including their sense of aesthetics and sexuality.⁵⁶ TsIT was more than an institute of labor research: Gastev wrote that it was created in “anticipation of a new world” and would “fight for a new culture” that would be capable of “energeticizing the human being [*energetizirovat’ cheloveka*].”⁵⁷ At once “energized” and docile in the Foucauldian sense of the term, this new type of human would experience no fatigue or lapses in productivity. He would be united with machines not by transplantation or splicing but through sociocultural conditioning that would produce Lamarckian evolution within a single generation.⁵⁸ Humanity must “discover,” Gastev wrote, that “man [*chelovek*] himself is one of the most perfect machines known to technology. But this is not all. We must make a second discovery: we must acknowledge that the technical progress of this machine is boundless.” The science of biomechanics — whose techniques, typically for the cross-pollination between aesthetics, science, and lived practices in 1920s Soviet culture, were mobilized in the theater of Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) — applied such concepts from physics as “statics” and “kinematics” to the

human organism.⁵⁹ Using chronoscopes, ammeters, and voltmeters, the energetics of the human body could be subjected to minute investigation and regulation.⁶⁰

The rigid tableaux and repetitive posing familiar to us from Sacher-Masoch's aesthetic sensibility were much in evidence in NOT, which relied on the same chronophotographic techniques as those F.W. Taylor (1856-1915) himself had used in the 1880s to rationalize assembly lines and which his student Frank Gilbreth (1868-1924) updated with the chronocyclegraph, which broke movement into even finer increments.⁶¹ Gastev's illustrative subjects were blacksmiths and metalworkers, whose movements and energy output he sought to optimize using chronophotography.⁶² The subdivision of workers' movements into incremental units using graphic representations, the repeated study of those units, and the instruction from the manager to stand, sit, etc. differently — not in the service of the worker's health or comfort, but in the name of the deferred goal of "improved" production — created a set of rigid, aestheticized posings not unlike the tableaux vivants that so delighted Sacher-Masoch's Severin. NOT, in Gastev's conception, represented a typically masochistic visual, temporal, and textual-verbal regime — complete with the pleasure workers would supposedly derive from their newfound labor efficiency and the resulting opportunities for leisure. TsIT, as a scientific organization established at the behest of the state and the collectivist society it represented, was the medium through which state power expressed itself.

For all that Gastev's ideal Soviet citizen is a streamlined machine, his rhetoric is intertwined with that of the rejuvenation and immortality researchers. Gastev argued that humans were *inherently* machine-like, a basic truth biological science must take into

account by inventing techniques for “regulating” the human motor. Technological advances like electrification, meanwhile, would find their “echo” in “the biology of the modern man [*chelovek*]. Techno-energetics must proceed alongside bioenergetics. [...] The people [*narod*] for whom electrification is meant must be straightened out [*dolzhen byt’ vypriamlen*].”⁶³ The mention of “bioenergetics” in this passage links Gastev to both visionary biologists and to early Soviet theorists of sexuality like Semashko, who in particular stated that it was insufficient to “regulate” the sexual instinct using “persuasion [*ubezhdenie*]” alone. Only a more directly disciplinary approach akin to Gastev’s recommended “straightening” through automatization could effectively rein in wayward “endocrine glands [*zhelezy vnutrennei sekretsii*]” that spurred sexual desires by secreting dangerously protean liquids. For Semashko and like-minded thinkers, this meant abstinence, sport, and engagement in productive, and preferably collective, activity.⁶⁴ To judge by Gastev’s forays into poetry, which predated his involvement with TsIT, his preferred tactic for quelling individualistic sexual desires would also be sublimation, via eroticized collective labor performed by a common proletarian body.⁶⁵ For Gastev, the great advantage of the human machine was precisely its imperfection, its ability to modify itself continuously through social practice and technology. Like contemporary neo-Lamarckians, Gastev believed a national energetics program could unite “mechanomorphic ‘techno-energetics’ with organic ‘bio-energetics,’” producing an ideal, immortal (because collective) man-machine hybrid.⁶⁶

Gastev fell into disfavor and was executed on charges of “counter-revolutionary terrorist activity” in 1939; a year later, the Ministry of the Aviation Industry absorbed his

institute. Gastev's death and the re-purposing of TsIT was just the final move in a series of shifts toward a biologically based reforging of humanity in high Stalinism. Although NOT, if perfectly implemented, would allow managers (and their direct overseer, the state) significant control over the bodies and minds of workers, this control would still not be total. First, it was indirect, because mediated by technology. Second, despite Gastev's ambition to make the mechanized New Person not just a fixture of the workplace, but of Soviet life in general, NOT itself was a set of labor practices meant to govern the behavior of citizens in the factory, field, or office. In the cultural logic of high Stalinism, this might prove insufficient to cultivate a truly New Person: optimally, the state would be able to alter its citizens on a biological-molecular level — with what Keith Livers calls the “fantasy of ideological incorporation” penetrating “the most minute levels of self-constitution.”⁶⁷ Finally, and most damningly, NOT relied on highly technical, specialized procedures whose very technical sophistication could, in the paranoid official *Weltanschauung* of the late 1920s and 1930s, potentially be used to obscure wrecking [*vreditel'stvo*].

The utopian drive to erase all possible boundaries between collective and individual, state and citizen, technical expert and lay authority, is evident in such official pronouncements as Stalin's speech at the first All-Union Conference of the Workers of Socialist Industry on February 4, 1931. Citing the events leading up to the 1928 Shakhty Trial, in which a group of engineers and coal mining bosses were accused of sabotage, Stalin called for an improved “revolutionary vigilance [*bditel'nost'*],” accomplished through an increase in “meddling [*vmeshatel'stvo*].” “It is time,” Stalin stated, “to adopt

a new policy, one appropriate for the current period: *to meddle in everything*. If you are the head of a factory — meddle in all things, delve into everything, do not miss anything, learn and keep learning. Bolsheviks have to master technology [*tekhnika*]. It is time for the Bolsheviks themselves to become specialists.”⁶⁸ These dicta, soon incorporated into official policy, not only further blurred the border between ideology and individual life, but also pointed to the undesirability of technological mediation in the USSR under Stalin.⁶⁹ The specialist, barricading himself with incomprehensible data, might sell out the Motherland to foreign agents. It was thus imperative to create a vertically integrated, fully transparent regime that absorbed the specialist’s knowledge while divesting him of agency. The antithesis of the mechanistic, the formally logical, and the abstract in high Stalinism was not even the “biological” in the scientific sense, since biological science was tainted with the mortal sin of “formalism,” but the “living” — life, or the body, itself.⁷⁰

The shift away from mediated to direct control of bodies in the 1930s was evident in such diverse settings as party policy toward medical research and literary aesthetics, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter on the example of Platonov’s *Happy Moscow* (1933-6). Physiology was declared to be the foundational element Soviet medicine, and accordingly “enveloped and ‘devoured’” studies in animal behavior as well as areas like psychology, psychiatry, and pedagogy.⁷¹ As technology-glorifying NOT fell out of favor over the course of the 1930s, certain types of rejuvenation therapy, like the allegedly miraculous “gravidan,” a substance derived from the urine of pregnant women, enjoyed new prominence as means of molding the New Person. Acting upon the very endocrine

systems whose unruly secretions had caused Semashko such consternation in the 1920s, gravidan supposedly energized workers and allowed them to work longer hours, more efficiently. Gravidan's other advantage was its ideological proximity to the concept of purgation, prominently featured in the rhetoric of 1930s show trials. The corruption that produced wreckers, counterrevolutionaries, and terrorists was regarded as rooted not in some social pathology but within the unclean individual physiology.⁷²

By the middle of the decade, Gastev's vision of a human body enhancing its productivity by uniting with tools and technologies had lost its appeal. The perfect Stalinist citizen was now required to need nothing but force and will to maintain the appropriate evolutionary trajectory. This meant that all aids to physical or psychological development, from Freudian psychoanalysis and the technocratic scientific management advocated by Gastev to even basic tools, would now be extraneous.⁷³ The reliance of socialist construction on brute force, rather than technologically enhanced labor, dated back to the scarcity attending the Revolution and Civil War. Yet this feature of Soviet labor persisted into the era of Magnitostroi/Magnitogorsk and the vaunted Stakhanovite achievements of the 1930s. As Susan Buck-Morss has written, shock work,

the favored organization form of labor during the First Five Year Plan, was precisely not Taylorist. Rather than standardizing rhythms based on scientific calculation of individual body performance, it was executed in rushes, or 'storms,' by teams of workers.⁷⁴

The brief reign of NOT had ended, and in its stead came a form of work that forced laborers to drive their own bodies to exhaustion in the name of collective production goals. Machines, too, were anthropomorphized, their physical capacities exploited until

they broke into pieces. The order of the day was a sacrificial athleticism of the type glorified in the period's monumental sculpture.

In the course of his or her struggle with the forces of nature, which could include anything from “[reversing] the course of rivers” to “[accelerating] the flow of time,” the orthodox Stalinist could be expected to part not only with tools but even with limbs, as illustrated in period classics like Nikolai Ostrovsky's (1904-1936) *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1936). The literature of the 1930s is rife with narratives of physical mutilation, which emphasize not only the protagonist's “passage from the profane world of primordial nature into the ontologically higher realm of civilization,”⁷⁵ but above all his or her willingness to be posed and molded according to state mandates. There is nothing the ideal Soviet person cannot overcome with enough self-discipline — not even the loss of both legs, as the myths surrounding the famous pilot Alexei Mares'ev (1916-2001) illustrated.

While the injuries the hero of screen and page endures may represent ritualistic payment for admission into the high Stalinist order, I argue that the depiction of stoic overcoming is not the center of narrative gravity. The salient point is not that intrepid Soviet amputees retain the ability to function perfectly despite their disabilities,⁷⁶ but that bodily mutilation is visited upon the citizen with his or her explicit consent. Moreover, this consent is to be granted not just willingly, but with a show of enjoyment. The demand for enthusiastic consent lies at the root of Stalinist literature and culture, rendering them masochistic.⁷⁷

Amputation in the course of heroic exploits is only one among many types of bodily sacrifice to which Soviet subjects “consented.” Even comparatively pedestrian woes, like lack of food, were construed as inevitable casualties of history’s forward progress. In his discussion of the 1933 death from starvation of the teacher Zinaida Denisevskaya, Jochen Hellbeck writes of her “consent to being crushed by political events,” expressed in her willingness to ascribe her suffering, produced by state actions, to personal weakness of will.⁷⁸ Soviet citizens not only endured the disciplinary moves the Soviet state enacted against them, but developed self-conceptions “suffused with symbolic violence,” expressing disgust for those they deemed “unfit for life.”⁷⁹ Diaries were thus a type of masochistic contract that enshrined state violence against individuals, along with their loved ones and fellow citizens in a written document whose function as a repository of individual thoughts was compromised by its inclusion of language in what Michael Gorham would call the “party-state voice.”⁸⁰

Diaries were not the only writings bearing the imprint of ideological intervention in individual thought. Platonov’s prose, Gastev’s articulation of the principles of NOT, and the pro-abstinence propaganda of Semashko, Zalkind, and other texts have in common the rhetoric focused on liquids and fluidity that increasingly pervaded official discourse. Gastev’s concern with flow related to reserves of bio-energy and the appropriate deployment of these reserves for productive ends, while Semashko, Zalkind, and others attended to the secretions of endocrine glands, which had to be strictly regulated to maintain socialist homeostasis. For Platonov, the fluids in question often derived from bodily functions and attention to what Bakhtin might call the “grotesque” body. Liquids

are the hallmark of the Stalinist masochistic aesthetic, combining the categories of utopianism, fantasy and staging, bodily discipline (including the control of sexuality), and textuality into a single thematic object.

It might seem that a rhetorical focus on liquids directly contradicts the prominence of motionlessness in Stalinist art and architecture and the significance of this frozen posturing for Stalinist culture as a whole. Stalinist monumental sculpture is, on the one hand, the paradigmatic embodiment of the period's political commitments, its "motionless figures" representing ideal people who have reached "the end of all development, expressed in the liquidation of an interior spiritual state and external frozenness."⁸¹ Equally important to Stalinism, however, is the rhetoric of "reforging" through physical and mental self-discipline and the related belief that "lack of movement signaled degeneration, for to be a Communist meant to be moving ahead in constant struggle."⁸²

The key to resolving the apparent contradiction between stillness and movement here is to recognize that the common element in the disciplined kinetics of continuing socialist struggle and the monumental tableaux presented in Stalinist statuary are aspects of controlled, tightly regulated staging. This staging delays the climax of the master narrative of human evolution, which would culminate with a perfectly orthodox mind housed within a muscular, larger-than-life body. Whereas post-revolutionary and NEP culture considered the future to be imminent, Stalinist culture deferred it indefinitely, which, as Vladimir Papernyi noted, only enhanced its "desirability," making "movement toward it even more joyous." In a sense, the Stalinist subject is meant to run in place,

remaining constantly in motion against an unchanging background. Motion thus becomes indistinguishable from stillness, while the future begins to seem synonymous with “eternity.”⁸³ This dynamic relationship between motion and stillness may be observed in a famous piece of Soviet statuary, the “Bather” sculpture located in Moscow’s Neskuchny Park.



“Female Bather [*Kupalshechitsa*],” Neskuchny Sad, Moscow. Photograph by Andrei Malenkov, 2010. Image retrieved from <http://belan-olga.livejournal.com/137150.html?thread=1644990>, accessed March 30, 2015.

It is no accident that the young swimmer appears to have been frozen at the precise moment when she was poised to dive into water, rather than depicted as already *in* the water or even in midair. Her pose simultaneously calls to mind the restless fluidity of the element with which she is about to merge and emphasizes her permanent separation from it. The statue, whose formal characteristics recall the visual culture of antiquity, is both a moment excised from the flow of time *and* a visual reminder of time’s continued progress, whose end neither the viewer nor the figure herself will ever see. Like Sacher-

Masoch's Venus, the Bather is more of an idea(l) than a concrete individual, although this idea can be projected onto a specific woman at any time.

A plurality of streams or even the uncontrolled flow of a single one was anathema to Stalinist ideology privileged verticality and opposed the “flowing outward [*rastekanie*]” that characterized 1920s culture.⁸⁴ Even before the Revolution, state-sanctioned control of human movement across borders and territories had a gendered component: because men had legal control over where their female family members lived, women's “restlessness” could easily be read as dissolute.⁸⁵ The pre-Soviet history of Russia thus provided discursive and legal precedents for associating certain types of (especially female) mobility with (especially sexual) “deviance.”

The rhetoric suggesting the existence of a society-wide physical, mental, and above all *moral* hygiene, which predated the Great Break, already suggested that the metaphor of “collective body” had been reified. In Stalinist culture, however, this construct was understood even more literally: with the official “triumph” of socialism and the ostensible erasure of the boundaries between classes (culminating in 1937 with the elimination of penalties for “class origins”), as well as the subsuming of all variations on socialist ideology under a single “general line,” the unification of the body politic was complete. Stalin himself functioned as this body's head and, in another, related metaphor, as its benevolent father. His feminine counterpart was the long-suffering “Motherland [*Rodina-mat*],” while the rest of the population was relegated to the subordinate status of “heroic sons and daughters” engaged in an everlasting construction of socialism.⁸⁶ Hence the “festive familial collectivity” that characterized public culture, particularly after

Stalin remarked to a group of Stakhanovite workers in 1935: “life has become better, comrades, life has become more joyous [*zhit’ stalo luchshe, tovarishchi, zhit’ stalo veselee*].”

With society figured as an enormous family and/ or as a collective body, the importance of maintaining hygiene became paramount: given a strong enough poison, even a very large and powerful body might succumb to illness or death. Show trials and purges constituted efforts to symbolically cleanse the body politic through “collective purgation.” Given the official attitude toward motion and flow, moreover, it is hardly surprising that such rituals would adopt a rhetoric relating to purgative bodily functions.⁸⁷

The association of flowing energies and fluids with dangerously unorthodox political leanings increased throughout the 1920s and played a prominent role in discussions of ideological contamination and purgation in the 1930s. Fear of contamination, whether by socially alien elements or by one’s own un-sublimated sexual instincts, had already appeared in NEP public discourse. The Great Break ushered in two important changes in the ongoing concern with physical, spiritual, and moral hygiene: first, enemies of the state were foes not because they had incorrect ideas, or had been influenced by corrupt peers. Rather, they were biologically rotten and threatened to infect all of society if they were not eliminated.

Second, there could be no half-measures in the 1930s drive for hygiene. The cleansing of foes had to be rapid and complete and yet, since Stalinist doctrine dictated that humans were constantly evolving, permanent purity remained out of reach. New contaminants had to be continuously discovered, exposed and rooted out — a perfect

setting for repeated, ritualized textual confessions of the type Hellbeck observed in his subjects' diaries.⁸⁸ These ideological impurities were imagined as liquids, as revealed in episodes like the playwright Alexander Afinogenov's (1904-1941) gradual expulsion from Soviet literary life. At a meeting of the Moscow Association of Playwrights in 1937, Afinogenov was implicated in a "Trotskyist plot" supposedly also involving the prominent critic (and former head of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, or RAPP) Leopold Averbakh (1903-1937). In his diaries, Afinogenov transformed the accusations leveled against him into this self-indictment: "[I have] imperceptibly imbibed, drop by drop, the very poison of unprincipledness."⁸⁹ Official culture's opposition to certain types of flow, including the uncontrolled flow of bodies through space or of information through the mass media and literature, constituted the crux of the masochistic aesthetic in Stalinist society. This preoccupation with flow dovetailed with two other features of the Stalinist masochistic aesthetic: its stretching out of time and space and its logocentrism.

4. Time (Utopianism) and Space (Borders) in the Soviet Masochistic Aesthetic

One of the hallmarks of the classical masochistic aesthetic is its tendency to stretch out time, often while subdividing it in the service of masochistic bodily discipline, in order to delay or even elide climax. A similar relationship to time is evident in Soviet utopianism. Utopian currents had existed throughout Europe for centuries, and in pre-revolutionary Russia took on such diverse forms as Orthodox eschatology, fin-de-siècle decadence, and widespread admiration for the theories of French socialists. These and other movements sought to inaugurate a Russian modernism "on the margins of the

Western world,” producing a contradictory temporal rhetoric oscillating between the distant past and the faraway future.⁹⁰ With the arrival of Bolshevism, the opposing poles of this syncretic picture of time became even more pronounced, with the future appearing simultaneously imminent and infinitely far away (as in the case of “electrification of the whole country”), a situation that provided fertile ground for society-wide fantasizing. On the one hand, there existed technologies that permitted the exact measurement, and therefore the manipulation of time and especially of bodies *in* time (for instance, in the name of greater efficiency of production). On the other hand, because some technologies, like those that would permit widespread and rapid electrification, remained inaccessible except in science fiction narratives or fiery newspaper editorials, it was unclear when, if ever, Soviet society would enjoy the fruits of greater efficiency through technology.

Soviet utopianism acquired its distinctly masochistic character in part because its focus on socialist construction produced a cult of labor that forced Soviet subjects to joyfully surrender control of their physiology to the state. At the same time, Soviet ideology privileged an infinitely delayed paradisiacal future over a gratifying present, so that bodily surrender could only be a sacrifice to a future beyond the individual human lifespan, never an exchange to the individual’s benefit in the short term. Traits Gastev had denounced as antithetical to increased efficiency in production — “waiting [*ozhidanie*]” and its twin, work at a frenetic and exhausting pace rather than measured, “metronomic” labor — had risen to the status of officially sanctioned norm.⁹¹ Both

waiting and sped-up labor, temporal counterparts to the spatial binary of stillness and movement described in the previous section, contributed to loss of pleasure.

Enjoyment in the present was the province of the political elite, which subscribed to materialistic “values” that would have been denounced as bourgeois ten years before.⁹² Moreover, the more unpleasurable daily life became, the more orgiastically “joyful” was official culture, and the more total the demand to identify with the present-denying fantasy. This enabled such apparently paradoxical, but actually totally logical dissonances as, say, the existence of Papernyi’s “two peasants”: one immortalized-immobilized in monumental sculpture and architecture, and the other “falling and starving to death” by the roadside; or “two children,” one “pink-cheeked and grateful to Stalin ‘for a happy childhood’” and the other subject to adult-level criminal penalties from the age of 12.⁹³

Thus, for most of Soviet society in the late 1920s and 30s, pleasure was an entirely theoretical construct that resided far in the future. This did not mean, however, that the gaze of the ideal Soviet citizen was to be directed toward the future *exclusively*. In keeping with the masochistic aesthetic’s propensity for quotation and pastiche, particularly from either spatially or temporally “exotic” moments, the historical past had a significant role in Stalinist culture. As the era of experimentation in art and literature that had characterized the turn of the century and the years immediately following the Revolution waned, official culture became increasingly conservative and reliant upon “classic” values. This move away from revolutionary aesthetics involved a partial recuperation of pre-revolutionary culture in addition to the changes in social policy

discussed above.⁹⁴ In this connection, Gorham invokes the telling example of school literary programs for teenaged schoolchildren, which in 1926 favored contemporary writers by a three-to-one ratio. By 1927, these same programs were dominated by works by Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Turgenev. Entirely absent were modernist texts from movements like decadence, symbolism, or futurism.”⁹⁵ The return to the literary classics in the late 1920s proceeded from a need to marshal centrifugal linguistic forces that threatened to destabilize an increasingly monolithic language of authority.⁹⁶ Yet the rejection of experimental aesthetic forms (later tarred as “Formalist”) also relates to what would become a typically Stalinist attitude toward time. The late 1920s and early 1930s saw the invention of what Katerina Clark calls a “canonized Great Time,” a *mélange* of moments from the past and the future that filled the present, paradoxically by “[annulling]” present time. Socialist realist literature tended to eliminate any “collision in the novel between ‘is’ (or ‘present’) and ‘ought to be’ (or ‘epic past’)” and to map any attribute of the present onto “a moment either from the official Heroic Age or from the Great and Glorious Future.”⁹⁷ The glorification of history in Stalinist culture was, I argue, triply masochistic: first, it entailed a disavowal of present pleasure or its delay for an undefined period; second, it involved a tendency to weave text (cultural or otherwise) out of a tissue of historical quotations and clichés; and third, it constituted a fantasizing about “exotic” spaces and/or times. In Stalinist culture,

People lose their mobility [*nezafiksirovannost’*] in geographic space, but as a kind of compensation the culture singles out special people who take upon themselves the heavy burden of movement, thus liberating everyone else from it. All the famous expeditions of the 30s — the mission to rescue the [crew of the S.S. Chelyuskin], the [first Soviet manned drifting station], [Valerii Chkalov’s] flights across the North Pole, the flights into the stratosphere — are described in the

mass media as something extremely difficult and torturous [*muchitel'noe*] [...] although joyous [*radostnoe*] at the same time. By empathizing with the superman who freely (if torturously) hovered over the network of parallels and meridians, the regular person also, in a sense, accomplished this act of hovering, experiencing all the attendant tortures, and did not notice his fixity. A kind of substitution had occurred: instead of experiencing the real tortures of fixity, man empathetically experienced the tortures of conquering space.⁹⁸

Certain areas of space thus became ripe for literal and figurative conquest — the stratosphere, Central Asian republics, peasants with insufficiently developed revolutionary “consciousness.” Others, like Kolyma or the “bourgeois” West, became taboo, which invested them with totemic power. As the previous section noted, the ritualized “struggle with nature” played out not only within the human body, but in a vast geographic expanse extending over the entire earth and beyond it.⁹⁹ Moreover, national borders became imbued with Manichean significance, as a line between Good and Evil.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, affiliation with values associated with taboo locations resulted in the transposition of “infected” individuals into those locations — often literally: thus, peasants who were seen as having “petit-bourgeois” values of the type associated with the Western-style “decadence” of NEP were, at the turn of the 1920s, declared “kulaks” and either murdered or deported; later in the decade, those cast as “enemies of the people” were relegated to the physical realm of Evil, the “un-world” of the GULag.

The Stalinist conception of space, like its imagination of time, closely resembled spatial and temporal discourses from the Austro-Hungarian setting. The history of enticing exotic locales is long in Russia: as Siberia was “colonized” over the course of the nineteenth century, for example, it became invested with mythic status. Because of its vast proportions, its natural resources were difficult to access, which left open the

possibility of both fantasy and tabooization: accordingly, for many decades, only exiles, criminals, or voluntary outcasts from “European” Russia spent much time in Siberia.¹⁰¹

The tendency to fetishize faraway lands, some of which happened to lie within national borders, thus existed in Russian culture for centuries before the advent of the Soviet state and Stalin’s rise to power, fed by the expansionist imperial policies of tsars anxious to establish Russia as a mighty colonial power on par with Britain and France. At the same time, Russia’s literal and metaphorical position between Europe and Asia contributed to its constitution as the object of Western Orientalist fantasies like *Venus in Furs*.¹⁰² Defiantly, some Russian thinkers re-appropriated the “Eastern” label and infused it with a martial, patriotic energy — with the Pan-Slavist poetry of Fyodor Tiutchev (1803-1873), the Eastward-looking eschatological philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), and the “Scythian” writings of Alexander Blok (1880-1921) furnishing just a few examples.

Under both Lenin and Stalin, the colonial spirit flourished as territories surrounding Russia proper came under Soviet rule. Despite pronouncements against “great-Russian chauvinism,” the advent of indigenization [*korenizatsiia*] policies meant to combat it entailed distinctly imperial practices like the “assistance” to non-Russian republics in developing “national cultures,” complete with administrative re-division of territories as Stalin saw fit, educational campaigns meant to usher their “backward” residents into socialist civilization, and ethnographic expeditions to these territories by “great Russians” themselves. Writers routinely accompanied these expeditions and mined them for literary and journalistic material: Platonov, for instance, visited Turkmenistan repeatedly between

1933 and 1935, producing the short story “Takyr” (1934) and the novel *Dzhan* (1934), his takes on the happy union of diverse ethnicities under the banner of Soviet socialism.¹⁰³

The collapse of the Russian empire thus did little more than change the outward appearance of age-old practices of “internal colonization.” Recalling Engelstein’s statement, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that women constituted a “foreign race” for the pre-revolutionary Russian authorities, we see that, similarly, conversion to the secular religion of socialism — whether seen through the lens of promoting physical “hygiene” or literacy — was itself conceived in colonialist terms. Gastev, for example, complained in 1921 that unlike the West, Russia “is either lazy or basically impulsive.”¹⁰⁴ Yet almost in the same breath, in expressions that would not be out of place in a Pan-Slavist treatise, he declared that Russia’s “half-civilized,” “half-nomadic” status was actually a boon. Though other countries may be more technically advanced, Gastev argued, Russia is a “country that has not rusted under the press of traditions,” whose “vast spaces [*ogromnye prostory*]” and propensity for quasi-nomadic movement create a “freshness of apprehension [*svezhest’ vospriiatii*] unknown to the West.”¹⁰⁵ These descriptions recall Kürnberger’s apologia for Sacher-Masoch, suggesting a cross-pollination of Orientalizing influence to which even the Orientalized party itself — in this case, Russia — was not immune.

Just as Sacher-Masoch and his contemporaries regarded the Slavic portion of their own empire as “foreign” and fetishized certain aspects of what they called “Slavic” culture (youthful potential; dangerous savagery), so too did Soviet commentators. Austria-Hungary, Imperial Russia, and the Soviet Union trafficked in similarly Orientalist

notions about Russia itself, experiencing similar malaise with respect to geographic and ideological boundaries. In the Stalinist case, spatial and temporal anxieties intertwined with rhetoric of fluidity. Mediated by the logocentricity of Russian culture generally and Soviet culture especially, these anxieties passed easily into texts that amplified and parodied them — sometimes simultaneously.

5. Text and Textuality, Law and Legalism

Sacher-Masoch's masochistic aesthetic, as Chapter One described, exhibited a preoccupation with textuality as such as well as a rapprochement of texts from apparently incompatible contexts, like the love letter and the legal contract (or, shifting to the Soviet setting, like the private domain of the diary and the relatively more public one of the transcript of a Stalin speech). It is true that the "private" and "public" domains were not defined in contradistinction to one another in the Soviet setting; indeed, the concept of "privacy" is historically ill defined in Russian culture, with the language famously lacking even the corresponding word. Yet it is still possible to speak of an intermixing of more and less private registers in Stalinist culture by defining a "more private" context as presupposing a smaller number of addressees and the "less private" one as presupposing a larger one.¹⁰⁶ A diary written with no audience except the self in mind, but which includes, for instance, a division of "personal life" into five-year plans whose timelines match those of "official five-year plans established by the Soviet state," is clear evidence of a subjectivity that disciplined itself according to state mandates even in its "private" moments and with respect to "personal" matters.¹⁰⁷ Stalinist diaries testify to the fact that even the most apparently apolitical experiences — from sexual experiences to quarrels

with colleagues — were subject to embedding in history and the politics of the day.¹⁰⁸ It is clear that this intermixing of discourses changed how Soviet subjects defined “intimacy.” The vector of influence also went the other way, with the “private” passing into and shaping the “public” realm.

Stalinist culture exhibited both a great investment in textuality as such and a tendency to mix private and public textual registers. As Igor Smirnov has written, literature especially functioned as a “special superdiscourse, occupying in the discursive world the same place as belonged to the highest arbiter (Stalin) in social reality.” It is no accident that Stalin read most of the works competing for the major literary prizes and took charge of distributing the prizes themselves.¹⁰⁹ Stalin was more, however, than simply the arbiter of the literary “superdiscourse;” he was the most important author of that “superdiscourse.” Despite its promotion of certain forms of individuality, such as heroism, Stalinist culture was not particularly invested in individual authorship. The most orthodox Stalinist texts are, in a sense, authorless, their plots or arguments proceeding along a predetermined track that their “authors” must merely follow.¹¹⁰ This was the function of the “master text” of socialist realism: to provide a template to which, as to the actual glorious socialist future which socialist realism represented, all would-be authors were supposed to aspire. Like geographical borders, words attained a totemic meaning and could only fully be entrusted to the head of the hierarchy. Stalin was not only commonly depicted with the “attributes” of textuality like inkwell and pen in hand; he also administered literary prizes and corresponded directly with writers on the subject of their work. Writers like Afinogenov, in turn, considered Stalin their “supreme literary

mentor” and submitted drafts directly to him.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, persons of lower status in the hierarchy were cast as almost nonverbal and permitted to express themselves largely via worldless applause at mass gatherings.¹¹²

Though the manipulation of language with the aim of molding thought was part of the Soviet project from its inception, with communists working to “impart consciousness” through every verbal medium,¹¹³ written texts became increasingly important in Soviet culture with the rise of Stalinism. Gorham chronicles the change in Party focus from language in general (whether expressed orally or in writing) to text as a development and intertwining of “voices,” with the “party-state voice” drowning out all others by the middle of the 1930s. This was nowhere more evident than in the plots of fictional works, where group scenes had previously played an important role in plots, with oratory helping “[articulate] problems, [identify] solutions, and [interpret] failures and successes.” Stalinist literature instead privileged written texts modeled on specific, orthodox examples. Spontaneous oratory, potentially rife with ideological error, was rendered “superfluous” by the existence of a master text (even if parts of that text were in the process of being written or as yet unarticulated).¹¹⁴ Textuality gradually became simultaneously very important and increasingly inaccessible to most ordinary citizens. Those who strayed from the master text tended to fall permanently silent, even undergoing textual erasure as their articles were excised from journals, their books removed from libraries, and their very names crossed out wherever they appeared.

Because of the risks associated with even slight deviations from it, whether in print, in conversation, or even in one’s private thoughts, Stalinist texts naturally tended toward

repetition and re-use of similar language. It is even possible to argue, with Smirnov, that Stalin himself was an aggregate of quotations from various sources, “a man with no personality [*chelovek bez lichnosti*], who embodied a dead Lenin (‘Stalin is today’s Lenin’) [and] did not make original political decisions, imitating existing ones [...] or usurping others’ political creativity.”¹¹⁵ The construction of Soviet verbal clichés had begun shortly after the Revolution, with the complex texts of Marx, Engels, and others undergoing simplification in order to make them suitable for a largely illiterate and ignorant populace still reliant on word-of-mouth.¹¹⁶ This emphasis on orality led to an alarming proliferation of often amusing neologisms based on “proper” Soviet terms that had been intentionally or accidentally mangled beyond recognition: thus “‘operational army’ became a ‘virginal army’ (*deistvuiushchaia armiia* → *devstvuiushchaia armiia*)” and a “‘militiaman’ became a ‘hypocrite’ (*militsioner* → *litsimer*).”¹¹⁷ The proliferation of *skaz* narratives during the 1920s, often written in the voice of a semi-literate narrator whose comical malapropisms reveal troubling misunderstandings of Party doctrine (or, like the texts of Mikhail Zoshchenko texts, slyly mock Soviet society as a whole), illustrate the difficulties the Bolsheviks encountered in their attempts to inculcate proper Soviet consciousness in the population at large.¹¹⁸

As it became evident that Soviet aesthetics would owe far more to the “realist” texts of the nineteenth century than either to modernist experiments or the works of the fellow travelers, Bolshevik discourse solidified into a paradigm privileging the written and recorded over the oral.¹¹⁹ Even when authors mixed genres and registers in an apparent imitation of orality, the ludic spontaneity of *skaz* had been supplanted by an authoritative

narrative voice that emerged from the “canonical discourse of the party-state.” To avoid these norms was to risk non-publication, public critique, or worse.¹²⁰ It is no surprise, then, that the most canonical of all Soviet literary forms — socialist realism — produced a corpus of often interchangeably similar works. Moreover, even “private” forms like the diary tended to rely on quotation: the popular *Diary of Kostya Riabtsev* (1926) was not only fictional, but based on the diary of a German girl. Moreover, actual private diarists found that their own diaristic efforts fell short of this mock-authentic text and “envied” the fictional Kostya for his “practical mastery of life.”¹²¹

If texts authored by private individuals were mere quotations from a master text known in full only to Stalin, it is no surprise that during the 1920s and 1930s, the borders between literature and other forms of writing became increasingly blurred.¹²² Though literary experimentation was coming to an end in the early 1930s, the technique of combining registers and genres was alive and well in Stalinism — with the caveat that Stalin maintained tight control of the hybridization. The convergence of the legal and non-legal written registers, exemplified in the legal contract that drives the plot in *Venus in Furs*, began to occur on a society-wide scale.

In the 1930s especially, the top-secret NKVD file became the object of intense public interest, rivaling any contemporary work of fiction.¹²³ Of course, this was only natural in an era when arrests were increasingly frequent and when public rhetoric was suffused with the concept of vigilance [*bditel'nost'*], which every Soviet citizen was supposed to exercise but which formed the NKVD's special area of expertise. I argue, however, that the creep of non-literary material into literature and, conversely, the inclusion of totally

fictional elements in legal documents was not a special feature of the years of purges. Rather, the stage for the intensive intermixing of literary and non-literary texts, discourses, and genres had been set in the 1920s, when propagandists' strove to awaken revolutionary consciousness in the previously illiterate, authors like Zoshchenko produced *skaz* narratives, and LEF and other groupings promoted the "literature of the fact." The specificity of the high Stalinist setting lay in its typically masochistic emphasis on legalism. This emphasis could be observed at all levels of culture, from the obsession with the party ticket [*partiinyi bilet*], subject of an eponymous 1936 film, to the so-called Stalin Constitution, also of 1936, which, in its complete dissonance with conditions on the ground (for instance, it promulgated freedom of speech, press, and assembly), was itself a work of fiction styled as a legal document.

By the 1930s, the NKVD personal file [*lichnoe delo*], which brought together a variety of extra-literary genres such like the personal letter and the confession, had become the definitive chronicle of individual life, its authority, like that of Walter Benjamin's storyteller, stemming from its proximity to death.¹²⁴ The *delo* did not attain this authority entirely on its own steam, but with the aid and active participation of these other genres, which collectively served the larger Soviet disciplinary project. Conversely, legal documents infiltrated even seemingly intimate documents like diaries, which individuals used not in the service of recording the soul's spontaneous outpourings, but "to intervene into their selves and align them on the axis of revolutionary time."¹²⁵ Furthermore, the private diary had a distinctly outward-oriented purpose: to cultivate the "personality," which had regained its importance in Soviet

culture with the end of NEP. This “personality” had to possess a perfected and perfectible biography fit for public scrutiny.¹²⁶ A communist would frequently submit a written autobiography to representatives of the state at certain milestone moments in his or her life — when seeking admission to university, applying to work, or confessing to the NKVD. At the same time, autobiographies focused not so much on external achievements or other factual material as on the development of the subject’s revolutionary consciousness, so that this text became both the vehicle for sincere revelations about intimate aspects of a citizen’s life and an official document styled and disciplined according to criteria articulated by the state.

Moreover, the popular practice of “self-criticism” encouraged the autobiographer to express not just any feelings, but the humble desire to be reformed.¹²⁷ The formation of a personality worthy of a Soviet autobiography was thus inherently disciplinary and docility-producing, especially given the often public nature of such laboratories of the self as the diary. For example, diaries and memoirs were often used to exemplify “good” behavior and so “mobilize lagging members of the collective,” with shock workers particularly being prompted to write diaries for the edification of their peers.¹²⁸ Similarly, during the construction of the Moscow Metro, diaries were supposed to help workers, in the words of one writer, “keep more order, to be more systematic, to reflect about what he does, in order to assimilate and reinforce his [work] experience.”¹²⁹ This emphasis on the perfectibility of the personality and the possibility of molding it through social-disciplinary means reveals the kinship of diaristic and autobiographical practices to the Lamarckian ideas pervading Soviet biology and labor theory in the 1930s. Like the

anonymous “perverts” who wrote themselves into German-speaking medical discourse by writing autobiographical letters to Krafft-Ebing, Soviet subjects wrote themselves into the master text of their increasingly totalitarian state. Just as those who deviated from the narrow sexual mores of their time appealed to Krafft-Ebing for a “cure” to their “perverted” behaviors and thoughts, so too did Soviet citizens, some of whom, “addressed the NKVD—the chief agency of Stalinist political violence—as the ultimate moral authority over their lives, pleading that it intervene and correct their errant thoughts” in times of crisis.¹³⁰ The Soviet autobiography and its laboratories, the diary and the secret police file, were thus paradigmatic instantiations of the Stalinist masochistic aesthetic.

6. Conclusion

In Soviet Russia, masochistic subjectivity developed from the bodily discipline to which the state subjected its subjects almost from its inception. The sexual asceticism of the post-revolutionary period quickly gave way to a conception of the body as a vessel of unruly energies and secretions. These required significant regulation before laborers would be fit to participate in socialist construction. Because, as Semashko wrote, merely “persuasive” means would not suffice to quell individualistic passions, techniques had to be invented to discipline the body and direct its attention outward in space and forward in time. The founding of TsIT in 1921 and Gastev’s development of NOT initially served these goals by subdividing workers’ time and space and creating frozen tableaux (chronophotographs) that would channel bio-energy into productive ends.

However, NOT depended too heavily on machines and specialists for Stalin, whose ideal state would have total, molecular-level access to its subjects. By the mid-1930s, a new culture had arrived, bringing with it an aesthetic that apparently renounced sexual asceticism, recuperated the “maternal” female body, and established a carnivalesque, sacrificial communality. Show trials, mass demonstrations, stereotyped images and narrowly prescribed forms of speech, and the practice of shock work all became part of the High Stalinism’s posing of its living statues. No matter how painful these posings became, Stalinist subjects were expected to consent to them with a show of joy. Because it placed the onus for producing this joy on individual bodies, the rhetoric of flow was instrumental in persuading Soviet citizens to internalize official discipline and simulate, if not actually experience, pleasure in pain.

¹ Engelstein 2.

² Engelstein 96.

³ Engelstein 131.

⁴ Engelstein 226.

⁵ Engelstein 10.

⁶ Stauter-Halsted and Wingfield 216.

⁷ Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 17.

⁸ Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 248.

⁹ Borenstein 3.

¹⁰ Bullock 17.

¹¹ Toller 146-7.

¹² Simpson, *Art, Sex, and Eugenics*, 213.

¹³ Borenstein 13.

¹⁴ Simpson, *Art, Sex, and Eugenics*, 219-221.

¹⁵ Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 133.

¹⁶ Simpson, *Art, Sex, and Eugenics*, 211.

¹⁷ Bullock 17.

¹⁸ Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 225.

¹⁹ Engelstein 310.

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- ²⁰ The full quote reads, "Das Bedürfnis, selbst koitiert zu werden, ist zwar das heftigste Bedürfnis der Frau, aber es ist nur ein Spezialfall ihres tiefsten, ihres einzigen vitalen Interesses, das nach dem Koitus überhaupt geht; des Wunsches, daß möglichst viel, von wem immer, wo immer, wann immer, koitiert werde." (Weininger 349)
- ²¹ Simpson, *Art, Sex, and Eugenics*, 219-220.
- ²² Borenstein 264.
- ²³ «Посетителю Парка исподволь внушается мысль о его собственной «детскости» (ее метафорой является нагота), которая надежна защищена миром "взрослых" (вождей, руководителей, начальников). Им нужно только беспрекословно подчиняться.» (Zolotonosov, "Filosofia obshchego tela," 50)
- ²⁴ Hellbeck 54.
- ²⁵ Bullock 18, 101.
- ²⁶ Healey 253, 258.
- ²⁷ Borenstein 275.
- ²⁸ Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 295.
- ²⁹ Lapidus 125.
- ³⁰ Lapidus 131.
- ³¹ Naiman, *Sex in Public* 101.
- ³² On, for example, changing official attitudes toward homosexuality, see Healey 252-63.
- ³³ For the pre-revolutionary history of some of these discourses, see Kremmentsov, *Stalinist Science*.
- ³⁴ Kremmentsov, *Stalinist Science*, 13.
- ³⁵ Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 96-7.
- ³⁶ Kremmentsov, *Revolutionary Experiments*, 148.
- ³⁷ Kremmentsov, *Stalinist Science*, 29.
- ³⁸ Kremmentsov, *Revolutionary Experiments*, 135-6.
- ³⁹ Kremmentsov, *Revolutionary Experiments*, 27.
- ⁴⁰ Kremmentsov, *Revolutionary Experiments*, 10.
- ⁴¹ Kremmentsov, *Revolutionary Experiments*, 6.
- ⁴² Banerjee 16.
- ⁴³ Banerjee 65.
- ⁴⁴ Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 245.
- ⁴⁵ Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 233.
- ⁴⁶ Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 227.
- ⁴⁷ Stalin 39.
- ⁴⁸ Simpson, *Art, Sex, and Eugenics*, 215.
- ⁴⁹ Platonov, *The Return and Other Stories*, 13.
- ⁵⁰ Banerjee 90.
- ⁵¹ Banerjee 15, 101.
- ⁵² Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 228.
- ⁵³ Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 245.
- ⁵⁴ Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 240-242.
- ⁵⁵ Sochor 257.

⁵⁶ Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 246-7.

⁵⁷ «В предчувствии этого нового мира мы создаем в Москве Центральный Институт Труда, который хочет одновременно с технической проблемой электрификации России энергетизировать человека. Здесь далеко не то, о чем говорил Тэйлор; он разрешал лишь или технологическую или административно-организационную проблему. Мы же хотим биться за новую культуру, которая была бы достойна грядущей электрификации.» (Gastev 48)

⁵⁸ Simpson, *Art of Evolution*, 226.

⁵⁹ «Человеческий организм знает свою статику и кинематику, он постоянно выбрасывает новые сочетания движений, он — постоянный источник обработочной интуиции.» (Gastev 47)

⁶⁰ «Мы должны заняться энергетикой человеческого механизма. В этот век, когда существуют хроноскопы, показывающие десятитысячную секунды, когда существуют амперметры и вольтметры, мы должны будем «метрировать» человеческую энергию. Наука о питании работающего организма должна быть такой же точной наукой, как тепловые науки, как наука о питании паровой Машины, о питании электрического мотора; расход человеческой энергии должен быть инструментально измерен до тысячных малой калории, а регулирование работы человеческого организма должно быть построено на системе карбюраторов, питающих тепловые машины.» (Gastev 47)

⁶¹ Banerjee 63-4.

⁶² Sochor 251.

⁶³ «Но электрификация — только одна полоса грядущего возрождения России. Она неминуемо должна найти свой отклик в биологии современного человека. Техно-энергетика должна идти рядом с биоэнергетикой и, может быть, одна другую вызывать. [...] Народ, на который рассчитана электрификация, должен быть выпрямлен.» (Gastev 46)

⁶⁴ As quoted in Zolotonosov, *Slovo i telo*, 460-1.

⁶⁵ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 4.

⁶⁶ Fore 109-10.

⁶⁷ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 8.

⁶⁸ Stalin 41.

⁶⁹ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 8.

⁷⁰ Papernyi 160, 164.

⁷¹ Kremontsov, *Stalinist Science*, 261.

⁷² Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 9.

⁷³ On the fate of Freudian psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union, see Miller 69-113.

⁷⁴ Buck-Morss 110-111.

⁷⁵ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 17.

⁷⁶ Livers, "Scatology and Eschatology," 178.

⁷⁷ Viktor Pelevin's post-Soviet novel *Omon Ra* (1992) makes this point with particular eloquence by short-circuiting the typical sacrificial narrative: the amputation of both legs that the student-inmates of the Mares'ev Academy endure proceeds not from industrial

accident or enemy fire, but rather deliberate surgical intervention. Amputation is initiation into a coveted minority, and it is only following loss of limb that the aspiring Soviet pilots can begin to learn their trade.

⁷⁸ Hellbeck 60.

⁷⁹ Hellbeck 358.

⁸⁰ On the “canonization of the party-state voice” in Soviet society, see Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues*, 120-140.

⁸¹ Zolotonosov, *Sovetskii eros*, 43.

⁸² Hellbeck 298.

⁸³ Papernyi 44.

⁸⁴ Papernyi 20.

⁸⁵ Engelstein 288.

⁸⁶ «Главные фигуры Большой семьи — это «мудрый отец» Сталин, Родина-мать как воплощение материнского начала и героические сыновья и дочери, строящие коммунизм.» (Günther 95)

⁸⁷ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 6-7.

⁸⁸ Hellbeck 107-8.

⁸⁹ Hellbeck 307.

⁹⁰ Banerjee 12.

⁹¹ Gastev 38.

⁹² Fitzpatrick 216.

⁹³ Papernyi 304.

⁹⁴ Fitzpatrick 197.

⁹⁵ Gorham 113.

⁹⁶ Gorham 119.

⁹⁷ Clark 40.

⁹⁸ Papernyi 64-5.

⁹⁹ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ Papernyi 79.

¹⁰¹ Banerjee 24.

¹⁰² Banerjee 20.

¹⁰³ Bullock 117.

¹⁰⁴ «Россия тем и отличается от Запада, что она или ленива, или элементарно импульсивна.» (Gastev 29)

¹⁰⁵ «Как бы ни превосходили нас западно-европейские и американские страны своей технической работой и хозяйственным масштабом, но все же в России есть счастливая особенность, которая может в сравнительно непродолжительный период превратить мечту об электрификации в самую осязательную жизнь. Мы — страна полукочевая, получивилизованная. У нас есть народы, верящие в шаманов, и есть интеллигенция, которая делает сенсации в Европе своими теориями; у нас есть нетронутые тундры, но у нас же есть закованные в сталь участки земли, которые могут конкурировать своей техникой с Америкой. Мы — страна, не заржавевшая под прессом традиций, а наши огромные просторы и постоянная

переброска населения из одного района в другой создают свежесть восприятия, незнакомую Западу. Мы многое пишем на голой доске.» (Gastev 44-5)

¹⁰⁶ Hellbeck 96.

¹⁰⁷ Hellbeck 67.

¹⁰⁸ Paperno xii.

¹⁰⁹ «Литература функционировала в коммуникативной сети тоталитарного режима в качестве особого супердискурса, занимая в дискурсивном мире то же место, которое принадлежало высшему арбитру (Сталину) в социальной реальности. Не случайно Сталин прочитывал большинство художественных произведений, выдвинутых на соискание литературных премий, которым он дал свое имя, и руководил распределением этих наград.» (Smirnov 275)

¹¹⁰ «У текстов культуры 2 (устных и письменных) нет никаких авторов, эти тексты даны заранее, а так называемые авторы должны потом к этой данности идти.» (Papernyi 247)

¹¹¹ Hellbeck 290.

¹¹² Papernyi 230.

¹¹³ Hellbeck 19-20.

¹¹⁴ Gorham 157.

¹¹⁵ «Сталин был человеком без личности. Он вочеловечивал собой мертвого Ленина («Сталин — это Ленин сегодня»), персонифицировал собой *praesentia in absentia*. Сталин не принимал оригинальных политических решений, подражая уже бывшим (пакт о ненападении с Германией имитирует Тильзитский мир, заключенный Александром I с Наполеоном) или узурпируя чужое политическое творчество (Сталинская конституция, как известно, была написана Бухариным и т. п., вплоть до сталинского трактата по языкознанию, спланированному А. С. Чикобавой).» (Smirnov 273-4)

¹¹⁶ Gorham 11.

¹¹⁷ Gorham 26.

¹¹⁸ Gorham 87.

¹¹⁹ Gorham 121-2.

¹²⁰ Gorham 172.

¹²¹ Hellbeck 39-40.

¹²² Vatulescu 7.

¹²³ Vatulescu 6.

¹²⁴ Vatulescu 8.

¹²⁵ Hellbeck 5.

¹²⁶ Hellbeck 7.

¹²⁷ Hellbeck 27.

¹²⁸ Hellbeck 44.

¹²⁹ Hellbeck 43.

¹³⁰ Hellbeck 359.

Chapter 5

Liquid Pains and Pleasures: Andrei Platonov and Daniil Kharms

1. Introduction

Imperial Austria-Hungary and Stalinist Russia, despite their many differences, both produced versions of masochistic subjectivity. Austro-Hungarian cultural masochism fetishized ethnic or sexual “otherness,” producing such staples of the masochistic canon as Sacher-Masoch’s Slavic Domina; emphasized the importance of a disciplined body; paid special attention to language and text, particularly contracts; quoted liberally, creating cultural artifacts characterized by a high degree of intertextuality; and protracted narrative time to avoid climax. Stalinist culture adopted and adapted to its own purposes each of these five characteristics, subsuming almost all of them in a preoccupation with fluidity.

Fluidity, already visible in such areas of 1920s Soviet discourse as the campaign for abstinence, became crucial in the Stalinist version of the organic turn, which discarded visionary ambitions of uniting man with machine or rendering individuals immortal through science in favor of a model of productivity based on the brute force of the physical body. This political and rhetorical shift was enabled by the understanding of human energy as governed by potentially unruly bodily fluids. These fluids, often associated with sexuality, were to be harnessed through correct physical and ideological practice in order to maximize labor productivity and usher in a Soviet utopia.

By the 1930s, the discourse of flow was an established cultural fact in the Soviet Union. The wish to freeze the fluid lay at the heart of the Soviet project as articulated in

Stalinism: the ideal Stalinist subject had to learn to prevent his thoughts or energies from flowing freely, instead taking pleasure in the rigid discipline of the present and the infinite deferral of the glorious socialist future. This chapter considers two authors whose works engage with this ideal subject as it was being constructed, namely Andrei Platonov (1899-1951) and Daniil Kharmis (1905-1942). Contrary to the notion that these writers represent the margins of Stalinist culture, I argue that their writings not only reflect, but actively contribute to the public discourse of their time.

2. And Quietly Flows Platonov

The beginning of Andrei Platonov's "Garbage Wind" (1934) rapidly plunges the reader into the violence and intense physicality that will mark the rest of the short story. Indeed, just a few pages in, a crowd of fascists tears off German physicist Albert Lichtenberg's ears and crushes his penis. In the work's first scene, Lichtenberg awakens to the realization that his wife, Zelda, has "become an animal."

The down on her cheeks had turned into a coat of hair, her eyes had a rabid gleam and her mouth was filled with the saliva of greed and sensuality. [...] Zelda was crying and had lain down on the floor; her leg was bared, it was covered with the rampant sores of animal uncleanness; she did not even lick them, she was worse than a monkey — a monkey looks after its organs with painstaking care. [...] his former woman had sucked his youth dry, she had nagged him for his poverty, his joblessness, his masculine impotence, and, naked, would mount him in the night. Now she was a beast, a scum of crazed consciousness, whereas he would always, until the grave, remain a human being, a physicist of the cosmic spaces, and even if hunger were to torment his stomach right up to his heart, it would not reach higher than his throat, and his life would hide away in the cave of his head.¹

Like much of Platonov's writing, "Garbage Wind" exhibits a prurient-disgusted attention to bodily fluids, especially feminine ones. Though both Albert and Zelda are starving, only Zelda's mouth fills with "the saliva of greed and sensuality" (*sladostrastie*, literally

“lust for the sweet”) and only she responds to their misfortunes with increased sexual energy, “sucking” life-giving liquid outward and further robbing Albert of his youth. Meanwhile, Albert’s intellectually motivated impotence, soon rendered permanent by the brutal crushing of his genitals, typifies Platonov’s notion that sexual and creative energy are in a zero-sum balance. Zelda’s metamorphosis into a fur-covered “monkey” proceeds from her immoderate appetites, which she, unlike her husband, fails to confine to areas below the neck.

“Garbage Wind” also exhibits several features of the masochistic aesthetic as it arose in the Austro-Hungarian context. For example, there are two immediate indicators of the ethnographic bent that typifies Sacher-Masoch’s fiction: firstly, the character of Zelda, who since she would not be “foreign” enough for a Russian author or reader if she were made merely Slavic, is described as “Afghan,” that is, from the Orientalized periphery even of the USSR; and secondly, the German setting of the plot. This dual “foreignness” imparts an ethnographic flavor to both the intra- and extra-diegetic worlds, estranging both the protagonist (who not only has a foreign wife but, as a committed communist, is himself an outsider in Nazi Germany) as well as the Russian-speaking reader, for whom the German context is naturally “other” (and the “Afghan” woman within it doubly so).

The story’s “foreign” accoutrements have additional meaning within Andrei Platonov’s biography. Although he wrote the story in 1934 as a topical denunciation of fascism, which was much discussed in the Soviet press at the time due to Hitler’s historic ascent to power in 1933, it can also be read, as Thomas Seifrid has proposed, as part of Platonov’s “transition to a more ‘socialist realist’ self,” since it contains “myriad hints” suggesting that it is less about Albert Lichtenberg, beleaguered communist in Nazi

Germany, than about Andrei Platonov, beleaguered author in Stalinist Russia.² It is true that, in 1934, Platonov had recently endured a chastening encounter with Soviet literary critique: the 1931 publication of his controversial tale *For Future Use* [*Vprok*] in the literary magazine *Red Virgin Soil* unleashed a storm of excoriating criticism (including from the magazine's own editor, the writer Alexander Fadeyev (1901–1956)), and the ensuing de facto publication ban only began to lift in the mid-1930s.³ However, his choice to set “Garbage Wind” in Germany rather than Russia is less about veiling his opposition to Stalinism in Aesopian language and more akin to the fundamentally *masochistic* play with nationality and ethnography in which he engaged as early as 1926, for instance in the parodic “Antisexus,” which he wrote at the peak of his passionate enthusiasm for the Soviet project and styled as an American advertising pamphlet for a partner-replacing masturbation aid. Some of Platonov's earnest admiration for the Soviet dream remains even in “Garbage Wind”: it is no accident that Albert is a “physicist of cosmic spaces,” that is, a professional investigator of lofty spheres — and, in his single-minded devotion to Doing the Right Thing, whether in the service of communism or simple human dignity, he is an obvious descendant of the Kirpichnikovs in “The Ethereal Tract” (1927) and the other scientist-ascetics that occupy so much of Platonov's fiction of the 1920s.

The figure of the noble scientist who gladly sacrifices not only personal happiness, but, in the limit, even his body in the name of socialism are, as I mention above, typical features of Platonov's fiction (and indeed, common to Stalinist myth-making in general). As hopeful as the coloration of these elements may sometimes be in “orthodox” Soviet fiction and even in some of Platonov's earlier stories, in “Garbage Wind” they have a

strictly negative valence, in part because Albert is severely outnumbered by committed fascists and can only give himself up in a tragic gesture of heroic sacrifice (notably unconnected to his professional qualifications). Yet the scientific theme lurks elsewhere in “Garbage Wind” as well: it is in the confrontation Albert (man) initiates with the metal engine (machine), as well as in the degeneration of humans into their evolutionary ancestors in the span of a single lifetime as a result of environmental factors. This Lamarckian conception of human development bears the clear imprint of contemporary scientific “discoveries,” especially those of agronomist Trofim Lysenko (1898-1976). More generally, the de-evolution in “Garbage Wind” relates to the uniquely Soviet aspect of the masochistic aesthetic that conceived of the human body and mind as perfectible by techniques of scientific and ideological re forging — a notion which Platonov regularly subjected to parodic reversal in his fiction.

In addition to the ethnographic bent of the passage about Albert’s awakening, “Garbage Wind” features the typically Platonovian, and more generally High-Stalinist theme of ebbing and flowing bodily energy, in Albert and Zelda’s case exhausted by chronic undernourishment. Whether this energy most properly belongs to and originates in the human organism, or in mechanical or “natural,” but non-human sources like the sun, remains ambiguous: indeed, the “radiant” July day that “[rises]” in the story’s opening lines is already anthropomorphized (“by eleven o’clock this day had already aged from the effect of its own excessive energy” — emphasis mine). Conversely, it is human beings who provide machines with the energy necessary to fashion, through the “friction of metal and human bones,” a thousand-year Reich, their bodies becoming as worn-out and rotten in the process as their all-too-perishable clothing.⁴

Albert's ultimate fate, while superficially similar to Zelda's (he also grows fur and comes to resemble a "large monkey someone had mutilated and then, as a joke, dressed up in scraps of human clothing"⁵), upon examination turns out to be quite different. After enduring the gradual violent disabling of most of his body parts and brief internment in a concentration camp, he amputates and cooks his own leg to nourish a starving mother he encounters in a ravaged "workers' settlement."⁶ However, whereas Zelda's degeneration into a disgusting, inhuman creature relates to her individualistic *hoarding* of fluids (for instance, saliva collects in her mouth in order to help her digest her personal portion of food), Albert's entire existence, which admittedly results in a similar transformation to Zelda's, is predicated upon the sacrificial *release* of his physical fluids into the outside world. This is nowhere more evident than in his amputation of his own leg with a blunt "chopper," which he undertakes in order to feed a stranger, demonstrating not only the complete mastery of his consciousness over mere matter, but also a heroism entirely free from self-interest. After placing his leg meat into a pot to cook, he "[crawls] out into the fenced yard and [lies] face down on the earth." He feels "plentiful life [...] leaving him in a hot stream," his "blood soaking into the [nearby] dry soil," as if to nourish the parched earth of his benighted *Vaterland* with good communist blood.⁷

Platonov did not begin his career at the level of pessimism about the Soviet project that "Garbage Wind" suggests. Born outside Voronezh in the Tambov region in 1899, Platonov worked from the age of thirteen, including as an engine driver's assistant, and displayed an early interest in machines, at one point even attempting to build a *perpetuum mobile*.⁸ In 1918, Platonov had just matriculated to the electrical engineering faculty at the Voronezh Polytechnic Institute, but the Revolution and Civil War interrupted his

studies, which he would not complete until 1921. He greeted the arrival of Soviet power enthusiastically, fully participating not only in the utopian discourses surrounding the topics of gender, technology, and labor but in active socialist construction: during the Civil War he served as a war correspondent and subsequently as a hydrologist and land reclamation engineer. He also participated in the electrification campaign of the early 1920s at the local level, “electrifying the countryside around Voronezh.”⁹ In the mid-1920s, he oversaw the digging of 763 ponds and 331 wells, “as well as the draining of 2,400 acres of swampland and the building of three small rural power stations,”¹⁰ which lends such stories as “The Motherland of Electricity” and “The Locks of Epifan” (1926) a clear autobiographical coloration. Indeed, for Platonov, unlike for many of his contemporaries, the matter of “building socialism” was not at all theoretical but rather part of his lived experience; in fact, his retreat from the literary world between 1924 and 1926 may have been inspired by the actions of Gastev, who “pointedly” left writing in favor of working at TsIT.¹¹ In 1926, Platonov left his post in Voronezh to work briefly at the Moscow-based Vserabotzemles, “the central agency for land reclamation” in the USSR.¹² He also returned to literary life in earnest.

Platonov’s writing career began with the revolution: between 1918 and 1921, he produced a volume of poems, several short stories, and numerous articles published in regional newspapers like *Railroad [Zheleznyi put’]*, *Red Village*, and *Voronezh Commune*, as well as in national journals like *Smithy*, the organ of the eponymous group of proletarian writers. As a writer, Platonov drew deeply on two main influences: the philosophy of the cosmist Nikolai Fyodorov and the visionary biologist Alexander Bogdanov.¹³ Unlike his predecessors, however, who published lengthy tracts or treatises,

Platonov's "political and philosophical writings were printed as journalism."¹⁴ Early stories like "Markun" (1921) display Platonov's abiding interest in the scientific concerns of his day, although after 1922 his output of science fiction *pe se* lessened.¹⁵

Between 1926 and 1927, Platonov left the engineering profession and became a full-time writer. Several of his best-known works, including "Antisexus," "The Innermost Man [*Sokrovennyi chelovek*]," and "Ethereal Tract" date to this period.¹⁶ By the time he decided to give himself over to writing completely, Platonov's literary vision had darkened: his characters were no longer the joyously, if sacrificially, productive zealots of his early tales; rather, their exploits, though pursued with devotion, often ended in failure — most saliently in the twisted-ironic production novel *The Foundation Pit* (1929), which Platonov wrote while traveling to various kolkhozes "as a technician rather than as a writer."¹⁷ The other major work of this period, *Chevengur* (1930), features a similarly ambivalent vision of socialism, with the naïve and literal-minded inhabitants of the titular village engaging in a doomed quest to reify socialist doctrine.

Though he no longer produced enthusiastic paeans to construction for the local press, Platonov drew on his technical training to write publicistic pieces in 1928-1931, many of which dealt with the slow progress of modernization in rural Russia. His trademark rhetorical move, much in evidence in such works as the controversial "Doubting Makar" (1931), was to refract the "language of the party-state" through the "convoluted ruminations of a truthseeking proletarian," resulting in satire that did not so much undermine the specifics of the Soviet project as it attacked its very foundations.¹⁸ Official retribution was not long in coming: the bureaucracy-skewering sketch "Che-Che-

O" (1928), written together with Boris Pilniak (1894-1938), was denounced as "anarchical" and "reactionary."¹⁹

It soon became evident that the excoriation to which the proletarian writing associations subjected Platonov was due not merely to his association with the disgraced Pilniak, who was then being actively persecuted for publishing his "counterrevolutionary" novel *Mahogany* (1927) abroad. "Doubting Makar," which was published in the literary journal *October*, drew Stalin's intense ire and prompted a corresponding campaign of harsh criticism in the press. Leopold Averbakh, who was but six years away from his own demise at the hands of the state, wrote that the publication of the story was an inexcusable mistake on *October's* part and ominously suggested that Platonov was "not even" a fellow traveler.²⁰ Yet in spite of this and other denunciations (one anonymous critic flatly declared "Makar" a "kulak story"), that same year Platonov managed to publish a second highly controversial piece of fiction, namely the short novel *For Future Use* [*Vprok*].²¹ Published in *Red Virgin Soil* [*Krasnaia nov'*] in April of 1931, *Vprok* quickly ended up in Stalin's hands. One possibly apocryphal version of events has Stalin assessing Platonov in the margins as an "idiot [*durak*]," "vulgarian [*poshliak*]," "comedian [*balaganshchik*]," "toothless joker [*bezzubyi ostriak*]," "bastard [*merzavets*]," and "fool [*bolvan*]."²² Whether or not it took this particular form, Stalin's disapproval had immediate consequences for Platonov, who was viciously persecuted in a smear campaign that only abated when RAPP, the source of much of the criticism, was itself disbanded in 1932. Platonov languished in virtual silence for the three ensuing years, with no journal or press daring to feature his writing.²³ Between 1930 and 1935, he published only three works of fiction and one article; and by 1936, when he reentered

public life, the utopian themes in his writing began to give way to the “depiction of everyday existence.”²⁴

The years of the purges brought new calamities: in 1937, critics panned the story collection *The River Potudan*,²⁵ and in May 1938, his 15-year-old son was arrested for an alleged anti-Soviet plot and only released, incurably ill with tuberculosis, in 1941.²⁶ The Second World War saw Platonov once again engaged in frontline correspondence, this time for *Red Star*. He published exclusively four children’s books between 1940 and 1946.²⁷ In 1946, he published one more “adult” story, “The Return,” which the literary establishment denounced as slanderous. As his health declined — he had caught tuberculosis from his son, who died in 1943 — Platonov continued to write for children, reworking folktales rather than producing original creations. At the time of his death in 1951, much of what has since become the best known corpus of his work — including *The Foundation Pit*, *Chevengur*, and the story “Happy Moscow” (1933-6), written just as Stalin was declaring Soviet life more “joyous,” remained unpublished.

Platonov’s writing deployed the figure of fluidity both toward and against the evolving cultural norms of Stalinism. Early articles like “The Reconstruction of the Earth [*Remont zemli*]” (1920) and stories like “Markun” (1921) testify to Gastev-like levels of optimism about the potential of human beings to evolve into superior beings capable of transforming the cosmos through their mastery of machines and their own bodies.

As this optimism faded in the face of the realities he observed on the ground, Platonov increasingly focused on the pragmatic difficulties of establishing a utopia. Shortly after thirty-year-old Voshchev, the protagonist of *The Foundation Pit* (1930), loses his job at a “machine factory” for the production-obstructing infraction of idle

contemplation, he and a new acquaintance, the legless Zhachev, observe a passing group of Young Pioneer girls.

Voshchev stood with timidity before the eyes of this procession of children, unknown and excited children; he was ashamed that the Pioneers probably knew and felt more than he did, because children are time ripening in fresh bodies, whereas he, Voshchev, was being pushed aside by hastening, active youth into the quiet of obscurity, like a vain attempt by life to attain its goal. And Voshchev felt shame and energy — he wanted to immediately discover the universal, long-lasting meaning of life, to live ahead of the children, faster than their suntanned legs, filled with hard tenderness. One Pioneer girl ran out of the ranks into a field of rye abutting the smithy and picked a plant. During this action the miniature woman bent down, baring a little birthmark on her swelling body, and with the lightness of impalpable strength disappeared, leaving regret in two onlookers — Voshchev and the cripple. Voshchev looked at the invalid; his face inflated with blood that had no way out, he moaned a sound and moved one hand in the depth of his pocket.²⁸

The theme of energetics is pronounced in this passage, with bodies conceived both as biological entities and sources of potential labor productivity waiting to be unleashed.

The biological component of the human energy economy is represented by blood, a neutral substance imbued with a positive or negative valence depending on the body through which it flows. Fluids, and bodily fluids particularly, tend to feature prominently in Platonov's prose:²⁹ in *For Future Use*, for example, the narrator describes a "real proletarian person" as consisting of "sulfuric acid" in order to be able to "burn all the capitalist bastards [*kapitalistecheskaia sterva*] taking up the earth;" meanwhile, another person is described as "sugar dissolved in urine."³⁰

In the case of the pubescent Pioneer girl, described as a "miniature woman," fluids fortify a young communist body filled with the promising, "ripening" time of the new socialist order. In the case of Zhachev, who cannot physically participate in socialist construction because of his disability, blood contributes to a state of physical and moral

filth, which Platonov clearly associates with masturbation. Between 1929 and 1930, while at work on *The Foundation Pit*, Platonov wrote in one of his notebooks: “the kulak is like an onanist, he does everything on his own [*edinolichno*], into his own fist [*kulak*].”³¹ True to contemporary discourse around sexuality, Platonov condemns masturbation, associating it with ideological impurity.

A second masturbating character soon appears on the scene: the hapless Kozlov, who, like all members of the mostly male foundation-pit collective, is clearly expiring from hunger and exhaustion. As Semashko and Zalkind’s abstinence-oriented theories of sexuality would suggest, Kozlov’s work and sexual energies exist in an easily disrupted zero-sum balance, so that his nocturnal masturbation adversely affects his daytime productivity. Appropriately for a masochistic subject, Kozlov himself spells out the prevailing view on his nighttime “enjoyment [*naslazhdenie*],” at which those who admonish him only hint. In so doing, he adopts the Bakhtinian “voice of the other,” sarcastically quoting his persecutors: “‘They say [...] that I have no woman,’ said Kozlov with the difficulty of umbrage [*s trudom obidy*], ‘that by night I make love to myself under my blanket, and by day am not fit to live [*zhit’ ne gozhus*]’ because of my body’s emptiness. Don’t ‘they’ just know everything, as the saying goes!’”³² Kozlov’s resentful statement points to how unsatisfying life in an all-male commune can be, complicating Platonov’s depiction of “proper” Soviet sexual morality. Through a semantic blurring typical of Platonov’s prose style, Kozlov’s words elide the difference between being “unfit to work” (Kozlov’s actual meaning, given the context) and being “unfit to live,” which, because *The Foundation Pit* documents Stalinist collectivization, carries ominous baggage.

Zhachev, too, resists the regulation of his baser instincts by appealing to the same ideological principles Voshchev invokes in scolding him. When Voshchev threatens to hit him for pleasuring himself at the sight of the blossoming Pioneer maiden, Zhachev parries,

“You bastard, [...] I look at children for memory’s sake, because I’ll die soon.”
“You were probably damaged [*tebia povredili*] in a capitalist battle,” said Voshchev quietly. “But cripples can be old men too, I’ve seen some.”
The crippled man [*uvechnyi*] turned his eyes, in which there was now the brutality of superior mind, onto Voshchev, and said with the slowness of embitterment: “Yes, such old men do happen, but there are no cripples as crippled as you are.”
“I was never in a real war,” said Voshchev. “Then I would also have come back not whole from there.”
“Yeah, I can see you weren’t: where else would you be so stupid from! When a man [*muzhik*] hasn’t seen war, he’s like a woman who never gave birth — lives a moron’s life [*idiotom zhivet*]. I can notice all of you through your shell!”³³

In this dialogue, moral and ideological authority unexpectedly shifts from Voshchev, whose admonition meant to prevent Zhachev from sullyng the Pioneers with his selfish, adult desires, to the disabled man, who reveals himself to be a veteran of the Civil War (which Voshchev, in a semantic blurring similar to Kozlov’s, calls “capitalist battle”). His lack of legs renders him unemployable in rural collectivization, for which he compensates with aggression and excess ideological zeal — for instance, it is on his initiative that the local “kulaks” are banished. In the passage above, his handicap functions as a painful reminder of the necessary (from the point of view of Soviet historiography) struggles the socialist collective endures en route to the future. In fact, Zhachev’s disability ennoble him by comparison to Voshchev, who is cast as the “real” cripple because of his ignorance of war.

Moreover, by using emasculating rhetoric that compares Voshchev not just to any woman, but one who has failed to give birth (and thus has not fulfilled her civic duty to

produce more workers and soldiers), Zhachev slyly justifies his own sterile, masturbatory action. At least he, by implication, is doing *something* manly and sexual, which he has the right to enjoy because he has paid his dues. It is precisely this self-serving logic that, despite its deceptive closeness to *bona fide* ideological orthodoxy, prevents Zhachev from fully inhabiting the heroism he arrogates. On the contrary, he is debased and appetitive, a carnivalesque figure whose physical lack paradoxically grants him greater mobility than any other characters enjoy. Where food is scarce, he obtains it through mysterious but terrifying threats of violence; at a village dance, he grabs at the legs of the dancers, toppling them. His mobility is as sterile as his lust, however, since it serves only his personal appetites.

Mobility and stillness are prominent themes in *The Foundation Pit*. Lack of motion, which in the frenetic, “joyful” 1930s comes to be seen as un-socialist, and accordingly, the character known only as the “activist” who, as Robert Chandler notes, was likely a “representative of the village poor” and considered himself to be the local expert in communist doctrine,³⁴ states that “movement is proper to the proletariat.”³⁵ In cruel contradiction to this Soviet cliché, the plot of *Kotlovan* is rife with an unceasing motion that, in the manner described by Papernyi, is in its indefinite and repetitive nature indistinguishable from stillness. When they are scolded for the precisely the pointlessness of their endless digging, the workers building the foundation pit are silent. They seem, in that moment, to both recognize the inadequacy of their own efforts and the fact that “it’s necessary to dig the earth and put up the house, or you’ll die and not be in time [*ne pospeesh*].” Continuing their line of thought, the narrator adds, “let life ebb away now [*pust’ seichas zhizn’ ukhodit*] like the streaming of breath [*kak techen’e*]

dykhaniia], but, in return, by dint of putting up the building, it can be organized for future use [*vprok*], for future motionless joy [*schast'e*] and for childhood.”³⁶ The narrator here equates two incomparable quantities, namely misery in the present and “future motionless joy,” where the former is supposed to pay for the latter. The catch here, of course, is that it would be impossible for these specific workers, trapped as they are in their own mortality and individuality, to store up joy “for future use” of an unidentified and indeed unborn future collectivity, precisely because their lives are finite and will end before the building is erected. Though the workers themselves recognize this and wish they could dig faster, the text itself takes them and the reader away from this understanding, couching it in naïve hopefulness. This rhetorical move, which conflates of the individual with the collective and of past, future, and present, conceals the painful absurdity of the Soviet project of unceasing construction.

Neither Zhachev nor Kozlov, nor, for that matter, the inappropriately contemplative Voshchev are ideal Soviet citizens, just as the text as a whole fails to adhere to the norms of the production novel. Indeed, *Platonov* deconstructs or pollutes almost every Soviet dictum his earnest characters mouth in their abiding commitment to pointless, but nominally “socialist,” tasks. It is difficult, for instance, to consider the touching figure of the Young Pioneer from the passage above with un-ironic optimism. The time “ripening” within her is endlessly drawn out masochistic time that will never bear concrete fruit. No character gives the lie to utopian visions more than the orphan Nastya, who is much more central to the novel’s plot than the passing Pioneer girl. Rescued after her mother starves to death (an event the child initially greets with cavalier socialist pabulum), Nastya survives only briefly among the foundation pit’s builders before succumbing to

conditions of exposure. The closer hunger and disease drive her to death, the more the socialist verbiage she parrots dissolves into calls for her dead mother, contradicting the Stalinist conception of an ideology that resides immutably within each cell of the true socialist's body. The same life-giving fluids that filled the limbs of the Young Pioneer flow fatally out of Nastya's body — "juice is coming out of me everywhere," she complains.³⁷ Her caretakers place her corpse inside the pit, so that the vast building they believe will one day rise from it will rest on her remains. Her death and burial reify Ivan Karamzov's philosophical construct of a civilization built upon the suffering of children — which many Christian thinkers, including Dostoevsky himself, considered morally untenable.³⁸

The Foundation Pit's tendency to dismantle Soviet ideological talking points even as it articulates them permeates every element of the novel, from its not-quite-socialist-realist genre to the much remarked-upon stylistic oddness, a hallmark of Platonov's published prose until the *For Future Use* affair. One of the oddest aspects of Platonov's style is precisely the way it deals with the odd, the unexpected or the traumatic (like the banishment of the kulaks in *The Foundaton Pit*).³⁹ Platonov elides the strange, wrapping it in double entendre or unusual syntax that the reader must pass over or "normalize" so that the "fabric" of the plot does not "tear apart."⁴⁰ For Joseph Brodsky, Platonov's prose was the natural and indeed most expressive possible product of its utopian-minded context. "The first victim of conversations about utopia," Brodsky wrote, is always grammar, since "language cannot keep pace" with thought, "loses its breath in the subjunctive mood," and begins to favor "atemporal categories and constructions. Consequently, even simple nouns lose the ground from under their feet." Platonov's

prose, according to Brodsky, “takes the Russian language into a dead end of meaning [smyslovoi tupik].”⁴¹ Chandler has described Platonov’s approach to language as “a literary equivalent of cubism,” classifying *The Foundation Pit* especially as “the work in which Platonov does the most violence to language.”⁴²

Platonov’s writing is masochistic in form, packaging disturbing or violent events in an idiom that promotes their normalization in the mind of the reader.⁴³ It is also masochistic in content. His fiction oscillated between official Soviet literary norms and his own idiosyncratic visions, affirming its status as both parody and acclamation of Stalinist doctrine, a wavering both the author and his establishment critics found highly problematic. When critics affiliated with the Russian Association for Proletarian Writers (RAPP) excoriated his short novel *For Future Use* (1931), Platonov wrote a self-flagellating letter to Stalin. After agreeing with critics’ assessment of the work as “ideologically harmful,” he described his new and improved creative process:

Then I began to work on a new book, checking myself [*proveriaia sebia*], monitoring my every phrase and position [*polozhenie*], torturously [*muchitel’no*] and slowly, overcoming the inertia of lies and banality [*poshlost’*], which still possesses me, which is hostile to the proletariat and the people of the kolkhoz [*kolkhozniki*]. Through labor and a new, i.e. proletarian, approach to reality, I feel ever lighter and freer, as though I were returning home from strange lands [*iz chuzhikh mest*].⁴⁴

Like Hellbeck’s diarists, Platonov internalized the vigilant gaze of the state, which he now turned mercilessly on himself. By infinitely slowing down his writing through an obsessive dissection of even the most trivial thought, by scrutinizing the ideological content even of his “positions” or gestures, a process he admits is “torturous,” Platonov achieved a feeling of homecoming.

We might wonder how such an exculpatory letter, written by a persecuted Soviet citizen to Stalin himself, could possibly be sincere, yet Platonov articulates similar sentiments in his diaries. In 1930, he wrote, “how I desire to write artistically, clearly [*iasno*], sensually [*chuvstvenno*], with fidelity to class [*klassovo verno*]!”⁴⁵ The torturousness of the process to which Platonov subjected himself in order to produce “appropriate” prose proceeds, in part, to his fluctuating position vis-à-vis the state — from frequently published journalist to member of the literary establishment to *persona non grata* to, at last, father of an enemy of the people. It is also evidence of his growing disillusionment with the Soviet project, expressed obliquely in diary entries like one dating to the early 1930s:

To annihilate whole nations, it's not necessary to wage war, but only to fear one's neighbors to such a degree, so build up the military industry, so mistreat the population, to store up military supplies to such an extent that the whole population perishes from economically fruitless labor, whereas mountains of food, clothing, machines and weaponry remain in the place of humanity, as a funerary mound and monument.⁴⁶

Platonov's prose illustrates the futility of his attempts to incorporate official literary standards into his writing while maintaining the unique artistry he denounced as “lies” in the letter to Stalin. For Platonov, the compromise between these two extremes lay in writing according to the dictates of his vision while consenting to, and even finding pleasure in, the punishments expressing this vision earned him from the state. In his wish to help bring about an indefinitely delayed, but paradisiacal future, and in his struggle to give this wish voice, Platonov resembles a young peasant woman from his own *Foundation Pit*. This character simultaneously feels “a rushing, hot movement nearby,” a “wind of universal dashing life,” yet “cannot articulate her joy,” lacking the “words” that

would enable her to “feel in her head the whole world [*svet*] in order to help it shine [*svetit'sia*].”⁴⁷ Platonov’s efforts to become the human light that shines in a dark land (to paraphrase a passage from his diary) constituted his masochistic subjectivity by forcing him to adopt a disciplinary regime that he found both “torturous” and pleasurable — at least when it produced the desired results of publication or “properly” proletarian writing.⁴⁸

The Foundation Pit is a powerful “index” of Platonov’s attempts to commune with the “master text” of Stalinism. Both his characters and narrator pepper their speech with the rhetoric of the Five-Year Plan, yet their amateurish utterances inadvertently reveal this rhetoric’s underlying falsity. Though even Platonov’s grammar echoes Stalinist terminology, it remains slippery and ideologically suspect.⁴⁹ For instance, parts of the text seem to quote from Stalin’s speeches from 1929 and 1930, only to contort them until they read as parody.⁵⁰ This slippery form of satire travesties the “authoritarian word, which by its nature rejects assimilation in any other context.” Its presence in Platonov’s literary efforts, earnest as they may have been, made him unacceptable within the cultural norms of the 1930s.⁵¹

Like Severin in *Venus in Furs*, Platonov conceived of himself as in a covenant with his torturer. For Severin, this eventually meant unscripted and undesirable punishment at the hands of Wanda’s Greek lover; for Platonov, it was complete rejection of even modest “fellow traveler” ambitions. Following the *For Future Use* affair, Platonov made a conscious effort to write in more standard prose, as if to quash one possible source of perceived rebellion in his writing.⁵² To quote a character from the short story “Che-Che-O” (1928), Platonov attempted to divert the stream of “self-criticism” into a “healthier

channel [*ruslo*].” And yet, as that character’s interlocutor points out, “Channels can also be unreliable things. Rivers sometimes erode [*razmyvaiut*] the channels they run in.”⁵³ Typically for Platonov, this exchange commingles the literal meaning of the word *ruslo* (“riverbed” or “channel”) with its figurative sense (“current of thought”).

The theme of liquids permeates Platonov’s early as well as his late prose, extending into even postwar works like “Afrodita” (1946). The recurring figure of fluidity is as volatile and problematic as the dialogue from Che-Che-O implies. In 1937, as part of the negative critical reception for *The Potudan’ River*, a collection of stories, the critic Abram Gurvich wrote a lengthy exposé of Platonov’s prose for *Red Virgin Soil*. Conceived as a wholesale denunciation of Platonov’s work and the man himself, the piece analyzes several stories in detail, concentrating particularly on the motif of liquids. Because of this emphasis and Gurvich’s stature within official culture at the time, his article provides insight into Stalinist conceptions of uncontrolled fluidity.

Gurvich portrays Platonov as a glutton for emotional punishment with an “insatiable” need to “spill tears over the misfortunes of others.” In the service of this “sweet torture [*sladostnaia muka*],” Gurvich asserts, Platonov writes in an excessively sorrowful manner. In so doing, he seeks to “arouse in the reader the only pleasure known to the writer — the feeling of *pity*.”⁵⁴ For Gurvich, Platonov’s need to “arouse” and experience pity thrives on “whipping up [*podkhlestyvanie*]” his imagination and distorting reality. In support of this thesis, he cites many episodes in Platonov’s writing where characters experience tragic circumstances and spill many tears.⁵⁵ Gurvich finds the metaphor of liquids to be discrediting to Platonov, at one point describing the author’s Bolshevik characters as human sponges that “must be dried up to the limit so [they] may absorb as

many human tears as possible.”⁵⁶ By associating Platonov with a lugubrious liquidity, Gurvich indicts him as soft, feminine, and overly concerned with the sacrifices necessary to fashion a strong Motherland — unforgivable flaws for a male public figure in the purge year 1937. Gurvich’s open disgust demonstrates the proximity of even such theoretically cleansing liquids as tears to the contaminating fluids of sexuality, old age, death, and disease, which testify to individualistic weakness. The conflation of literal with figurative liquidity in the surrounding culture was so pervasive that when Platonov wrote letters on behalf of his arrested teenage son, he implied that any moral-ideological contamination the boy had displayed proceeded from “poisoning of the brain” by pus from an old illness.⁵⁷ Physiology, indeed, had “devoured” not only all other types of science, but even political discourse.

Platonov’s notion of liquids as carriers of political contaminants shares features with the paranoid rhetoric of the Stalinist 1930s and the liquid-obsessed discourse around sexuality in the Soviet 1920s. It also recalls the theories of the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger, further aligning Platonov with the masochistic heritage of German-speaking Europe. Weininger’s original contribution to theories of sex circulating at the fin de siècle was his speculation about the existence of special “male” and “female” secretions within every human cell. The relative proportions of these secretions purportedly determined how “masculine” or “feminine” a given individual would be.⁵⁸ Platonov critiqued Weininger in an article called “The Soul of the World” (1920), arguing that the Viennese student’s suicide stemmed from an inability to endure his own negative view of Woman, the titular “soul” of Platonov’s “world.”⁵⁹ However much he disliked Weininger’s work, however, Platonov’s own writing reveals that he absorbed not only

those ideas Weininger held in common with contemporaries (like the equation of “Woman” with sex), but even the entirely original claim about the connection between sexual fluids and certain mental tendencies.⁶⁰ Platonov exploited this notion until fluidity became, as Gurvich astutely noted, a central figure in his prose, its unmanageability acting sometimes for good (defined, especially in Platonov’s early works, as labor productivity), and at other times for evil.

For Platonov, energy was a finite, fungible, and above all fluid substance. Like Gastev, Semashko, and others, he frequently returned to the idea of balancing energies judiciously to maximize labor output. In Platonov’s writing, any mechanism capable of directing flows, like a pump or a sluice, is “synonymous” with utopian construction projects.⁶¹ Human labor, particularly creative work, could also act like the pump, lock, or dam. As Platonov wrote his wife, Maria Platonova (née Kashintseva) in 1927, “I’m working. [...] Sometimes I’m fed [*menia pitaet*] by the energy of frenzy [*ostervenenie*], in order to get out into the clear independent water of life.”⁶² This “clear independent water” can be contrasted to the “pitiful, watery [*zhidkii*], tired substance” inside one’s head, which, as Platonov wrote in a notebook in the early 1930s, must be overcome in order to accomplish any “artistic” aim.⁶³

Accordingly, in “The Ethereal Tract [*Efirnyi trakt*]” (1927), which tells of the ascetic scientist Kirpichnikov, a character “feels a terrible emptiness of the brain, as though the rains of work had washed away all the fertile land, leaving nothing for the plants of his creativity to feed on.”⁶⁴ Mental fluidity can either promote or obstruct the blossoming of creative thought, depending on the context; often, what gets the intellectual juices flowing are appetites that, if not subjected to sublimation, would lead to debauchery.

Kirpichnikov, for instance, experiences his scientific work as a “flowing” similar to “music” or “love;” as he writes the titular tract, his masterpiece, he feels a “lust for the elusive tender body — ether.”⁶⁵ His tremendous productivity stems precisely from the fact that he works “not with his head alone, but also with his heart and blood.” This simultaneously makes him a great scientist and a terrible lover; the beautiful Valentina can “arouse in him only a slight feeling of sadness” because “the forces of his heart [are] mobilized for other things.”⁶⁶ If blood, semen, and other liquids are properly harnessed, however, there is little they cannot accomplish: around 1932, Platonov wrote, “man is like a cock [*khuy*] — he casts off filth [*nechistoty*] and produces the future. The cock is the most vivid manifestation of life.”⁶⁷ Another “vivid manifestation,” this time of the power of sublimation, is the invention of Kirpichnikov’s Rakhmetov-like colleague Matissen, who discovers a way to mobilize brainwaves in order to control an irrigation machine telepathically. After demonstrating his fantastic invention to Kirpichnikov, Matissen declares,

I want to get around executive mechanisms and any mediators, to act on nature directly and immediately [*neposredstvenno*] — with sheer [*goloi*] perturbation of the brain. I am convinced of the success of technology without machines. I know that a single contact between man and nature — thought — would suffice to control all the matter in the world! Get it? I’ll explain. See, in every body there is a spot, a little heart [*serdechko*], and if you give it a little flick — the whole body is yours: do with it what you will! And if you torment [*iazvit*] the body how and where necessary, it will do what you make it do by itself!⁶⁸

This manifesto, despite its origins in a story from 1927, is a powerful prefiguration of Stalinist bodily discipline, which eschewed dependence on machines. Like Matissen, the mature Stalinist cult of labor sought to discipline the body until the “torment” of work became voluntary — to find that “little heart” that the lightest touch can control.

Matissen's mind-control labor practices are nothing but a masochistic disciplining of the body, which now performs willingly what only "force" could previously make it do. Moreover, this synthetic production of consent harnesses the body's bio-capacities, obviating the need for machines in socialist construction.

Even as official interest in an unmediated, physiologically based conquest of nature grew, Platonov's own enthusiasm for it waned. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Happy Moscow*, which is profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of lossless sublimation. The story's heroine, Moscow Chestnova, is herself an "organic machine that transforms filth into beauty," although, true to the feminine "nature" Platonov would likely ascribe to her, she enacts her transformations unconsciously and with no discernible goal.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, fluid filth seems more powerful here than the "clear independent water" Platonov yearned for ten years earlier and which he had once considered imminently attainable. The plot of *Happy Moscow* shows that the human body is fatally resistant to utopian interventions meant to reforge it.⁷⁰

For example, the ambitious surgeon Sambikin's attempt to save a tumor-afflicted child ends in failure when he realizes that the "pus-bearing bodies" in the boy's brain are indivisible from the rest of his head. After a first, apparently successful surgery on the child, Sambikin feels "oppressed [*podavlen*] with the sorrow of the constitution of the human body, whose bones contain more suffering and death than life and movement."⁷¹ The bio-energy that intellect could discipline, contain, and channel in Platonov's earlier stories — for example, through abstinence — turns out in *Happy Moscow* to be outside human influence, since in its most concentrated form it resides exclusively within the glands of "dead tissue." Even if it can potentially be harvested and isolated, it cannot

help its dead host and is of dubious use to others. After Moskva is injured during the construction of the Moscow metro, Sambikin amputates her leg and injects her with a substance derived from a dead boy's organs in a paroxysm of lust. Though this metaphorical ejaculation superficially resembles other Platonovian sublimations, it emerges not from careful thought and asceticism, but from a madness brought on by the temptation of Moskva's unclean body. Even worse from the point of view of Stalinist ideology, though Moskva recovers from her injury, sustained in the course of socialist construction, she is unable to return to any productive work. Instead of being purged of contaminants through sacrifice, she feels permanently unclean and becomes "prone to various whims." She washes her hair daily "because she constantly feel[s] dirt [there] and even crie[s] from disappointment because [it] never seem[s] to go away."⁷²

Happy Moscow suggests that, far from being removable through the disciplining action of socialist labor or effective self-criticism, fluid contamination is deeply ingrained in the human body and mind. Yet like the naïve workers and peasants in *The Foundation Pit*, the intellectuals of *Happy Moscow* continue to waste their energies and talents in an effort to achieve perfect purity. Unmediated contact with and control of nature, which Matissen so confidently practiced in "The Ethereal Tract," remains unrealized in *Happy Moscow*. As Sambikin operates on the boy with the tumor, he sees that the battle against filth is bound to fail, since

The gaping, hot, helpless body of the patient, with its thousands of bisected sucking blood vessels, greedily absorbed streptococci from everywhere — from the air, but especially from the surgical instruments, which it was impossible to sterilize entirely [*nachisto*]. It was necessary to progress to electric surgery — to enter the body with the clean, instantaneous, blue flame of an electric arc — then everything that carries death would itself be killed and new streptococci, having

reached the wounds, would find there a parched desert rather than a nourishing medium.⁷³

The “instantaneous” sterile treatment Sambikin dreams of here is currently inaccessible. Moreover, its futuristic character implies that, like electrification of the whole country in 1920, it will long remain a fantasy. Even if it someday becomes possible to operate on patients using pure electric currents, this technique will at best cauterize wounds and remove the “nourishment” that both harmful and essential bacteria need to survive. Only death permanently removes the possibility of infection.

Sambikin’s fantasy resembles Platonov’s dark vision of a depopulated Russia whose technological creations tower over an empty landscape as a grim “monument.” Later that same night, as he contemplates the surgery while lying in the bathtub, Sambikin recognizes that the utopian vision of unmediated surgical intervention into the human body is, for the moment, “nothing more than a murky embryo” and that “much work must yet be done to unfurl from this embryo the flying, lofty image buried in our dreams.”⁷⁴ The word “buried,” with its funereal coloration, overpowers any hopeful message. Like the corpse of Nastya, which the foundation pit consumes, the “embryo” of Sambikin’s imaginings does not form the basis of a utopian future, but instead indicates that this future is either impossible or grotesquely undesirable.

This may be the only climax available in masochistic narratives: the realization that the radiant future is doomed never to arrive, that it is dead and “buried” irrespective of the human energies that have been invested into constructing it. *Happy Moscow*, saturated as it is with uncontrollable liquidity, testifies to the erosion of Platonov’s faith in the feasibility and morality of the Soviet project. At the same time, it is the apotheosis

of his constitution as a masochistic subject — one who has voluntarily chained himself to the master's discourse even in the articulation of resistance.

Platonov's writing casts properly flowing energy as essential to producing the radiant future. Even as his optimism about the Soviet project dwindled and his prose meditated on the failures of socialist construction, Platonov remained enmeshed in the basic ideological underpinnings of Stalinist utopianism. It is this abiding commitment to, and even pleasure in, a discourse deployed to persecute him, that makes Platonov a consummate masochistic stylist.

3. Daniil Kharms: Life is a Sea

Life is a sea, fate is the wind, and man is a ship. And just as a good coxswain can make use of a contrary wind and even go against the wind without changing the ship's course, so a clever man can make use of the blows of fate, getting closer to his goal with each blow.

Example: One man wanted to become an orator, but fate cut off his tongue and the man became mute. But he didn't give up and instead learned to display little tablets with sentences written on them in large letters, and also where it was necessary to growl and howl a little, and so he affected the listeners even more than is possible with ordinary speech.

—Kharms, diary entry from July-August 1937⁷⁵

"They say all the good broads are fat-assed. Yeah, I love me some big-breasted broads, I like how they smell." Having said this, he began to increase in height and, once he reached the ceiling, crumbled into a thousand little balls.

Pantelei the caretaker came by, gathered these little balls into the shovel he usually used to collect horse manure, and took them somewhere behind the house.

Meanwhile the sun kept on shining as before, and, as before, voluptuous women kept on smelling marvelous.

—Kharms, "How One Man Crumbled," 1936

A cursory examination of Kharms' fiction is enough to suggest that he is familiar with, at the very least, the stereotypical trappings of masochism. Consider the "Incidence

[*Sluchai*]” beginning with the words “Once Orlov overstuffed himself with mashed peas and died.” Several increasingly overwrought and improbable comeuppances follow, starting with Spiridonov, who “died all by himself,” and ending with Perekhryostov, who was wired four hundred rubles and “got so uppity” that he lost his job. The penultimate demise in this sequence, which by the story’s logic represents near-peak absurdity, belongs to Kruglov, who “drew a woman holding a whip and went out of his mind.”⁷⁶ Like the lady in furs adorning a wall of Gregor Samsa’s room in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915), Kharms’ woman with a whip is a clear nod to the stagings of *Venus in Furs*. Kharms, like Platonov, channeled many of the techniques Sacher-Masoch developed in his own narratives, adapting them to his time and place by engaging with the Stalinist discourse of liquidity. Kharms was also living proof of the impossibility of true subversion in political masochism: for all his contempt for the Bolshevik state, he took seriously its preoccupation with liquids to the point of linking his idiosyncratic personal philosophy of creative production to the ebb and flow of fluids like saliva, ink, and semen.

Kruglov’s state change, which is notably not a death, presumably results from the same excess of sexual excitement that leads to the protagonist’s disintegration into “one thousand tiny balls” in “How One Man Crumbled” (1936).⁷⁷ Following his declaration of devotion to “fat-assed” women, the speaker begins to grow rapidly, eventually exploding. Kharms’ penis-man is the personification of Platonov’s utopian dictum about “man” being a “cock [*khuy*].” Yet he does not produce any kind of “future” after “[casting] off” the “filth” of his ejaculate, since following his ejaculation-*cum*-disintegration he is presumably discarded.

Typically for Kharms, the man's catastrophic (if possibly pleasurable) "crumbling" is not an equal and opposite reaction to any action, but a testament to the power of language. Among other texts, the seventeenth "Incidence," "Makarov and Petersen," offers a view into this mystical, often destructive capacity. The story involves a book about "desires and their fulfillment." "Read this book," Makarov promises his skeptical interlocutor, "and you will understand how vain our desires are. You will also understand how easy it is to fulfill the desire of another and how difficult to fulfill one's own." After Petersen mocks Makarov for his pompous tone and reverential attitude, Makarov utters the book's title — "MALGIL" — whereupon Petersen disappears into a parallel plane, invisible (though not inaudible) to Makarov. There, he experiences terror before fulfilling MALGIL's prediction about men becoming spheres. "And," the book goes on, "having become a sphere, man divests himself of all his desires."⁷⁸ Juxtaposing "Makarov and Petersen" with "How One Man Crumbled," we may conclude that desire is the prerequisite to dramatic phase changes, up to and including death, with language acting as a catalyst to the transformation, as well as a conduit into alternate dimensions or physical states.

It is almost too easy to map Kharms' "Incidences" onto the author's life, given that his was a time when words could all too easily effect a person's disappearance, destruction, and expropriation, all the more so if they failed to adhere to a high standard of clarity. Indeed, to write incomprehensibly, as Kharms and his friends did, was to invite trouble in the 1930s. As Valerii Shubinskii notes, Soviet jurisprudence of the time regarded "zaum'" or "gibberish" in literature as "code directed at an unknown, counter-revolutionary addressee."⁷⁹ Even Kharms' children's poetry acknowledges the ease with

which words could turn against those who uttered them, for example in the impish “Liar [*Vrun*]” (1930). During the interrogations following his 1931 arrest, Kharms, likely under duress, cited this poem as an example of literary activity intended to “act on the imagination of children in a degenerating way.”⁸⁰ In “Liar,” structured as a dialogue between a naïvely enthusiastic speaker and his incredulous interlocutors, one of the verses reads

— А вы знаете, что ДО?	“Did you know that YOUR?
А вы знаете, что НО?	Did you know that NO?
А вы знаете, что СА?	Did you know that SE?
Что до носа	That your nose
Ни руками,	Can’t be reached
Ни ногами	By hand
Не достать,	Or foot,
Что до носа	That your nose
Ни руками,	By hand
Ни ногами	Or foot,
Не доехать,	Not by driving
Не допрыгать,	Nor by jumping
Что до носа	That your nose
Не достать!	Just can’t be reached!” ⁸¹

Although the syllables “*do nosa* [to the nose]” appear separately on the page, reading aloud blurs them together into the word “*donos* [denunciation],” which lends the poem its only possible non-nonsense meaning: that, once released into the world, a denunciation can never be overtaken.⁸² Whatever Kharms’ thoughts on the ineluctable force of the official denunciation, it is poetic language that occupies pride of place in the hierarchy of words capable of deeds: as Kharms put it in a diary entry from 1930, “Poetry should be written in such a way that if a poem is thrown at a window, the window will shatter.”⁸³ Poetic language and sexuality, then, are comparable in their power to create alternate realities and propel human beings out of earthly existence.

Once we observe Kharms' conception of sexual desire as a tightly wound knot of pleasure and pain acted upon and accessed through language, we can begin the process of understanding him as a Stalinist masochist. Kharms' works feature many of the elements I have associated with masochistic writing: the attention to bodily discipline;⁸⁴ the stretching out of narrative time and elision of climax;⁸⁵ the propensity for quotation and pastiche;⁸⁶ and the preoccupation with text and language. Whether Kharms' writing exhibits an ethnographic bent is debatable. Though he was interested in an eclectic set of subjects including Buddhism,⁸⁷ ancient Egyptian history,⁸⁸ occultist texts,⁸⁹ and hatha yoga,⁹⁰ his fascinations with the culturally and ethnically exotic never rose to the status of a fetish — except, perhaps, where women were concerned. A 1940 fragment features a “naked Jewish girl” washing her genitals in milk, which Kharms' speaker then drinks. Though the fragment is constructed of *non sequiturs* and lacks a unified narrative, the Jewish girl keeps haunting the speaker's thoughts, eventually compelling him to return to the “transparent and viscous liquid” flowing from between her legs.⁹¹

It is no accident that one of the only works where Kharms' interest in ethnic otherness assumes a fetishistic aspect is a text dominated by the flowing of liquids. Indeed, Kharms, like Platonov, displayed a deep affinity for the rhetoric of liquidity as it intersected with sexuality. This affinity for sexualized liquids in turn intersects with one of Kharms' best known authorial attributes: his abiding obsession with language and languages, which ran the gamut of registers from playful punning to serious philosophizing. Kharms' prose and poetry offer a constant slippage of meaning, from the figurative to the literal and back. Consider a fragment from 1929 or 1930 beginning with the words “Ivan Grigorievich Kantov walked along, leaning on his stick and stepping

importantly, in goose-like fashion [*po gusinomu*]. He walked along Gusev Street and carried a goose [*gus*'] under his arm.”⁹² At first glance, this sentence appears to offer nothing more than facile repetition. Yet it is actually a disciplined exploration of the semantic and conceptual fluidity lurking within even the simplest terms. The signifier “goose” does triple duty: firstly, it acts as shorthand for a waddling, affected gait, distilling the bird’s essence; secondly, it names a street, which suddenly locates it on the opposite end of the “goose” spectrum, toward pure signifying entirely divorced from the “goose” sign; and thirdly, it points to a literal “goose,” which might be placed between the two earlier extremes. What begins as an apparently obvious language game could in reality be used to model Saussure’s thesis on the arbitrariness of signs.

Over time, Kharms’ language games acquired an increasingly sinister and pessimistic cast. This is no coincidence, since following his 1931 arrest and exile in Kursk until October 1932, he and other former members of OBERIU, who had found sources of income within the children’s literary establishment, experienced increasingly frequent threats to their livelihoods. In 1937, after Kharms published his children’s poem “A Man Left Home [*Iz doma vyshel chelovek*],” which included the stanza “And so one time at dawn/ He entered a dark wood/ And from then on/ And from then on/ He wasn’t seen again,” he endured a year-long publication ban.⁹³ Yet Kharms’ rejection of the language of Soviet reality was well in evidence before 1937.

During the period 1932-1934, Kharms obtained official permission to return to Leningrad, where he joined the Soviet Writers’ Union.⁹⁴ These same years were relatively tranquil ones in normally turbulent early-Soviet literary culture: RAPP, which had been responsible for so much of the viciousness in the literary wars of the 1920s, had

been disbanded in 1932, and on the other hand the promulgation of Socialist Realism as the official form of Soviet art at the First Congress of Soviet Writers was still two years away. Kharms, however, remained wary even during this period of relative calm, his linguistic play slipping into an increasingly sarcastic register. In 1933, for instance, he wrote the scene “Tiuk!”, in which a man repeatedly makes the titular noise despite the exhortations of an increasingly exasperated woman. The play ends with the curtain falling over a Gogol-style dumb scene, the woman having lost the power of speech following yet another “Tiuk” from the man.⁹⁵

Like this object lesson in the disbalancing power of nonsense, the fragment “Piesa,” written around the same time, drives home the impossibility of even basic communication in a setting where language simply falls apart. In “Piesa,” one Koka Brianskii seeks to inform his mother of his impending nuptials, but is driven to strangling her when she proves unable to parse even the word “married,” instead breaking it up into meaningless syllables.⁹⁶ Her death is simultaneous with the entrance of Koka’s bride, Marusia, onto the stage; the new order thus instantly supplants the old. For reasons that remain opaque to sender and receiver alike, Koka’s message—which heralds the arrival of significant changes to the mother-son relationship, changes perhaps unfavorable to the mother—cannot be transmitted. As the piece suggests, the penalty for failing to understand that the world has changed is death. We may surmise that Kharms, like Koka Brianskii’s mother, felt himself unready, unable or simply unwilling to receive communiqués from the world forming around him in the early 1930s. A 1933 letter he wrote to the actress Klavdiia Pugacheva (1906-1966) testifies to this fact:

I am the creator of a world, that's the most important thing about me. [...] When I write poetry, it seems to me that the most important thing is not the idea, not the content or the form, and not the nebulous concept of "quality," but something even more nebulous and incomprehensible to the rationalistic mind, but comprehensible to me and, I hope, to you, dear Klavdiia Vasilievna. This is *purity of order* [*chistota poriadka*] [emphasis in the original — M.V.]. This purity is one and the same in the sun, the grass, in the human being and in poetry. [...] [Great works] are not just words and thoughts printed on paper, they're as real a thing as the crystal vial of ink in front of me on the table. It feels like you could take these poems, which are things, and throw them at the window and the window would break. That's what words can do! But on the other hand, how impotent [*bespomoshchny*] and pitiful these same words can be! I never read newspapers. There's a fictional [*vymyshlennyi*], not a created [*sozdannyi*] world. It's just a pitiful, battered typeface on bad, splintery paper.⁹⁷

This passage reaffirms Kharms' commitment to a reality apart from the one offered in "newspapers," the reality of poems capable of breaking glass. Words not endowed with the mystical quality of "purity" do not, in his estimation, have the same power to effect physical change as really good poetry. It is not that Kharms negates the physical world in favor of a purely speculative reality; on the contrary, such natural elements as the sun, grass, people, and inkwells remain important to him. Excluded is only that "reality" reported in the newspaper, that is, the reality of the Soviet state. Yet for all his apparent denial of that reality, which is evident in his many efforts to isolate himself from it, up to and including the invention of a code used to write down "unflattering" statements about "Soviet reality,"⁹⁸ Kharms, no less than a writer with explicitly establishment-oriented ambitions like Platonov, remained inexorably bound to it. Nowhere is this clearer than in his writing about liquids.

It is worth noting that the quality of "purity [*chistota*]," though the word can also mean "cleanliness," has for Kharms nothing in common with its apparent synonym, "hygiene." On the contrary, wherever the word "hygiene" appears in Kharms' texts, it is

always an instance of the Bakhtinian “word of the other.”⁹⁹ Indeed, hygiene figures in one of Kharms’s most famous utterances, normally quoted only in part, as one of the things most “hateful” to him:

I am interested only in ‘nonsense,’ only in that which makes no practical sense. Life interests me only in its absurd manifestation. Heroism, enthusiasm, daring, morale, hygiene, morality, sentimentality and zeal [*azart*] are hateful words and feelings for me. But I fully understand and respect: rapture and delight, inspiration and despair, passion and restraint, dissipation and chastity, sorrow and grief, joy and laughter.¹⁰⁰

Even as Kharms tars physical and moral hygiene as hateful, his own views on hygiene and sex did not escape influence by contemporary Soviet discourse. For example, his disgust toward pregnant women bears traces of NEP-era, and even earlier, fears of female physiology. Between 1936 and 1938, for instance, Kharms wrote “Article,” which approvingly explicates the views on various social questions of “the great emperor Aleksandr Vilberdat.” Among the emperor’s achievements was his confinement of “pregnant broads [*baby*]” to a holding area in order that they “not offend the sight of the peaceable population with their vile appearance [*gnusnyi vid*].”¹⁰¹ Not only Kharms’ narrators, but the man himself found pregnancy disgusting; the condition disqualified even women he had previously found attractive, like a “beauty” he met on the beach in 1934.¹⁰²

However much he hated the language and values of the Soviet order, Kharms’ writings privileged liquids no less, and perhaps more, than contemporary sexuality and labor discourse. Kharms concerns himself with all kinds of liquids, though perhaps not exactly the ones one might expect from a writer so dedicated to depictions of violence. Indeed, even as people fall fatally out of windows, as in “Falling Old Ladies” (1936-7);

are beaten to death (“Mashkin killed Koshkin”); operated upon by incompetent surgeons like Professor Mamaev in the story beginning with the words “Once Andrei Vasilyevich was walking down the street...” (1931); are taken away by the police, as in “The Obstacle” (1940) or “The Knight” (1936) — indeed, even when they have their heads broken off like “mushroom caps,” as in “I raised dust...” (1939)¹⁰³ — they rarely bleed. One prominent exception is the old lady Zviakina from “Knights” (1940), whose already broken jaws are torn out by pincers.¹⁰⁴ Instead of blood, Kharms favors water, ink, wood glue, soup (splashed at an unruly table companion in “The Argument” (1933)); spittle; diarrhea — Ivan Susanin’s in “A Historical Episode” (1939) and the narrator’s in “The Old Woman” (1939); vomit; something evocatively called “dog grossness” [*sobach’ia gadost’*], which a dog sprays in someone’s face in a fragment from 1936-8;¹⁰⁵ and, particularly in his private writings, vaginal secretions.

Many of the above fluids are organic and even “abject” in the Kristevan sense. Of those that do not proceed from the human (or animal body), that is, water, wood glue, soup, and ink, almost all interact with life, animal or otherwise, in negative or at best ambivalent ways: for instance, as the story “Black Water” (1934) shows, water, if mixed with spittle, may unleash disturbing (though perhaps ultimately salubrious) supernatural occurrences. Though the sanity of the protagonist in “Black Water” is debatable, that of the professor’s widow in “The Fate of the Professor’s Wife” (1936) is less so. At the story’s conclusion, the woman — who, as the narrator assures us, is “totally normal” — uses a fishing rod to “catch some invisible fish from the floor” of an insane asylum.¹⁰⁶ For Kharms, “water is the typical sign of the mental asylum, a criterion for determining madness. Only the ill are able to ‘see’ ‘water’ on the floor.”¹⁰⁷ Recalling the idea that

Kharms' aqueous asylums resemble medieval psychiatric "treatments" in which patients would be submerged in water without warning and against their will, we may class "The Fate of the Professor's Wife" with "Kolpakov the Braggart" (1934). On its face, this story is a comical refashioning of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf;" on closer inspection, however, it turns out to be a disturbing statement on the dehumanizing violence of moral "reforging." Kolpakov, whose list of things of which he is not afraid includes cannons, fire, water, tigers, eagles, whales, and spiders, makes the mistake of delivering his boastful rant to some divers, who call his bluff and shame him into putting on a wetsuit and getting underwater.

Fyodor Fyodorovich Kolpakov lowered himself [*opustilsia*] underwater. Meanwhile the divers shout to him from the surface on the phone: "How's it going, Fyodor Fyodorovich? You scared?" And Fyodor Fyodorovich responds from below: "Nyav...nyav...nyav..." "OK," say the divers, "He's had enough." They get Fyodor Fyodorovich out of the water, take off the diving suit, but Fyodor Fyodorovich keeps looking around, wild-eyed, and says only "Nyav...nyav...nyav..." "That's what you get, brother, don't go around bragging," the divers told him and dropped him on the shore. Fyodor Fyodorovich Kolpakov went home and never bragged again.¹⁰⁸

The story ends on a pat note familiar to us from other moral parables, but any impression of harmlessness is misleading. Yes, the divers have taught Kolpakov a lesson and nipped any future bragging in the bud, but at what cost? A jubilantly individualistic, if self-deceiving, raconteur has been silenced or even driven insane, judging by his "wild-eyed" demeanor.

The divers punish Kolpakov in a manner consistent with a masochistic script. "Shoot me with a cannon," Kolpakov had earlier demanded, earnestly or not, "throw me in the

water.” It is he who accosts the divers, who are minding their own business, and he who “lowers himself” into the water. The divers manufacture Kolpakov’s consent to punishment for the transgression of frivolous speech by taking his bragging at face value and shaming him into a dive.

The sinister manner in which the divers gang up on Kolpakov, as well as the deployment of a liquid means of punishment, recalls a 1929 fragment that evinces similar pessimism about the outcome of confrontations between an individual and an unfavorably disposed collective:

On our river’s embankment a large number of people had gathered. In the river, regiment commander Sepunov was drowning. He kept choking, jumping out up to his stomach, screaming, and sinking into the water again. He beat his arms in all directions and again cried out for help.

The people stood on the banks and watched, gloomily.

“He’ll drown,” said Kuz’ma.

“He’ll drown for sure,” confirmed a man in a cap.

And indeed, the regiment commander drowned.

People began to disperse.¹⁰⁹

Why does Sepunov, like the “skilled coxswain” from the diary entry beginning “life is a sea,” not maneuver among the “blows of fate” and save himself? The difference may be the malevolent inaction of the collective, whose “gloomy [*mrachnyi*]” glaring recalls the deadly “bronze stare” that presages murder in a fragment from 1935.¹¹⁰

Like water, glue, another common Kharmasian liquid, can be a killer or not depending on circumstance. For example, in the undated “The Young Man Who Saw a Caretaker,” wood glue is declared to be an effective remedy against the nuisance of flies.¹¹¹

Furthermore, Kharms uses wood glue and carpenters as symbols male potency, so that breaking chairs or tumbling carpenters symbolize decreased sexual potency or other “failures on the sexual arena.”¹¹² At times the author even identifies himself with a

carpenter, as in a 1928 prospectus for the children's journal *Yozh*, in which a Kharms-like figure is described as "the carpenter and inventor Ivan Kharmsovich Toporyshkin."¹¹³



Loss of sexual and writerly potency were perennial, and linked, bogeymen for Kharms.

His fiction and private writings are rife with recurring motifs of empty pages, disappearing inkwells, spontaneous ink droughts, or text that suddenly becomes transparent, revealing the “fear” beneath. Collectively, these motifs point to an abiding anxiety around loss of inspiration or worse, erasure of existing thoughts, texts, or identities.¹¹⁴

Kharms’ references to ink are shorthand for an issue that plagued him, as it did Kafka, throughout his career: the tension between the necessity and impossibility of writing. Ever vigilant, Kharms meticulously “[recorded] the dates and even times of the completion”¹¹⁵ of many poems and stories and wrote injunctions to himself to “look upon writing as a holiday.”¹¹⁶ If all else failed, as evidently happened one day in January 1937, Kharms would write simply “today I wrote nothing.” On several occasions, Kharms ends a fragment of writing not with a curt “that’s all [vsyo],” but with a statement

about running out of ink, or his inkwell disappearing. An early, prankish letter from 1931 breaks off abruptly with Kharms's complaint that he can "no longer write with a pencil," explaining in a footnote that his aunt had just taken away his inkwell, leading to the pencil predicament.¹¹⁷ Two fictional fragments similarly end with references to ink and its disappearance: a brief piece called "The Artist and the Watch" (1938), which ends with "Ech! I'd write more, but the inkwell has gone somewhere;"¹¹⁸ and "Knights," which ends with the words "However, at this point the author concludes his narrative, since he cannot find his inkwell."¹¹⁹

The idea that the instrument necessary for the task at hand might disappear unites Kharms' fears of writerly and sexual impotence, and is the animating principle of works like "The Disarmed Man or the Failed Affair (Tragic Vaudeville in One Act)" (1934) and what may be regarded as its companion piece, "The Obstacle." In the former, a man tries to pressure a woman into sex but suddenly discovers that his penis is missing. If, in 1934, an interlude between an unwilling woman and an insistent man could be played for laughs, by 1940, the same situation was no longer humorous. Sexual congress between Pronin and Irina Mazer is rendered impossible not by any deficiency on Pronin's part but by the sudden arrival of threatening "military men" who take both protagonists away to an undisclosed location, allowing Irina Mazer to put on her coat but not her panties.¹²⁰ The lack of underwear, potentially erotic in a seduction scene, is terrifying and impractical in a scene of arrest, but the transition from one scenario to the other is fluid, taking both Pronin and Mazer by surprise. With the arrival on the scene of what can only be the NKVD, the scene's eroticism, like the contents of Pronin's apartment, becomes the property of the state. Juxtaposing the two fragments, we see that the masculine potency

so comically absent in 1934 reappears in transposed, violent form in 1940, coming between the male protagonist and sexual pleasure with a finality even a disappearing penis could not match. Furthermore, if we consider that sexual and writerly prowess were related, and similarly elusive, for Kharms, we may see that if the “obstacle” to writing lay within the male actor in 1934, by 1940, the narrative and flirtation end at the moment the state interferes.

The inability to attain sexual pleasure itself, either because of material circumstances or simply because of unreciprocated attraction, is the subject of much of Kharms’ writing. In his private writings, joking letters, like the one confessing his love to Tamara Meier, at the time married to fellow OBERIUT Aleksandr Vvedensky (1904-1941), alternate with tortured diary entries.¹²¹ “I love Marina [Malich, his second wife — M.V.] very much, but how awful to be married!” he wrote in 1938. “I am tormented by ‘sex,’ I have nothing to do with women for weeks, sometimes for months.”¹²² When he was not seeking them out as sex partners, Kharms was considering women as philosophical concepts. In 1933, he wrote in code:

Sit down and think about beautiful women.

1. they are unattainable to you.
2. that is all you can say about them.¹²³

He placed women into numbered lists, statements of interests made at informal OBERIU gatherings, and into charts among other, non-human items, such as the one below, from a 1934 notebook:¹²⁴

GOOD	BAD
Mozart	Tchaikovsky, Scriabin
Big-boned women	Thin-boned women

Buxom women	Flat-chested women
Young, healthy, fresh, full-figured, juicy women	Modish, skinny, flexible, overindulged, even demonic women
Meat, milk	Spicy dishes, with vinegar
Humor	Mood
Clothing — simple, comfortable, emphasizing the strength of the figure	Fashionable clothing with little thingies such as trim, with pretensions to luxury

Particularly notable in this connection are Kharms's many disquisitions on female "hygiene," most of which seem to be an excuse to consider his favorite bodily fluid at length. His diaries and notebooks abound with prescriptions and statements of strong preference of the type "A woman should wash, from time to time, only her hips. The interior of her sex organs, however, a woman should never wash! However strong the smells from there."¹²⁵

Kharms's obsession with sexual fluids, which, in spite of his distinctly un-Soviet understanding of feminine hygiene, aligns him with the official discourse he so despised. As we would expect from a masochistic subject who internalizes the dicta of the state even as he appears to subvert them, fluidity was also essential to Kharms' self-conception as a writer. This becomes even clearer if we consider his writings as part of the corpus of other members of OBERIU. For example, Leonid Lipavsky's (1904-1941) "Investigation of Horror" (1930) dwells on the terrifying nature of liquids and semi-liquids like jelly, whose formlessness Lipavsky he considers a sign of "spilled, non-concentrated, unindividuated, and ambiguous life."¹²⁶ Like Kharms, who expressed apparently equal interest in both "cleanliness and filth," Lipavsky tends toward uniting logical opposites. In "Investigation of Horror," he writes,

In the human body, the erotic is that which is frightening. What is frightening is a certain independence of life in tissues and parts of the body: women's legs, say, not just as a means of conveyance, but as an end in themselves, shamelessly live for themselves. [...] There is something simultaneously attractive and disgusting in the puffiness and smoothness of the body, in its pliancy and firmness. The more unspecialized the part of the body, the less it resembles a mechanism for work, the more one can feel its independent life. That is why the female body is more frightening than the male one.¹²⁷

Lipavsky's quivering jelly, which is terrifying because it projects a semblance of life despite its obvious lifelessness, is related to Kharmsian liquids, which seem to escape bodies at the most inopportune time, taking on a life of their own. Echoing Lipavsky's understanding of the erotic, Kharms characterized "the age of sexual maturity" as consisting of "charms" and "'grossnesses [*gadosti*].' But the sexual 'grossnesses' of the opposite sex," he continued, "are by no means disgusting."¹²⁸

In a "pseudo-autobiographical" origin myth, Kharms claims to have been born in the reeds. While "lying naked in the water," he engages a frog in conversation and "they wonder, 'why should we be ashamed of our fine bodies, given to us by nature?'"¹²⁹ Here, water is the perfect environment for a philosophical conversation with an amphibian, a protean creature equally at home in the water and on land. Taking this identification of liquids and people to its logical conclusion, Kharms presents himself as a liquid, or at least as a viscous substance: in 1933-4, he told Tamara Meier that he was "born from caviar," a dangerous state of affairs that nearly led to his being eaten in a sandwich. "For a long time," he added, "my parents avoided putting me in the corner because I would adhere to the wall," becoming part of the architecture.¹³⁰ In March of 1930, he wrote,

Statement X.

One person thinks logically. Many people think FLOWINGLY.

Statement XI.

Though I am alone, I think FLOWINGLY.

That's all
I write high poetry.¹³¹

Here, Kharms conceives of himself as a kind of “army of one,” a self-sufficient collective akin to the nutritive medium that spawned the first life forms on Earth. This conception of himself as a fluid only intensified with time, so that by 1935, Kharms had become “a stream of bright joy” according to his own description.¹³² Fluidity and flow thus became key elements of Kharms’s personal philosophy during the same period as they became integral to Soviet sexuality and labor discourse. Humorous though his fictional accounts of his own birth and childhood may be, they reveal the degree to which fluidity was tied up with the most primal and intimate aspects of his life. Water, ink, and vaginal secretions are by turns pleasurable, philosophical, conducive to writerly productivity, and threatening, distracting, or disgusting.

Kharms, Lipavsky, and Yakov Druskin (1901-1980), among others, exhibited fascination with substances in flux. As Branislav Jakovljevic observes, Kharms and his friends “related the absence of structure and the relative formlessness of certain kinds of matter to the sense of pleasure.”¹³³ This pleasure could be bodily, or it could be intellectual, but in any case, it was often contiguous with unpleasure or at least ambivalence. Such is Kharms’ treatise, originating in a 1937 “letter” addressed to “Yakov Semenovich [Druskin].” It consists of several numbered points, each containing a fragmentary narrative related to what precedes or follows it only through narrator’s cues of the form “and now we will tell another story.” The series begins with a man deliberately smashing his head against “a smithy,” and ends with “a philosopher and the flowing of thoughts.”¹³⁴

8. There stood a barrel with beer, and next to it sat a philosopher and reasoned, “This barrel is filled with beer. The beer ferments [*brodit*] and becomes stronger. And I, with my reason, wander [*brozhu*] along the trans-astral heights and become stronger in spirit. Beer is a drink flowing in space, and I am a drink flowing in time. 9. When the beer is confined [*zakliucheno*] to a barrel, it has nowhere to flow. When time stops, I will get up. 10. But time will not stop, and my flow is immutable. 11. No, it’s better for the beer, too, to flow freely, for it is against the laws of nature for it to stand still.” And with these words the philosopher opened the barrel tap, and the beer spilled out onto the floor.¹³⁵

In this passage, the comical and the philosophical, as well as the pleasing and unpleasing, intertwine: a lofty notion like the freedom of thought is comically equated with the “freedom” of beer to flow whither it will, in this case wastefully onto the floor. Thoughts float along cosmic planes, while their physical manifestation, in this case beer, creates a mess, entering a state of greater entropy and, from the point of view of the floor, greater filth. Moreover, the identification of thought and liquid is so strong that it goes beyond explicit statements (“Beer is a drink flowing in space, and I am a drink flowing in time”) to the very core of language, so that the same verb is playfully used to describe both fermentation and wandering (*brodit*’, which can mean both).

This story juxtaposes the notions of “flowing thought” with conventional, linear thinking. For Lipavsky, too, writing, language, and thought were strongly connected to flow: in his interpretation, “language is a stream that flows out from the speaker and into the world that is its receptacle.” Unlike for Kharmis, for whom this fluid is often a literal, physical substance (beer, ink, etc), the “‘fluid’ that Lipavsky talks about is neither a fresh running stream nor stagnant receding water. It is a dense matter that can be formed and molded.”¹³⁶ For Kharmis, writing in particular is inexorably physical, intimately related to the inkwell, pen, and hand that mediates between them; writing is not “in-scription in the sense of arresting but precisely the opposite: an outpouring and a flow.” Like the

flow of thought, the flow of writing resists logic and rationality — and is, moreover, connected to purity/ cleanliness [*chistota*].¹³⁷ As Kharms wrote to Pugacheva, the indispensable value of “purity of order [*chistota poriadka*]” was “incomprehensible to the rationalistic mind.” It is no accident that, in the same letter, Kharms chose to illustrate his conception of poetic reality with a “crystal vial” of ink. As discussed above, ink is a mystical fluid par excellence, its drying out or disappearance associated with loss of both creative and sexual inspiration.

Kharms saw ink as important not only to writing and desiring, but also to remembering. Its absence serves as an excuse to stop writing or, at least, acts as an impetus to conclude. In a poem he presented at the funeral service of Kazimir Malevich on May 17, 1935, Kharms refers to flow several times: there is the “stream of memory,” which the poem’s addressee has “torn apart;” meanwhile, the speaker requests the addressee’s “eyes,” which he promises to “dissolve on his [i.e., the speaker’s — M.V.] pate;” a “river” is said to have “flowed ten times” before the addressee. The addressee’s “wish” or “desire” [*zhelanie*], which can have a sexual connotation in Russian as in English, also figures prominently in the poem. It is equated with “greasy grub,” represented by the zaum’-like syllable “Pe,” and connected to “memory,” which is compared to an “inkwell.” The poem also contains the line “The inkwell of your desire has ceased.”¹³⁸ Here, ink stands in for blood as the life-giving substance whose drying-out is synonymous with death. Moreover, by the transitive property, memory is linked with wish/ desire, and both to the flow of time, water, and ink.

As is the case with so many Kharmsian symbols, ink is not univocal in its significance. Lack of ink is, in at least one case, tied to the creation, not the destruction

or conclusion, of a text (or a life). Interestingly, this example comes out of Kharm's writing for children, which, as the 1930s wore on, increasingly became one of the only remaining means for former members of OBERIU to eke out a living. In the story "How the Old Lady Was Shopping for Ink," published in 1928 in the children's journal *Chizh*, the titular old lady wanders confusedly all around Leningrad on a fruitless hunt for ink. She ends up what contemporaries would easily recognize as the top floor of the House of the Book, which "[houses] the editorial office of the children's journal *Yozh*," and asks two writers, a fat and a skinny one, for ink. At this point,

The skinny writer agrees to give her a bottle of ink in exchange for the story of her wandering through the city. The lady gets her ink, and the tall, skinny writer writes down the title: "How the Old Lady Was Shopping for Ink."¹³⁹

This "tall and skinny writer," who physically resembles Kharm's and, much like Kharm's, complains about lacking anything to write about, thus trades the material required to physically produce writing (form) for the substance of a story (content). We may conclude that, for Kharm's, the inkwell is as much as "mnemonic aid" to writing as it is a "mechanism of forgetting," in the sense that it is the glance at the inkwell at the moment when the pen must be refilled in order to function that seems to put a stop to writerly production.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the mysterious and unexpected disappearance of the inkwell is a powerful figure for the onset of writer's block, literally the ebb of inspiration.

Juxtaposing Kharm's mentions of ink with his many references to feminine secretions, we see that these substances exist in the same tense economy as the sexual and labor energies familiar to us from Soviet abstinence discourse and the fiction of Platonov. Occasionally, Kharm's explicitly addresses the balance between ink, thought, and sexuality, as in the poem "To My Wife" (1930), in which lovemaking and writing appear

as incompatible.¹⁴¹ The poetic “I,” evidently after a long, unproductive break (“Long did I not sit down and write”) finally sits down at his desk. At this point, we might expect that his pencil will disappear, or that he will fall off his chair, or that he will simply continue doing nothing, like the man from the 1931 fragment who “sat down at the table on which lay diaries [*zapisnye knizhki*] and blank sheets of paper, [...] a little tray with assorted inkwells, a crystal glass with pencils and quill pens” and then “spent about three hours [...] doing nothing” so that “even from his face you could tell he wasn’t thinking about anything.”¹⁴² Though nothing like this happens, work cannot begin because the speaker becomes distracted by desire for his wife, ultimately giving in to the temptation to kiss her “between the legs/ where the juice of love flows.” This “juice” is so preternaturally abundant that its intoxicating “aromas” fill the room, apparently foreclosing any possibility of work. “But enough!” exclaims the speaker, breaking the spell. “Where are paper and ink?” he asks. The “aromas” literally fly out the window, and order is restored in the writerly universe:

Я за стол и ну писать	To the desk! Writing’s a go,
Давай буквы составлять	Gonna put together signs
Давай дергать за верёвку	Gonna yank and yank that rope
Смыслы разные сплетать.	Weaving meanings of all kinds.

At first glance, this whimsical love lyric seems straightforward: a man almost fails to get his writing done because his wife is too sexy to ignore! In the end, his strong work ethic prevails and he is able to return to writing. On closer inspection, however, the narrative seems to assert the opposite. The poet’s wife takes him away not from the task of writing, but from a standstill in which no writing is taking place. Though the woman’s “aromas” dissipate, the effect of her interlude with the speaker is instantaneous and

salutary, from the point of view of his writing. It is only when he has slaked his thirst for her fluids that ink can begin to flow again, and it is fitting to follow Jakovljevic in characterizing oral sex in this poem as equal parts “pleasure” and “nutrition.”¹⁴³ Moreover, the writing that the poet eventually engages in is not entirely free from sexual elements, proceeding as it does through a masturbatory gesture of “[yanking].”

Indeed, it is not the fulfillment of lust that blocks the transfer of ink onto the page, but rather sexual frustration, as a poetic fragment from 1931 makes clear:

Wherefore do you sit
Looking at me not at all
While I, having put a little sign on paper
Am dreaming only of your moisture
Does my come-hither glance by chance affect
you?
Does passion penetrate your breast?
You're looking over here more often
So hurry dearest and be mine.¹⁴⁴

Почто сидишь
и на меня нисколько не глядишь
а я значок поставив на бумаге
лишь о твоей мечтаю влаге
ужель затронул вдруг тебя мой взгляд
манящий
ужели страсть в твою проникла грудь
и ты глядишь теперь сюда все чаще
так поскорей же милая моею будь.

Thematically, this later piece serves as a prequel to the moment described in the earlier one: here, the woman is not yet seduced, her “moisture” available, at least for the moment, only to the speaker’s imagination. Accordingly, nothing is getting written, apart from a “little sign [*znachok*].” It is almost as though the most important fluid for writing is not ink at all: in this interpretation, the dipping of the pen into the inkwell becomes a penetrative gesture, and the woman becomes the source of the “ink” Kharms most needs to get his own creative juices flowing.

Kharms connects erotic flow not only to productivity or the lack thereof, but also to more serious losses. An elegiac poem written in 1933 (two years before the one dedicated to the memory of Malevich) portrays a lonely “traveler,” a forefather, perhaps,

of the one depicted in “A Man left Home:” both are solitary, travel through wilderness, and carry a “bag [*sumka*]” and a weapon (in one case, a “club” and in the other, bullets). In any case, 1933’s traveler, wandering around “in the midnight hour,” encounters a “sinful [*porochnyi*]” flower filled with “moisture” and sensual “bliss [*nega*].” The traveler immediately grabs a bullet and throws it at the flower, interrupting its flow. As he flees the scene, he assumes a pose of classically poetic regret tinged with zaum’-style “nonsense,” crying, “Ah, whence the bliss/ In that flower growing from.”¹⁴⁵ This poem recalls the one dedicated to Malevich not only in its use of zaum’ syllables, but also through the nexus of (abruptly ceasing) desire and liquidity, in this case in the vaginal figure of an oversized, moist flower whose internal and external flow (ie, both its internal moisture and its floating through space) are interrupted through murderous penetration.

Even as rhetoric on both writing and sex became increasingly outwardly oriented (both in the abstinence-obsessed 1920s and the natalist 1930s), Kharms’s own writings grew ever more private. At the same time, their continued focus on liquids guaranteed that they remained in dialogue with public discourse on labor and sexuality. Like Platonov, moreover, Kharms continued exploring the protean quality of liquids through the 1930s without regard to the move away from fluidity in official discourse. As the poem about the moist flower, the one dedicated to Malevich, and the treatise on flowing beer make clear, weakness and strength, flow and its interruption, even “cleanliness and filth” are, for Kharms, two sides of the same coin.¹⁴⁶ So deep was Kharms’s commitment to uniting apparently mutually exclusive notions that it seeped into his very name, which is an equally plausible relative of both “harm” and “charm.” Kharms’ liquids, as read through both Lipavsky’s philosophy and his own private notes, take on the aspect of the

Kantian sublime: on the one hand, they threaten to overwhelm, to infect the heretofore differentiated subject with their fatal formlessness; on the other, this very formlessness and capacity for free flow is what gives liquids their special magic, their function as the elixir of creativity.

Kharms, unlike Platonov, harbored few illusions about the possibility of his integration into the Soviet literary establishment. His private writings abound with dark predictions about the future: “But the heart runs toward the bullet, and the throat raves of the razor blade” (1925) (a quotation from Mayakovsky);¹⁴⁷ “In all likelihood, my whole life will pass in awful poverty” (1926);¹⁴⁸ “I know that great troubles await me in the nearest future, troubles that will make my whole life significantly worse than it has been up to this point” (1928).¹⁴⁹ These foreboding remarks make clear that Kharms was not a solipsist dedicated to an anachronistic journey of philosophical self-discovery, but an author pursuing an aesthetic program. On the other hand, he was also no mere subverter of norms who combined the “nameless world of Kafka and the specific world of Stalin” in order to “[force] the reader to confront the absurdity, cruelty, and brutality of Stalinism in the real world.”¹⁵⁰ Subversive though some of Kharms’ texts may be, his oeuvre engages with Stalinist ideology, particularly its discourse of liquidity, in a way that is only partly parodic. Kharms’ lifelong ambivalence toward flow and his desire to harness it echoes similar tendencies in the official discourse. Like Platonov, Kharms internalized and took pleasure in Stalinist norms even as his writing staged his resistance to them.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

¹ Platonov, *The Return and Other Stories*, 67-8. *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, 112-13. I have slightly modified Robert and Elizabeth Chandler’s translation.

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- ² Seifrid, *Uncertainties of Spirit*, 181.
- ³ See for instance Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 13.
- ⁴ Platonov, *The Return and Other Stories*, 70.
- ⁵ Platonov, *The Return and Other Stories*, 88-9.
- ⁶ Platonov, *The Return and Other Stories*, 85.
- ⁷ Platonov, *The Return and Other Stories*, 88.
- ⁸ Seifrid, *Uncertainties of Spirit*, 4.
- ⁹ Banerjee 115.
- ¹⁰ Chandler 155-6.
- ¹¹ Seifrid, *A Companion to The Foundation Pit*, 44. See also Langerak, *Mir tvorchestva*, 203.
- ¹² Seifrid, *Uncertainties of Spirit*, 7.
- ¹³ For more on Platonov and his influences, see Banerjee, Borenstein, Etkind (*Khlyst*), Günther, Naiman ("Inadmissibility of Desire"), Seifrid, Zolotonosov, and others.
- ¹⁴ Borenstein 196.
- ¹⁵ Langerak, *Mir tvorchestva*, 200.
- ¹⁶ Langerak, *Mir tvorchestva*, 193.
- ¹⁷ Seifrid, *A Companion to The Foundation Pit*, 97.
- ¹⁸ Gorham 163.
- ¹⁹ Gorham 165.
- ²⁰ «Напечатание этого рассказа в <<Октябре>> (и уже тем паче без одновременной развернутой и жестокой критики его) является безусловно ошибкой, ибо <<Усомнившийся Макар>> произведение даже и не попутническое.» (*Vospominaniia sovremennikov*, 256)
- ²¹ «Редакции не могло быть не известно политическое лицо писателя Платонова, опубликовавшего кулацкий рассказ в журнале «Октябрь» - «Усомнившийся Макар»» (*Bol'shaia tsenzura*, 212-13)
- ²² *Ia prozhl zhizn'*, 287-8.
- ²³ Seifrid, *A Companion to the Foundation Pit*, 25.
- ²⁴ Naiman, "Inadmissibility of Desire," 339.
- ²⁵ Bullock 151.
- ²⁶ Seifrid, *A Companion to the Foundation Pit*, 27.
- ²⁷ Semenova, *Mir tvorchestva*, 149.
- ²⁸ «Воцев стоял с робостью перед глазами шествия этих неизвестных ему, взволнованных детей; он стыдился, что пионеры, наверное, знают и чувствуют больше его, потому что дети - это время, созревающее в свежем теле, а он, Воцев, устраняется спешащей, действующей молодостью в тишину безвестности, как тщетная попытка жизни добиться своей цели. И Воцев почувствовал стыд и энергию - он захотел немедленно открыть всеобщий, долгий смысл жизни, чтобы жить впереди детей, быстрее их смуглых ног, наполненных твердой нежностью. Одна пионерка выбежала из рядов в прилегающую к кузнице ржаную ниву и там сорвала растение. Во время своего действия маленькая женщина нагнулась, обнажив родинку на опухающем теле, и с легкостью неощутимой силы исчезла мимо, оставляя сожаление в двух зрителях - Воцеве и калеке. Воцев поглядел на

инвалида; у того надулось лицо безвыходной кровью, он простонал звук и пошевелил рукою в глубине кармана.» (Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* 112)

²⁹ Seifrid, *Uncertainties of Spirit*, 66-7, 109, 111.

³⁰ «сущность такого человека состояла, приблизительно говоря, из сахара, разведенного в моче, тогда как настоящий пролетарский человек должен иметь в своем составе серную кислоту, дабы он мог сжечь всю капиталистическую стерву, занимающую землю.» (Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* 198)

³¹ Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 34.

³² «— Они говорят, [...] что у меня женщины нету, — с трудом обиды сказал Козлов, — что я ночью под одеялом сам себя люблю, а днем от пустоты тела жить не гожусь. Они ведь, как говорится, все знают!» (Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* 119)

³³ «— Чего ж я скажу ребенку, стервец. Я гляжу на детей для памяти, потому что помру скоро. — Это, наверно, на капиталистическом сражении тебя повредили, — тихо проговорил Воцев. — Хотя калеки тоже стариками бывают, я их видел. Увечный человек обратил свои глаза на Воцева, в которых сейчас было зверство превосходящего ума; увечный вначале даже помолчал от обозления на прохожего, а потом сказал с медленностью ожесточения: — Старики такие бывают, а вот калечных таких, как ты, — нету. — Я на войне настоящей не был, — сказал Воцев. — Тогда б и я вернулся оттуда не полностью весь. — Вижу, что ты не был: откуда же ты дурак! Когда мужик войны не видел, то он вроде нерожавшей бабы — идиотом живет. Тебя ж сквозь скорлупу всего заметно!» (Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'*, 113)

³⁴ Chandler 212.

³⁵ Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* 158.

³⁶ «скорей надо рыть землю и ставить дом, а то умрешь и не поспеешь. Пусть сейчас жизнь уходит, как течение дыхания, но зато посредством устройства дома ее можно организовать впрок - для будущего неподвижного счастья и для детства.» (Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* 124)

³⁷ «Чиклин все время держал Настю при себе [...] —Из меня отовсюду сок пошел,— сказала Настя. —Неси меня скорее к маме, пожилой дурак! Мне скучно!» (Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* 193)

³⁸ «Поэтому Платонов и ввел в повесть смерть ребенка, в русском культурно-философском обиходе означавшую безнравственность основываемого на нем социального творения. "Здание судьбы человеческой" (как торжественно выразился Иван Карамазов), в фундаменте имевшее замученное "крохотное созданыице", не имело права на существование.» (Zolotonosov, *Mir tvorchestva*, 276)

³⁹ Meerson 34.

⁴⁰ Meerson 25.

⁴¹ «Первой жертвой разговоров об утопии — желаемой или уже обретенной — прежде всего становится грамматика, ибо язык, не поспевая за такого рода мыслью, задыхается в сослагательном наклонении и начинает тяготеть к вневременным категориям и конструкциям; вследствие чего даже у простых существительных почва уходит из-под ног и вокруг них возникает ореол условности. Именно это

непрерывно происходит в прозе Платонова, про которую можно с уверенностью сказать, что каждая ее фраза заводит русский язык в смысловой тупик или, вернее, обнаруживает тяготение к тупику, тупиковую философию в самом языке.»

(Brodsky 201-2)

⁴² Chandler 173, 176.

⁴³ For more on “re-familiarization” in Platonov’s prose, see Meerson 21-37.

⁴⁴ «Тогда я начал работать над новой книгой, проверяя себя, ловя на каждой фразе и каждом положении, мучительно и медленно, одолевая инерцию лжи и пошлости, которая еще владеет мною, которая враждебна пролетариату и колхозникам. В результате труда и нового, т. е. пролетарского, подхода к действительности, мне становилось всё более легко и свободно точно я возвращался домой из чужих мест» (*Ia prozhil zhizn'*, 285-6)

⁴⁵ Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 64.

⁴⁶ «Чтоб истреблять целые страны, не нужно воевать, нужно лишь так бояться соседей, так строить воен<ную> промышленность, так третировать население, так работать на военные запасы, что население все погибнет от экономически безрезультатного труда, а горы продуктов, одежды, машин и снарядов останутся на месте человечества, вместо могильного холма и памятника.» (Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 103-4)

⁴⁷ «Она чувствовала вблизи несущееся, горячее движение, у нее поднималось сердце от ветра всеобщей стремящейся жизни, но она не могла выговорить слов своей радости и теперь стояла и просила научить ее этим словам, этому уменью чувствовать в голове весь свет, чтобы помогать ему светиться.» (Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* 188)

⁴⁸ In 1931, Platonov wrote in his diary: «Страна темна, а человек в ней светится» (Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 70)

⁴⁹ Seifrid, *A Companion to the Foundation Pit*, 161-2.

⁵⁰ «В «Котловане» же можно увидеть целый «диалог» со Сталиным, диалог, в котором пародируются язык и идеи статей и выступлений «мужикоборца» в 1929-1930 годах. Сталин: «Новое и решающее в нынешнем колхозном движении состоит в том, что в колхозы идут крестьяне не отдельными группами, как это имело место раньше, а целыми селами, волостями, районами, даже округами. А что это значит? Это значит, что в колхозы пошел середняк ...» Платонов: «Все смолкли, в терпении продолжая ночь, лишь активист немолчно писал, и достижения все более расстилались перед его сознательным умом, так что он уже полагал про себя: «Ущерб приносишь Союзу, пассивный дьявол, мог бы весь район отправить на коллективизацию, а ты в одном колхозе горюешь; пора уж целыми эшелонами население в социализм отправлять, а ты все узкими масштабами стараешься. Эх горе!»» (Zolotonosov, *Mir tvorchestva*, 272)

⁵¹ Günther 94.

⁵² Seifrid, *A Companion to the Foundation Pit*, 26.

⁵³ «—Нет, надо самокритику ввести в здоровое русло придать энергии народа плановый темп! — Русло тоже дело ненадежное, — сказал кирсановец, представив

себе, должно быть, русло речное. — Реки иной раз размывают свои русла.» (Platonov, "Che-che-O," 204)

⁵⁴ «Потребность проливать слезы над чужим горем у Платонова настолько сильна и ненасытна, что он неумоимо и изощренно вызывает в своем воображении самые мрачные картины, самые жалостливые положения. В этом отношении, подгоняемая болезненным состраданием, фантазия художника не знает и не хочет знать никаких ограничений. В пол ном самозабвении тянется она ко всему скорбному, к ночи, к смерти, к нищете. С какой-то сладостной мукой скрещивает Платонов в одной судьбе все существующие на земле пути одиночества. Он сгущает краски, преувеличивает, чтобы вызвать в читателе единственное из известных писателю наслаждений — чувство *жалости*.» (Gurvich, *Vospominaniia sovremennikov*, 358)

⁵⁵ Gurvich, *Vospominaniia sovremennikov*, 369.

⁵⁶ «Большевик Платонова это губка, которая должна быть высушена до предела, чтобы суметь впитать в себя как можно большее количество человеческих слез.» (Gurvich, *Vospominaniia sovremennikov*, 370)

⁵⁷ See, for example, the letter to M.P. Frinsonskii from 1938: «Мой сын болен. У него несколько раз была трепанация черепа в связи с мастоидитом среднего уха: очаг болезни до сих пор окончательно не залечен, и я думаю, что продукты этого гнойного очага проникают в мозг (место трепанации - на голове, за левым ухом), отчего происходит отравление мозга; последнее обстоятельство, конечно, должно болезненно влиять на психику сына.» (Platonov, *Ia prozhil zhizn'*, 443)

⁵⁸ Sengoopta 472, Weininger 19 and 28.

⁵⁹ «Мыслитель Отто Вейнингер, вышедший из недр буржуазии, в своей книге «Пол и характер» проклял женщину. «Мужчина, представляющий собою олицетворение низости, стоит бесконечно выше наиболее возвышенной из женщин», — написал он и, развивая мысль, утверждал, что существование женщин — одна случайность и насмешка, и доказал это распространенностью сводничества среди женщин. Мужчинам Вейнингер отдал все, что отнял у женщины, но забыл, что если женщины — сводницы, то тогда мужчины —снохачи. Я бы мог опровергнуть его книгу от начала до конца, но сделаю это в другом месте. Нас эта книга интересует только как вопль погибающего, ибо, вынув душу из мира — женщину, Вейнингер зашатался и исчез в вихре безумия (он убил себя юношей).» (Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel'* 534-5)

⁶⁰ Langerak, *Mir tvorchestva*, 197.

⁶¹ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 54.

⁶² «Я работаю. Иногда меня питает энергия остервенения, чтобы выбраться на чистую независимую воду жизни.» (Platonov, *Ia prozhil zhizn'*, 228)

⁶³ «Все искусство заключено в том, чтобы выйти за пределы собственной головы, наполненной жалким, жидким, усталым веществом.» (Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 101)

⁶⁴ «Усевшись, Фаддей Кириллович, однако, почувствовал страшную пустоту в мозгу, будто там ливни работы смыли всю плодородную почву и нечем было питаться зелени его творчества.» (Platonov, *Rasskazy. Povesti. 1921-1934*, 153)

⁶⁵ «Как музыка, лилась работа у Кирпичникова, как любовь, он ощущал в себе страсть к неуловимому нежному телу — эфиру. Когда он писал пояснительную записку “О возможности и нормах дополнительного питания электронов”, то чувствовал аппетит, и его полные юношеские губы бессознательно смачивались слюной.» (Platonov, *Rassказы. Povesti. 1921-1934*, 209)

⁶⁶ «Но Кирпичников изобретал не одной головой, а также сердцем и кровью, поэтому Валентина в нем возбуждала только легкое чувство тоски. Силы его сердца были мобилизованы на другое.» (Platonov, *Rassказы. Povesti. 1921-1934*, 211)

⁶⁷ «человек, как хуй — он сбрасывает нечистоты и производит будущее. Хуй — самое яркое выражение жизни.» (Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 102)

⁶⁸ «Я хочу добиться, чтобы обойтись без исполнительных механизмов и без всяких посредников, а действовать на природу прямо и непосредственно — голой пертурбацией мозга. Я уверен в успехе техники без машин. Я знаю, что достаточно одного контакта между человеком и природой — мысли, — чтобы управлять всем веществом мира! Понял?.. Я поясню. Видишь, в каждом теле есть такое место, такое сердечко, что если дать по нем щелчком — все тело твоё: делай с ним что хочешь! А если язвить тело как нужно и где нужно, то оно будет само делать то, что его заставишь!» (Platonov, “Efirnyi trakt,” 174-6)

⁶⁹ Naiman, *A Hundred Years of Andrei Platonov*, Vol. 1, 99.

⁷⁰ Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, 63.

⁷¹ «Он пришел подавленный скорбью устройства человеческого тела, сжимающего в своих костях гораздо более страдания и смерти, чем жизни и движения.» (Platonov, *Schastlivaia Moskva*, 38)

⁷² «после потери ноги и болезни у [Москвы] появилась разная блажь [...] Она, например, каждый день мыла себе голову, потому что все время чувствовала в волосах грязь и даже плакала от огорчения, что грязь никак не проходит.» (Platonov, *Schastlivaia Moskva*, 82)

⁷³ «Самбикину было ясно, что разверстое, с тысячами рассеченных сосущих кровеносных сосудов, горячее, беззащитное тело больного жадно вбирало в себя стрептококков отовсюду — из воздуха, а особенно — из инструмента, который стерилизовать начисто невозможно. Нужно было дано перейти на электрическую хирургию — входить в тело и кости чистым и мгновенным, синим пламенем вольтовой дуги — тогда все, что носит смерть, само будет убито и новые стрептококки, проникнув в раны, найдут в них сожженную пустыню, а не питательную среду.» (Platonov, *Schastlivaia Moskva*, 34)

⁷⁴ «Самбикин пошел в ванну, разделся там и с удивлением оглядел свое тело юноши, затем пробормотал что-то и залез в холодную воду. Вода умиротворила его, но он тут же понял, насколько человек еще самодельное, немощно устроенное существо — не более как смутный зародыш и проект чего-то более действительного, и сколько надо еще работать, чтобы развернуть из этого зародыша летящий, высший образ, погребенный в нашей мечте...» (Platonov, *Schastlivaia Moskva*, 36)

⁷⁵ *Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 2, 129.

⁷⁶ *Novaia anatomiia*, 334.

⁷⁷ *Novaia anatomiia*, 151.

⁷⁸ *Novaia anatomiia*, 350.

⁷⁹ «В отношении зауми (и просто в отношении герметичных, «невнятных» стихов) у советской юстиции (и у официально-погромной критики) в 1930-1940-е годы существовало два подхода. Первый заключался в том, что всякая заумь или невнятица — прямая шифровка, направленная неведомому контрреволюционному адресату.» (Shubinskii 319)

⁸⁰ *Tigr na ulitse*, 328.

⁸¹ *Tigr na ulitse*, 41.

⁸² Some scholars deny that there is anything to the “*do nos/ donos*” theory, including Anna Gerasimova: see Gerasimova, Anna. “Kak sdelan ‘Vrun’ Kharmisa.” Umka.ru. <http://www.umka.ru/liter/950701.html> Accessed 03 Mar. 2015.

⁸³ *Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 2, 170.

⁸⁴ See, for instance, the schedules he wrote out to himself, whose aim was to discipline his body in the service of his writing mind: (*Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 1, 13, 41, 182) and his joking “contract” with Vvedensky, which stipulated that Kharms would be entirely in his friend’s command for two days “in terms of drinking and nights” (*Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 1, 103). Also notable in terms of their repetitive, clownish physical antics, which can be read as parodies on the posings of Taylorized labor, are the “Falling Old Women” (1936-7) and the ritualistic, ultimately murderous dancing in the undated “Mashkin Killed Koshkin.” (*Novaia anatomiia* 334-5, 355)

⁸⁵ See, for instance, the almost interminable falling in “Falling [*Upadanie*] (Near and Far)” (1940); the repetitive, anticlimactic “letter” beginning “Dear Nikandr Andreevich,” (1933), which is constructed entirely of circumlocutions ending with “Say hello to your new wife” (*Novaia anatomiia*, 244-5, 71-3); or the 1935 story about the little girl Lidochka and her possible molestation by an old man who snatches her from under the nose of her inattentive nanny and drags her to his lair. At this point, the narrative begins to dwell on the moments presumably preceding her molestation, breaking off suddenly when Kharms himself was evidently unable to stand the tension (the original manuscript bears the remark “I wanted to write something vile and did. But I won’t keep writing: it’s too vile”). The story then resumes, after a temporal lacuna, at a point in time when Lidochka has been miraculously saved from her abuser. The substance of what happened to her is thus elided. (*Novaia anatomiia*, 121-6 and 396)

⁸⁶ The most salient example is the story “Historical Episode” (1939), which purports to be about Ivan Susanin, a “historical personage who lay down his life for the czar,” who had recently been reintroduced onto the cultural scene through the revival of Mikhail Glinka’s (1804-1857) opera “A Life for the Tsar” (1836) (*Novaia anatomiia*, 358-61). In fact, the story’s fake archaisms, deliberate anachronisms (like the entrecote Susanin supposedly orders at a tavern), and scatological humor reveal that it is, above all, a “[rude mockery of] everything in the clumsy nationalistic aesthetic of mature Stalinism.” (Shubinskii 455) Another set of examples involves Kharms’ pieces involving famous authors, both dead (Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy) and living (Aleksei Tolstoy). These pieces tend to name and apparently praise the illustrious personage at their center, only to subvert readers’ expectations of literary hagiography with absurd, inappropriate, or

simply meaningless “alternative histories.” The logical conclusion of the “misbehaving classic” trope may be found in “On Pushkin.” Kharms wrote this piece in December 1936, at the height of nationwide preparations for the 1937 Pushkin Jubilee, when Kharms, as Valerii Sazhin notes, was struggling to produce a Jubilee-ready Pushkin homily for the children’s journal *Murzilka* (*Novaia anatomiiia* 403, *Tigr na ulitse* 297). In this piece, a hemming and hawing on the greatness of Pushkin relative to such figures as Gogol, Napoleon, Bismarck, and all three tsar Alexanders ends with the words “But it’s somehow insulting to write about Pushkin after Gogol. Whereas one can’t write about Gogol. That’s why I’d better not write anything about anyone.” (*Novaia anatomiiia*, 159) As in the case of the gradual, feature-by-feature elimination of the “Red-haired man” (1937), “On Pushkin” not only shows how past-glorifying Soviet cultural construction arrives at a dead end when its hero-worship becomes too extreme, but also illustrates the disintegration of meaning in the face of political pressure to sing the praises of a given figure or phenomenon. See also Cornwell 18.

⁸⁷ One of his favorite spots was the Buddhist temple in Staraia Derevnia just outside Petersburg, a location the narrator of “The Old Woman” passes by on his train out of town. (Kobrinskii 404; *Novaia anatomiiia*, 291)

⁸⁸ *Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 2, 157.

⁸⁹ Glotser 44.

⁹⁰ Kobrinskii 277.

⁹¹ *Novaia anatomiiia* 254-5.

⁹² *Novaia anatomiiia*, 27.

⁹³ «И вот однажды на заре/ Вошел он в темный лес./ И с той поры,/ И с той поры,/ И с той поры исчез.» (*Tigr na ulitse*, 69-70) For more on this period in Kharms’ life, see *Polet v nebesa* 553-4 and Kobrinskii 497.

⁹⁴ Kobrinskii 495 and *Polet v nebesa* 551.

⁹⁵ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 352-3.

⁹⁶ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 68-9.

⁹⁷ *Polet v nebesa*, 483-4.

⁹⁸ Kobrinskii 275.

⁹⁹ A term Bakhtin first coined and explicated in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*.

¹⁰⁰ As quoted in Cornwell 47, translated by Anatolii Aleksandrov with my edits. The statement originates in a diary entry of October 31, 1937, and in Russian reads «Меня интересует только „чушь“; только то, что не имеет никакого практического смысла. Меня интересует жизнь только в своем нелепом проявлении. Геройство, пафос, удаль, мораль, гигиеничность, нравственность, умиление и азарт — ненавистные для меня слова и чувства. Но я вполне понимаю и уважаю: восторг и восхищение, вдохновение и отчаяние, страсть и сдержанность, распутство и целомудрие, печаль и горе, радость и смех.»

¹⁰¹ The first lines of “Article,” written between 1936 and 1938, read: Прав был император Александр Вильбердат, отгораживая в городах особое место для детей и их матерей, где им пребывать только и разрешалось. Беременные бабы тоже сажались туда же, за загородку, и не оскорбляли своим гнусным видом взоров мирного населения.

¹⁰² In the original, this reads, “13 марта 1934 года в специальном зале Пуб[личной] библ[иотеки] я стоял и рассматривал каталоги. Рядом со мной стояла барышня в зеленой кофточке. [...] От барышни шел какой-то возбуждающий меня ток. Но барышня была чем-то мне неприятна. Вдруг я узнал в ней мою красавицу с пляжа. Я пригляделся к ней внимательнее и увидел, что она теперь беременна. Вот чем она неприятна...” (Vol’pe 49)

¹⁰³ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 228.

¹⁰⁴ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 232.

¹⁰⁵ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 222.

¹⁰⁶ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 150.

¹⁰⁷ Kobrinskii 368.

¹⁰⁸ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 112-13.

¹⁰⁹ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 25.

¹¹⁰ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 134-5.

¹¹¹ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 345.

¹¹² «Можно предположить, что образ столяра и столярного клея был как-то связан у Хармса с представлением о мужской силе, а поломка мебели или падение самого столяра - с упадком этой силы или неудачами в половой сфере.» (Анна Герасимова, <http://www.umka.ru/liter/950701.html>)

¹¹³ Shubinskii 270.

¹¹⁴ From a diary entry dating to his exile in Kursk: “I am even unable to direct my thoughts elsewhere. I try to read. But what I’m reading suddenly becomes transparent and I again see my fear. [«Мне даже не удастся отвлечь мысли в сторону. Я пробую читать. Но то, что я читаю, становится вдруг прозрачным и я опять вижу свой страх.»]” (*Novaia anatomiiia*, 57)

¹¹⁵ Nakhimovsky 63.

¹¹⁶ A diary entry from April 1937 reads, “Enough of idleness and loafing! Every day, open this notebook and write no less than half a page into it. If there is nothing to write down, then at least follow Gogol’s advice and write that today nothing can be written. Write always with interest and look upon writing as a holiday. [«Довольно праздности и безделья! Каждый день раскрывай эту тетрадку и вписывай сюда не менее полстраницы. Если нечего записать, то запиши хотя бы по совету Гоголя, что сегодня ничего не пишется. Пиши всегда с интересом и смотри на писание как на праздник.»]” (*Sborishche družei*, vol. 2, 352)

¹¹⁷ He writes, “At that moment, Auntie took the ink away from me. [«В этот момент тетушка отобрала у меня чернила.»]” (*Polet v nebesa* 465)

¹¹⁸ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 216.

¹¹⁹ In the original, this reads «Однако на этом автор заканчивает повествование, так как не может отискать [*sic*] своей чернильницы.» (*Novaia anatomiiia*, 233)

¹²⁰ *Novaia anatomiiia*, 241-2.

¹²¹ On December 5, 1930 Kharms wrote: “Dear Tamara Aleksandrovna, I love you. I wanted to tell you that yesterday, but you told me that I have spots all over my forehead and I felt uncomfortable. But later, as you were eating a turnip, I mused: ‘All right, I don’t have a pretty forehead, but Tamarochka is not a goddess either.’ I said that to myself in

order to calm down. But essentially, you are a goddess — tall, beautiful, intelligent, a bit cunning, and priceless. [«Дорогая Тамара Александровна, Я люблю Вас. Я вчера, даже, хотел Вам это сказать, но Вы сказали, что у меня на лбу всегда какая-то сыпь и мне стало неловко. Но потом, когда Вы ели редьку, я подумал: "Ну хорошо, у меня некрасивый лоб, но зато ведь и Тamarочка не богиня". Это я только для успокоения подумал. А на самом деле Вы богиня, – высокая, стройная, умная, чуть лукавая и совершенно не оцененная!»]” (*Sborishche družei*, vol. 2, 409-10)

¹²² *Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 2, 198.

¹²³ *Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 2, 32.

¹²⁴ *Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 2, 93.

ХОРОШО	ПЛОХО
Моцарт	Чайковский, Скрябин
Ширококостые женщины	Тонкокостые женщины
Грудастые женщины	Плоскогрудые
Молодые, здоровые, свежие, полные, сочные женщины	Стильные, худые, гибкие, изнеженные, даже демонические женщины
Мясо, молоко	Острые блюда, с уксусом
Юмор	Настроение
Платье — простое, удобное, подчеркивающее силу в фигуре	Платье модное, с мелкими штучками в виде отделки, с претензией на роскошь

¹²⁵ *Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 2, 12.

¹²⁶ Jakovljevic 106.

¹²⁷ In the original, this reads: «В человеческом теле эротично то, что страшно.

Страшна же некоторая самостоятельность жизни тканей и частей тела; женские ноги, скажем, не только средство для передвижения, но и самоцель, бесстыдно живут для самих себя. В ногах девочки этого нет. И именно потому в них нет и завлекательности. Есть нечто притягивающее и вместе отвратительное в припухлости и гладкости тела, в его податливости и упругости. Чем неспециализированнее часть тела, чем менее походит она на рабочий механизм, тем сильнее чувствуется ее собственная жизнь. Поэтому женское тело страшнее мужского; ноги страшнее рук, особенно это видно на пальцах ног.» (*Sborishche družei*, vol. 1, 76)

¹²⁸ In the original, this reads, “Возраст половой зрелости имеет свои прелести и «гадости.» Но половые «гадости» противоположного пола отнюдь не противны.” (Vol’pe 41)

¹²⁹ Jakovljevic 74.

¹³⁰ Jakovljevic 162.

¹³¹ Jakovljevic 40. In the original, this reads «Один человек думает логически; много людей думают ТЕКУЧЕ. XI утверждение. Я хоть и один, но думаю ТЕКУЧЕ. всё. Я пишу высокие стихи.» (*Sborishche družei*, vol. 2, 333)

¹³² Vol’pe 205.

¹³³ Jakovljevic 40.

¹³⁴ Jakovljevic 72.

¹³⁵ In the original, this reads: «8. Стояла бочка с пивом, а рядом сидел философ и рассуждал: "Эта бочка наполнена пивом. Пиво бродит и крепнет. И я своим разумом брожу по надзвездным вершинам и крепну духом. Пиво есть напиток, текущий в пространстве, я же есть напиток, текущий во времени. 9. Когда пиво заключено в бочке, ему некуда течь. Остановится время, и я встану. 10. Но не остановится время, и мое течение непреложно. 11. Нет, уж пусть лучше и пиво течет свободно, ибо противно законам природы стоять ему на месте". И с этими словами философ открыл кран в бочке, и пиво вылилось на пол.» (*Sborishche družei*, vol. 2, 405)

¹³⁶ Jakovljevic 66.

¹³⁷ Jakovljevic 72-3.

¹³⁸ In the original, this reads, «Прекратилась чернильница желания твоего.» (*Polet v nebesa*, 166)

¹³⁹ Jakovljevic 167-8.

¹⁴⁰ Jakovljevic 202.

¹⁴¹ In full, the poem reads:

«Давно я не садился и не писал
Я расслабленный свисал
Из руки перо валялось
На меня жена садилась
Я отпихивал бумагу
Цаловал свою жену
Предо мной сидящу нагу
Соблюдая тишину.
Цаловал жену я в бок
В шею в грудь и под живот
Прямо чмокал между ног
Где любовный сок течёт
А жена меня стыдливо
Обнимала тёплой ляжкой
И в лицо мне прямо лила
Сок любовный как из фляжки
Я стонал от нежной страсти
И глотал тягучий сок
И жена стонала вместе
Утирая слезы с ног.
И прижав к моим губам
Две трепещущие губки
Изгибалась пополам
От стыда скрываясь в юбке.
По щекам моим бежали
Струйки нежные стократы

И по комнате летали
Женских ласок ароматы.
Но довольно! Где перо?
Где бумага и чернила?
Аромат летит в окно,
В страхе милая вскочила.
Я за стол и ну писать
Давай буквы составлять
Давай дергать за верёвку
Смыслы разные сплетать.» (Vol'pe 127)

¹⁴² *Novaia anatomia*, 49.

¹⁴³ Jakovljevic 90.

¹⁴⁴ Vol'pe 149.

¹⁴⁵ In the original, this poem reads:

«Ходит путник в час полночный,
прячет в сумку хлеб и сыр,
а над ним цветок порочный
вырастает в воздух пр.
Сколько влаги, сколько неги
в том цветке, растущем из
длинной птицы, в быстром беге
из окна летящей вниз.
Вынул путник тут же сразу
пулю — дочь высоких скал.
Поднял путник пулю к глазу,
бросил пули и скакал.
Пуля птице впилась в тело,
образуя много дыр.
Больше птица не летела
и цветок не плавал пр.
Только путник в быстром беге
повторял и вверх и вниз:
"Ах, откуда столько неги
в том цветке, растущем из".» (*Aviatsiia prevrashchenii*, 305-6)

¹⁴⁶ Jakovljevic 11.

¹⁴⁷ «А сердце рвется к выстрелу. А горло бредит бритвою.» (*Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 1, 34)

¹⁴⁸ «По всей вероятности, вся моя жизнь пройдет в страшной бедности и хорошо жить я буду только пока я дома, а потом, может быть, если доживу лет до 35-40.» (*Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 1, 69)

¹⁴⁹ «Я знаю, что в ближайшее же время меня ждут очень крупные неприятности, которые всю мою жизнь сделают значительно хуже, чем она была до сих пор.» (*Zapisnye knizhki*, vol. 1, 231)

¹⁵⁰ See Cornwell 89.

Conclusion

What do we learn about twentieth-century political authoritarianism if we class its “ideal” subjects as masochistic — and what does it mean for a regime to have “ideal” subjects, anyway? My central contention is not that oppressive policies produced citizens who either sincerely enjoyed their pain or were fully and deliberately anhedonic and therefore stoic in the face of suffering. Indeed, such assertions would be difficult to support without access to some sort of retrospective statistical mind-reading apparatus (literature being a poor substitute for such a machine). Instead, I have argued that the political formations that eventually became Stalinist or Nazi conceived of their subjects as fuel for enormous engines of conquest, collections of energies whose sole act of personal agency would be to channel these energies into accomplishing large-scale geopolitical goals.

That pleasure should play a major role in the internal economies of Stalinist and Nazi subjects should come as no surprise. Brute force or even the constant threat thereof cannot accomplish the levels of ideological saturation these regimes enjoyed. Internalization of state values thus became a necessary component in the construction of either Stalinist or Nazi identity, which internalization was facilitated through the consumption and production of diverse texts: decrees, speeches, officially sanctioned art, diaries, letters, and even some nominally “subversive” literature. The authenticity of the pleasure nominally derived from working toward a radiant socialist future or the empowerment of an ancient Germanic *Volk* was irrelevant — what counted was a

convincing staging of happiness, a sincere appearance of joy, engaged in willingly and for an indefinite period.

The literary texts produced after 1870 and before 1940 in Russia and Germanophone Europe provided subjects with testing grounds in which to work out their political identities. The instrumentalization of literature for political ends helped cement its function as laboratory. The creation of aesthetic and narrative norms of the type governing Soviet production novels did little to reduce the experimental aspect of writing for publication within the confines of these regimes: even the most sincerely orthodox writers were faced with the task of assimilating and “correctly” deploying these standards in their own work.

Meanwhile, texts by “fellow-traveler” authors like Platonov, who oscillated between resistance to and observance of Stalinist aesthetic norms, functioned much like the contract Severin and Wanda sign in *Venus in Furs*. On the surface, such texts performed obedience to the regime while subversively staging resistance, seemingly deliberately incurring the punishments such a course of action necessarily provoked. Yet the appearance of opposition is deceptive: as an analysis of Platonov and Kharms’ writings showed, these authors did not so much defy official norms as they reinforced them, often altering details of their form while remaining faithful to their essential content. For example, for all his loathing of proletarian culture, Kharms was the quintessential Stakhanovite, assuming sole responsibility for the attainment of unsustainable production norms and in particular attempting to channel his prodigious sexual energies to their (over)fulfillment. Like the Masochian contract, texts lying on the peripheries of the officially acceptable within Soviet culture enshrined the erasure of subjectivity within a

format whose ostensible purpose was to prevent it and, indeed, to ensure its opposite: the actualization of the self.

The dualistic nature of the masochistic contract (and the literary texts that resemble it) points to the troubled nature of subversion within the masochistic *modus operandi*. One reading of masochistic behavior, to which theorists beginning with Freud have subscribed, is that masochism provides victims of trauma with a measure of control over their suffering. By re-staging moments of persecution according to a script meticulously tailored to his or her specifications, the masochist masters what was once an uncontrollable and unpredictable source of torment. At the limit, he or she even learns to enjoy formerly painful activities or events, divesting the torturer of power and reclaiming personal agency. The success of such a staging depends on a simultaneous suspension of disbelief and an unflagging commitment to verisimilitude: the torturer must completely submit to the whims of his or her nominal “victim” and embody ruthless power.

As Severin discovered in *Venus in Furs*, such a precarious balance cannot be maintained for long. At the point where the performance of enslavement becomes too real, Severin attempts to reinstate himself as the situation’s master, only to find that his contract with Wanda precludes suspension. Severin’s subversive play with power is thus undermined by its own central codicil and ultimately becomes just another conduit for the state’s will. In the context of crumbling empire, masochism turns out to be an escapist self-mystification that not only reinforces the political subject’s victimization by the state, but actually conspires with the state to optimize it.

As the foregoing chapters show, no one in Russia or Germanophone Europe arrived at a habitus of political masochism overnight. It took several decades of seemingly diffuse

activity occurring across geographical, disciplinary, and even ideological boundaries to produce the political masochists who would correspond with Stalin, write fervent paeans to an imagined future in their diaries, and willingly sacrifice themselves to grandiose projects with uncertain outcomes.

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