

A Case of Canonical Limbo:  
Idealist and Materialist Interplay in Marietta Shaginian's *Hydrocentral*

Jill Roese

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## ABSTRACT

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Marietta Shaginian's Soviet production novel, *Hydrocentral* (*Gidrotsentral'*), represents a case of canonical limbo. Without exception, the novel is listed as a Soviet literary classic in reference works and compendia of Russian literature since the time of its publication in 1931 up to the present day, and yet its fame as an exemplary work of socialist realism (the officially mandated artistic and literary method established by the Soviet government in 1934) was extremely short-lived. This dissertation attempts to explain the reasons for the novel's "in-between" status as a Soviet "classic" work of literature, but not an exemplar of socialist realism.

Although *Hydrocentral* was published three years prior to the adoption of socialist realism, this dissertation argues that there is little doubt that *Hydrocentral* was one of a handful of Soviet literary works contributing to the formulation of its central tenets. Per the official definition, socialist realism "demands from the artist the truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. At the same time, truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic depiction of reality must be combined with the task of ideologically remolding and educating [the working people] in the spirit of socialism."

Shaginian's novel did, in fact, fulfill all the official requirements of socialist realism: it is a concrete, historically-grounded portrayal of life in rural Armenia at the inception of the first Five-Year Plan (1928-1932) in which objective reality (*bytie*) is characterized as unceasing

dialectical movement. As a paean to inspired, creative socialist labor, *Hydrocentral* was also written with the express purpose of inculcating a socialist work ethic in Soviet citizens.

Part I of this dissertation offers a structural explanation of the novel's limbo status by demonstrating how the principle of multiplicity undergirds the novel's structure at every level. Shaginian uses two types of multiplicity, conventional, as in artistic, not true-to-life (*uslovnaia*) and real, everyday (*bytovaia*) multiplicity, combining them in a way that achieves Shaginian's to achieve unique vision of objective reality (*bytie*) as unceasing dialectical development.

Part II of the dissertation demonstrates how the nature of this objective reality (*bytie*) has its philosophical underpinnings in German Idealism as espoused by Hegel and Goethe, as well as in the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx. At the phenomenological level, *Hydrocentral* is, a Marxist, materialist philosophical overlay that conceals deeper Idealist – and even Modernist – epistemological undercurrents.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system for all parenthetical Russian titles and for surnames of lesser known literary figures. For Russian figures well known in the West I have used the common English spellings of their surnames: for example, Gorky instead of *Gor'kii*, Tolstoy instead of *Tolstoi*, and so on. I have chosen to use the LC transliteration of *Hydrocentral's* author's surname for two reasons; it is, almost without exception, transliterated as *Shaginian* and not the more vernacular *Shaginyan* usually adopted for Armenian surnames, and because she is little known in the West. Translations of passages from the novel are mine, as are the translations of all Russian secondary sources.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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In memory of my father, John H. Roese, who made this dissertation possible



## INTRODUCTION

### ***HYDROCENTRAL: A CASE OF CANONICAL LIMBO***

In the mid-1920s, the Soviet Communist Party called on its writers to portray the many capital construction projects germinating throughout the Soviet Union under the first Five-Year Plan (1928-1932). As the cornerstone of Joseph Stalin's far-reaching plan to rapidly industrialize the USSR, the First Plan served to lay the foundation for the agrarian and war-torn country to "catch up and overtake" the capitalist West in all areas of the economy. The Party's reason for involving the writers was to produce a new literature that reflected the new reality of Soviet life, one that would inculcate socialist values in its citizenry – a new society of people – who collectively would build the first socialist society in human history.

One of the first to respond to the summons was Marietta Sergeevna Shaginian (1888-1982), the daughter of Russified Armenian parents and an intellectual who achieved literary fame both as a journalist and Symbolist poet before 1917. Prior to the Bolshevik overthrow, she had been a deeply religious and mystical person, but soon after embraced Marxism-Leninism and became an ally of the Bolshevik cause.<sup>1</sup> Shaginian spent a total of four years (1927-1931) recording and participating in the construction of the DzoraGES hydroelectric station in northern Armenia's Lori Province, gathering the material that formed the basis for *Hydrocentral* (*Gidrotsentral'*, 1931), her epic narrative of socialist construction.<sup>2</sup> This and other such novels were the earliest forays into a burgeoning genre of proletarian literature known ever since as

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<sup>1</sup> Marietta Shaginian, *Chelovek i vremia. Istoriia chelovecheskogo stanovleniia in Sobranie sochinenii* vol. 1 (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1986), 598.

<sup>2</sup> The novel was first published serially in the monthly literary journal *New World* (*Novyi mir*) in 1930-31, and as a separate edition in 1931. All references are to the 1931 edition.

five-year plan production novels.<sup>3</sup> The production novel was not a new phenomenon in Soviet *belles-lettres* when it was mandated in the mid to late 1920s; its most famous antecedent was Fedor Gladkov's *Cement* (*Tsement*, 1925), a chronicle of the enormous sacrifices made by the builders of a cement factory following the economic devastation from three years of Civil War (1918-1921). *Cement* served as a literary template of sorts for production novelists in the coming years: Leonid Leonov's *The River Sot'* (*Sot'*, 1930) and *Skutarevskii* (1932), Valentin Kataev's *Time, Forward!* (*Vremia, vpered!* 1932), Mikhail Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned* (*Podniataia tselina*, 1931-1960), and Il'ia Erenburg's *Out of Chaos* (*Den' vtoroi*, 1933).

Shaginian's novel was written during the last years of relative artistic freedom for Soviet authors; on April 23, 1932, the Party's Central Committee passed a resolution dissolving all Soviet literary and artistic associations and establishing centralized, party-controlled groupings.<sup>4</sup> For literature, that organization was the Union of Soviet Writers (*Soiuz sovetskikh pisatelei*), which brought writers under its administrative and political control and signaled a change of literary methodology that, over the next two years, would develop into what came to be known as socialist realism. The first public mention of the term came only one month after the Central Committee's decree, when Ivan Gronskii, editor of the newspaper *Izvestiia*, used the term to describe the "basic method of Soviet literature." Gronskii exhorted writers to "write the truth, portray truthfully our reality that is itself dialectic."<sup>5</sup> Five months later the first Plenary Session of the Organizational Committee of the Union of Soviet Writers was held from October 29 to

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<sup>3</sup> For a description of the genre of production novel, see I. Nusinov, "Voprosy zhanra v proletarskoi literature," *Literatura i iskusstvo* 2-3 (1931): 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> *Postanovlenie TsK VKP(b) "O perestroike literaturnom-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii"* 23 apreliia 1932 g. <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/USSR/1932.htm>. (Excerpted from: A.N. Iakovlev, ed. *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia. Dokumenty TsK RKP(b) – VKP (b) – OGPU – NKVD o kul'turnoi politike. 1917-1953* [Moskva: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratia," 1999]). Accessed December 21, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 23 May 1932.

November 3. Presiding at the session were Gronsii and Valerii Kirpotin, chief of the literary division of the Party's Central Committee. It was here that socialist realism acquired a more fleshed-out formulation of its tenets originating in Marxism, literature, and contemporary Soviet reality. At this same meeting, Kirpotin praised (and panned) several contemporary works of fiction. One of the positively appraised was Shaginian's *Hydrocentral*, mentioned as one of the "greatest Soviet masters [sic]" to reflect the new themes and "genuine innovation in content" that had first been taken up by proletarian writers.<sup>6</sup>

Over the next two years, the polemic in Soviet literary journals was dominated by the discussion of the new methodology. At the First Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934, socialist realism received its official definition in the Congress's Charter:

Socialist realism, being the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism, demands from the artist the truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. At the same time, truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic depiction of reality must be combined with the task of ideologically remolding and educating [the working people] in the spirit of socialism.<sup>7</sup>

Curiously, the First Congress named no writers or literary works as canonical exemplars of the official approach, but certain authors and texts were regularly cited at later Writers' Congresses.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Doklad V. Kirpotina 'Sovetskaia literatura k piatnadsatiletiiu oktiabria,'" in *Sovetskaia literatura na novom etape. Stenogramma pervogo plenuma orgkomiteta Soiuzs Sovetskikh pisatelei*. (Moskva: Sovetskaia literatura, 1933), 15.

<sup>7</sup> "Ustav Soiuzs Sovetskikh pisatelei SSSR," in *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934. Stenograficheskii otchet*. (Moskva: OGIZ, 1934), 712.

<sup>8</sup> For a short list of socialist realist exemplars, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 262-63.

The Charter also contained a call for more experienced writers to share their expertise with beginning writers from the proletariat, Red Army, and collective farms.<sup>9</sup> Among others, Shaginian gave such a seminar, the transcript of which was published as part of the series “My Creative Experience – for the Worker-Author” (*Moi tvorcheskii opyt – rabochemu avtoru*) and entitled *How I Worked on “Hydrocentral”* (*Kak ia rabotala nad “Gidrotsentral’iu”*). Given that *Hydrocentral* was deemed ideologically and artistically worthy at the 1932 Plenum, and given that Shaginian received official sanction to train younger writers “from the masses,” there is no doubt that *Hydrocentral*, like other novels covering the first Five-Year Plan, was instrumental in laying the foundation for the official definition of socialist realism in 1934.

Yet curiously, *Hydrocentral*’s fame as an exemplar turned out to be short-lived; it disappeared from subsequent lists of socialist realist classics. Why was this the case? One possible reason is that *Hydrocentral* differs in several important respects from other production novels of the period: first, the subjects of these other novels were enormous capital construction projects: *The River Sot*’ chronicles the construction of a paper plant in northwestern Siberia; *Out of Chaos and Time, Forward!* describe the erection of gargantuan steel factories in Kuznetsk and Magnitogorsk. *Hydrocentral*, however, deals with the story of the relatively small-scale construction of a hydroelectric station in northern Armenia.<sup>10</sup> Second, maybe more crucially, in the other above-mentioned novels the central moment of triumph – the completion of the project – resembles that of Gladkov’s *Cement*, the classic paradigm for the Soviet production novel. In contrast, *Hydrocentral* utterly lacks this happy *dénouement*. In fact, its dramatic climax is not

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<sup>9</sup> “Ustav Soiuza,” 712.

<sup>10</sup> Marietta Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala nad ‘Gidrotsentral’iu.’* (Moskva: Profizdat, 1933), 14-15. Shaginian explicitly advised beginning “worker-writers” (*rabochie pisateli*) to choose small-scale projects as literary subjects: “Comrades, in order to fully master your object and correctly reproduce it for the reader, it is extremely important to specifically pick a small construction project.”

the completion, but rather the destruction of a bridge linking two construction sites on either side of the swift-flowing Mizinka River. Yet out of the dozens of reviews of the novel, just one critic complained that the only thing that gets built ends up a casualty of Mother Nature.<sup>11</sup> That this critic is in the minority is not surprising; Shaginian's literary portrayal of the historical period – the end of Lenin's New Economic Policy and the beginning of Stalin's planned economy – was verisimilar, and most everyone accepted that chaos and dysfunction in these early construction projects were the rule rather than the exception.

If anything, *Hydrocentral* serves as an object lesson in how *not* to build a hydroelectric power plant: two-thirds of the novel is devoted to chronicling the project's many glitches, conflicts and shortcomings. The novel's overall focus is on the *process*, not result, of socialist construction, on the ways in which technical and scientific expertise is acquired and mastered. The novel ends just as the work at the construction site is getting back on its proper track. Along with the assembled workers, the reader is presented with the Chief Engineer's future plan: to link the hydroelectric station to a vast complex, a network that will fulfill both the irrigation and energy needs of the entire Transcaucasus region and transform an impoverished and backward agrarian country into a model of socialist economic progress. Shaginian ends the novel here, at what is essentially the actual beginning of the project: its realization is left to the reader's imagination. Instead of depicting completion like a proper production novel, *Hydrocentral* triumphantly generates images of process: the process of learning, of labor, of artistic creation itself.

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<sup>11</sup> I. Grinberg, "Vmeste s proletariatom," *Rezets* 3 (1931): 8-9.

British scholar David Shepherd uses the yardstick of Katerina Clark's Soviet novel "Master Plot" characteristics to evaluate *Hydrocentral*'s credentials as an exemplary work of socialist realism and, unsurprisingly, finds them wanting.<sup>12</sup> Besides noting the novel's "conspicuous absence [of] the very hallmark of the genre – 'how the plan was fulfilled or the project was constructed'" – Shepherd also points out a second problem – the novel's main character [Arno]. Comparing Arno's actions to elements of Clark's Master Plot, Shepard writes that, instead of being the man of action who "sees that all is not good in the microcosm," 'concocts a scheme for righting the wrong', overcomes bureaucratic opposition to his plan, 'mobilizes "the people" and inspires them to follow his plan,'"<sup>13</sup> Arno is nothing but, in Shaginian's own words, a "wandering type" (*brodiachii tip*), whose mysterious past as a hairdresser provides the "axis of the plot" (*fabuliarnaia os*').<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Shaginian's contemporaries in the thick journals of the 1930s frequently pointed to Arno's air of mystery (in addition to his glaring lack of proletarian credentials) as one of the novel's chief shortcomings.

Clark herself presents a compelling hypothesis as to why novels like *Hydrocentral* were dropped from the official canon in the coming years of high Stalinism, namely, they violated the mandated turn away from the literary portrayal of the real "what *is*" and toward the utopian-mythic "what *ought to be*."<sup>15</sup> Shaginian's novel does in fact gibe with the official definition; she does concretely portray contemporary Soviet reality – the earliest phase of socialist construction,

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<sup>12</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 4-23 (Introduction) and 255-60 (Appendix A) provides a detailed exegesis.

<sup>13</sup> David Shepherd, "Canon Fodder? Problems in the Reading of a Soviet Production Novel," in *Discontinuous Discourses in Modern Russian Literature*, ed. by Catriona Kelly, Michael Makin and David Shepherd. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 48-49.

<sup>14</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala...*, 31; Marietta Shaginian, *Dnevnik, 1917-1931*. (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo pisatelei v Leningrade, 1932), 260 [8 February 1928].

<sup>15</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 36-41.

what was referred to as the “end of the rehabilitation period and the beginning of the reconstructive period”– truthfully, historically, and concretely.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps that is why *Hydrocentral* continued to be named as a classic in Soviet literary compendiums and reference works well into the 2000s.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, when compared to other works of the period, *Hydrocentral* has a streak of eccentricity that makes its classification as an example of canonical Soviet literature problematic.

What is the nature of the novel’s eccentricity? Above all, it is *multiplicity*. As the novel’s chief organizing principle, multiplicity informs every level of its physical structure.

*Hydrocentral*’s genres, plot lines, narrative strategies, techniques of characterization, imagery and language – down to its smallest lexical and syntactical units – endlessly repeat, reproduce, and reenact themselves throughout the novel. Instead of producing kilowatts of electricity, *Hydrocentral* self-consciously generates kilobytes of textual material.

That the novel is structured to repeat is evident from the start. Chapter One begins with an opening sequence in which the main character makes the acquaintance of a supporting character at an employment office and ends with the supporting character retelling the same sequence. *Hydrocentral*’s dramatic “climax,” the collapse of a newly built bridge during a spring flood, is presented not as a singular catastrophe; rather, the reader is treated to no fewer

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<sup>16</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Bol’shaia entsiklopediia v shestidesiati dvukh tomakh*, vol. 58 (Moskva: “Terra,” 2006), 490; *Bol’shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*. vol. 61 (Moskva: OGIZ, 1934), 790; *Bol’shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 47. (Moskva: OGIZ, 1957), 496; Neil Cornwell, ed. *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*. (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Pubs., 1998), 721; Laura Goering, “Marietta Shaginian,” *Russian Women Writers*, vol. 2. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 1191, 1197; *Great Soviet Encyclopedia. A Translation of the Third Edition*. vol. 22 (New York: MacMillan, 1982), 461a; *Ibid.*, vol. 29; 518a-b; William E. Harkins, *A Dictionary of Russian Literature*. (Westport: Greenwood Pubs., 1956), 354; Wolfgang Kasack. *Dictionary of Russian Literature since 1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 359; Victor Terras, ed. *Handbook of Russian Literature*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 400.

than six reenactments of the destruction. Each time – and there are several – the hero attempts to tell the story of his professional past as a hairdresser, a crisis or another character interrupts him. Various romantic entanglements and seductions appear and then reappear, refracted in every tonality; sordid, sublime, comic, and tragic love affairs echo one another throughout the novel. Even *Hydrocentral*'s story line – the construction of MizinGES – the Russian abbreviation of *Mizinka HydroElectric Station*<sup>18</sup> – is echoed in numerous construction episodes. MizinGES is re-told and pre-told in descriptions of earlier projects, lesson plans, or future visions of the Hydrocentral, a linked network of hydroelectric power plants that will economically and socially transform the Transcaucasus.

The upshot of *Hydrocentral*'s monumental predilection for textual production and structural replication is that its *own* construction is as visible as the power plants'. As “a narrative about narrative,” Shaginian’s novel is palpably at odds with the socialist realist aesthetic norm, which demands a simple and direct portrayal of reality uncluttered by a multitude of artistic strategies. By the mid-1920s, artistic conventionality had already become ideologically suspect; in fact, Shaginian had been roundly criticized for deploying artistic, structural, formal devices in previous literary works, in particular *Mess-mend, or Yankees in Petrograd* (*Mess-mend, ili ianki v Petrograde*, 1924) and *K.i.k. (The Witch and the Communist)* (*K.i.k (Koldun'ia i communist)*, 1929). Yet Shaginian repeatedly and unapologetically employs literary artifice and “lays bare the device” at nearly every turn of her paean to Soviet socialist construction. The result? *Hydrocentral*, even with its abundance of literary devices, *does*, in fact, manage a “truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality.”

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<sup>18</sup> Pronounced *MEE-ZEEN-GUESS*, an acronym for *Mizinskaia gidroelektrostantsiia*. *Mizin* is an abbreviation of the name of the fictional Mizinka river; GES is the Russian acronym for Hydroelectric Station (*GidroElektroStantsiia*).

How is this possible?

Shaginian effectively combines artistic conventionality (*uslovnost'*),<sup>19</sup> with descriptions of the events and realia of everyday life (*byt*) to demonstrate, per the official definition of socialist realism, objective “reality in its revolutionary development” (*bytie*).<sup>20</sup> To achieve this end, she uses multiplicity itself in multiple ways that run at ideological cross-purposes: in a conventional way, in multiplicity-as-repetition (of which the novel’s repeated narratives are a prime example), as well as in an “everyday” (*bytovoi*) way, in multiplicity-as-manifoldness in the form of myriad detailed and lengthy descriptions of the nitty-gritty, real-life, everyday *realia* (*byt*). Shaginian adds generous portions of construction materials, contemporary debates, buildings, clothing, body parts, odors, and countless processes – biological, psychological, artistic, mechanical, and geological – to the heady mix of conventionality to serve up her unique aesthetic-philosophical vision of objective reality (*bytie*) during the early years of the first Five-Year Plan – a vision that departs dramatically from the orthodox Marxist view called for by an increasingly stringent literary establishment.

*Hydrocentral*’s formal and structural eccentricity is the subject of Part I of this dissertation. Part II goes on to offer an explanation for the novel’s ambiguous reception in its problematic philosophical base. In detailed explorations of five iconic episodes, the dissertation lays out *Hydrocentral*’s distinctly un-Marxist philosophical, epistemological, and aesthetic underpinnings: the idealist writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), and Vissarion Belinskii (1811-1848). The novel’s very

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<sup>19</sup> Here and throughout the dissertation, the terms “conventional” and “conventionality” do not refer to the “typical,” or “run-of-the-mill,” but rather the self-consciously constructed, overtly artistic – the product of literary conventions applied to the real world.

<sup>20</sup> “Ustav Soiuza,” 712. Part of the official definition of socialist realism.

foundation made its classification as a model Soviet production novel problematic and likely contributed to its removal from the Writers' Union's short list of exemplary works after 1932.

As of the present date, there have been no studies of Marietta Shaginian's *Hydrocentral* that attempt to address the reasons for its "in-between" status; only six works of substantive scholarship on *Hydrocentral* have appeared at all since the novel's original publication in 1930.

The first two scholarly treatments of the novel, by A. Margarian and L. Skorino, respectively, are sections of larger literary biographies of Shaginian and give standard Soviet-Marxist exegeses of its themes, use of language and imagery, and ideological content. Neither scholar examines the novel's idealist philosophical underpinnings.<sup>21</sup> In 1980, A. A. Smorodin drew parallels between Shaginian's journalistic work at DzoraGES (several "publicistic essays" – *ocherki-publitsistika*) and the writing of *Hydrocentral*, which he characterizes as an "epic" extension of that work.<sup>22</sup>

David Shepherd's 1989 article, which focuses on the problematic status of *Hydrocentral* as canonical Soviet literature, was the first scholarship on the novel that piqued my interest in *Hydrocentral*'s odd canonical status. Shepherd takes a Bakhtinian approach in explaining the novel's strangeness by demonstrating the "provisionality" of its many instances of "official discourse." He makes a convincing case for provisional nature of *Hydrocentral*'s discourse through repeated comparisons of passages in the 1931 (pre-to-low Stalinist) and 1949 (high

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<sup>21</sup> A. Margarian, *Marietta Shaginian. Tvorcheskii put'* (Erevan: Armianskoe Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1956): 77-97; L. Skorino, *Marietta Shaginian – khudozhnik. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*. (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1975): 238-279.

<sup>22</sup> A.A. Smorodin, "'Gidrotsentral'" i ocherki Marietty Shaginian 30-kh godov," *Tvorchestvo Marietty Shaginian. Sbornik statei*, ed. V.A. Kovalev (Leningrad: "Khudozhestvennaia literatura" Leningradskoe otdelenie, 1980): 109-126.

Stalinist) editions of the novel.<sup>23</sup> Although I had not read the 1949 edition of *Hydrocentral*, I was intrigued by the canonization model he posits. However, I saw that Shaginian's 1931 opus was sufficiently odd enough in and of itself to warrant an in-depth structural and philosophical inquiry.

In a reading of *Hydrocentral* that appeared in 1998, Karen McCauley correctly notes that Shaginian's "extra-textual" struggle to create the novel "becomes as much a part of the text as the thematics of construction of the hydroelectric station," and that with *Hydrocentral*, Shaginian demonstrates that "the true meaning of production can be understood only through the aesthetic, creative imagination."<sup>24</sup> To date, the only 21<sup>st</sup>-century scholarship on the novel, Mary Nicholas's chapter "How She Worked on *Hydrocentral*: Marietta Shaginian and the Changing Soviet Author" is devoted to the changing cultural and political demands made on Shaginian and the necessity of Soviet writers to continually "reforge" themselves. She chronicles the many parallels between real-life events at MizinGES and those in the novel and in so doing, provides a concise and useful English-language synopsis of material pertaining to the novel culled from Shaginian's diaries and seminar to beginning worker-writers. Nicholas also includes a compelling account of Shaginian's politically naïve attempt to resign from the Union of Soviet writers in 1934 that, had she not been talked out of it, would have undoubtedly resulted in disastrous personal consequences for her and her family.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> David Shepherd, "Canon Fodder? Problems in the Reading of a Soviet Novel," in *Discontinuous Discourses in Modern Russian Literature*, ed. Catriona Kelly, Michael Makin, and David Shepherd (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989): 39-59.

<sup>24</sup> Karen A. McCauley, "Production Literature and the Industrial Imagination," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 3 (1998): 444-66.

<sup>25</sup> Mary A. Nicholas, "How She Worked on *Hydrocentral*: Marietta Shaginian and the Changing Soviet Author," *Writers at Work: Russian Production Novels and the Construction of Soviet Culture* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2010): 78-117.

What will follow here represents a starting point for the substantial amount of scholarship that deserves to be done on what is undoubtedly one of the stranger novels of the Soviet literary canon.

## **PART I: SUPERSTRUCTURE**

## CHAPTER 1

### “THE TRUTHFUL, HISTORICALLY CONCRETE PORTRAYAL OF REALITY”

#### “Real-life” (*bytovye*) Origins of *Hydrocentral*

Shaginian first conceived of *Hydrocentral* in 1926, when she visited a small, crudely constructed hydroelectric station in the Armenian capital city of Yerevan built during the first years of Soviet power.<sup>1</sup> Intrigued by what she saw, she followed up with a visit to Armenia’s Gosplan<sup>2</sup> office and studied folder upon folder of old documents related to its construction. She became sidetracked, however, by more pressing matters, and the seed idea for the novel was itself archived in Shaginian’s creative warehouse until the spring of 1927, when she learned of new plans for the erection of a hydroelectric station in northern Armenia’s Lori Province. That autumn she moved to the construction site, located on the side of a mountain in a remote area near the Dzoraget River. The living conditions were exceedingly rugged. The barracks leaked when it rained; the heating inside them was inconsistent at best. In winter, the rain-saturated ground would freeze over, making travel around the site slippery and treacherous. At night, packs of hungry wolves roamed the nearby countryside, their howling causing the site’s inhabitants considerable anxiety.<sup>3</sup> Another notable impediment to restful and untroubled sleep

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<sup>1</sup> ErGES, built on the Zanga River. Marietta Shaginian, “Shaginian Marietta Sergeevna,” in *Sovetskie pisateli. Avtobiografii v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2 (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo Khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959), 654.

<sup>2</sup> Gosplan (*Gosudarstvennyi planovyi komitet*) is the Soviet acronym for the State Planning Committee, an organ of the USSR Council of Ministers. It was established in 1923 and remained in existence until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. According to the *Efremova Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language*, Gosplan was responsible for “accomplishing the economic and social development of the country and [had] oversight of the fulfilment of [economic] plans (in the USSR).”

<sup>3</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 10.

came in the form of “an indescribable number of bedbugs that had made their début by the fall of 1929.”<sup>4</sup>

Shaginian’s first winter at the site was also very challenging professionally; she was not made to feel welcome upon her arrival. The local officials and management at the site saw her as a nuisance who served no practical purpose. At this early stage of the first Five Year Plan, the practice of embedding writers at construction projects was unheard-of, and Shaginian frequently had to seek intervention from Moscow to gain the access she needed.<sup>5</sup>

Not only were conditions physically and professionally grueling for the site’s inhabitants, but the project itself was suffering on the administrative and managerial fronts. Several months into construction, neither the project’s technical design nor its budget had been approved by the necessary government entities and staff morale was very low. Workers were angry at not being paid what had been promised in the collective bargaining agreement negotiated with the project’s administration. Complaints, mutual suspicion, and shoddy work were rampant. Shaginian notes that “great courage, political astuteness and endurance were required in order to feel the “pathos of construction” during that time, to support it [that pathos] in others, and to give over my strength to the construction [project].”<sup>6</sup>

During her time on the site, Shaginian came to be involved in the day-to-day work and activities there. She initially conducted “public service work” (*obshchestvennaia rabota*), assisting with the activities of the site’s drama circle and chess section, as well as the “political

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<sup>4</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 332 [27 September – 6 October 1929].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 12.

literacy” (*politgramota*) circle.<sup>7</sup> In fact, for her significant contributions to the construction of DzoraGES, she was awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labor (*orden trudovogo krasnogo znamenii*).<sup>8</sup>

Shaginian began the actual writing of the novel in January of 1928 while still living on site.<sup>9</sup> She remained there until the spring of 1928, after the real-life bridge collapse, then returned to Moscow to continue her writing. For the next three years, she continued to be involved with the project and made frequent trips there until its completion. Shaginian was instrumental in a final herculean struggle to secure the necessary machinery and equipment in order to bring the station online (render it fully functioning and producing electricity) in 1930.<sup>10</sup>

Even though by the spring of 1928 Shaginian had returned to the relative comfort of Moscow living, her troubles with the novel were far from over. In late July 1929 her suitcase was stolen while she was travelling by train to Melitopol’ in southeastern Ukraine. The suitcase contained, among other pieces of writing, the manuscript of *Hydrocentral* and one of her diary notebooks. In early August she received a telegram from the Melitopol’ Office of Criminal Investigation informing her that her effects had been found, but when she went to retrieve them, everything except the manuscript and diary had been recovered.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Shaginian was forced to re-write the first half of the novel, including the technical notes for it contained in the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>8</sup> Shaginian, “Shaginian,” 659.

<sup>9</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 257.

<sup>10</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 329.

diary notebook.<sup>12</sup> Thus the history of *Hydrocentral*'s writing compounds the novel's complexity, adding another "narrative about narrative" outside the one inside the novel.

### **Shaginian, "Conventionality," and "Everyday Life"**

As mentioned earlier, criticism of Shaginian's use of literary conventionality had plagued her professionally throughout the 1920s. By the mid-1920s, "laying bare the artistic device" in a work of literature was broadly perceived by Soviet Marxist critics as a barrier to achieving artistic verisimilitude, as well as a symptom of a writer's bourgeois-idealist backwardness and therefore a signal of his potential hostility to the Soviet government. Shaginian, however, continued to employ conventional devices in such proletarian-minded works as the widely-popular *Mess-mend, or Yankees in Petrograd*<sup>13</sup>; and *K.i.k.*, and as a result was subject to regular and pointed disapproval by her professional peers. Indeed, by the early 1930s, the proportion of "conventionality" (*uslovnost'*) to "everyday life" (*byt*) in literary works became the prevailing standard by which the works were judged.

Shaginian had been a participant in discussions of *uslovnost'* and *byt* well before she came under fire for her use of the former. In 1922, two years before penning *Mess-mend*, she addressed the issue in an article entitled "Conventionality and Everyday Life." In it, Shaginian gives the specialized, Soviet definition of conventionality as "not true to life," "made up," "unreal" and illustrates it using examples of magical events in fairy tales: a maiden who drinks a magical potion, or Gulliver who travels to the land of the Lilliputians. Everyday life refers to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 254-55 [no date].

<sup>13</sup> *Mess-mend* was published in German in 1925; certain elements of its plot were used in the creation of a widely popular movie, *Miss-mend* (1926), directed by Fedor Otsep and Boris Barnet.

those elements that are typical, specific, real: “the burning issues of the day.” They are instantly recognizable to the reader as being part of the world in which he lives.<sup>14</sup> Shaginian’s conscious positing of “everyday life” (*byt*) in opposition to “conventionality” (*uslovnost*) makes it possible to stretch the definitions of both in a few important directions. Shaginian’s definition of *byt* as “current” implies “temporary,” and *byt* in its sense of everyday life implies its particularizing, individual character, as in, for example, the preoccupation with life’s petty details. This, in turn, makes it possible to add to Shaginian’s definition of *uslovnost*’ the contrasting notion of the general or universal, the timeless or eternal, as oppositions to the contemporaneity and hence temporality implied by *byt*. As we shall see, the critical tension between the temporary and particular on one hand and the eternal and general on the other is the defining feature of Shaginian’s own conception of *bytie*; these oppositions have philosophical underpinnings in Goethe’s scientific thought as well as that of Hegel and Marx.

Shaginian goes on to outline three ways in which conventionality can appear in a literary or artistic work. For one, there is the kind of conventionality that is “forced” or results from external necessity. The artist, for social or political reasons, cannot express an idea directly for fear of reprisal, so she undertakes indirect means to express her idea. That indirectness is conventionality functioning as a “shell” or “mask” for the idea, allowing it to be expressed in a way that will not incite her audience against her. This work of art is perceived by the audience not as “made up” and unreal, but as pertaining to everyday life. The audience is able to distinguish between the work’s content (the idea) – which is temporary, deals with a burning issue of the day – and its form (the conventional device, the “mask.”)

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<sup>14</sup> Marietta Shaginian, “Uslovnost’ i byt,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1986), 718-722.

In addition to “conventionality through necessity,” Shaginian describes “conventionality as reflected impression.” This type of conventionality does not inhere in the work itself, but results from the passage of time. A work written five hundred years ago was real to the readers at the time, but over the course of five hundred years, issues that were meaningful to the author’s contemporaries lose their freshness and relevance for later audiences. This conventionality is not originally part of the work, but is “added on top of it” by the perceptions of successive generations of readers.

The last type of conventionality Shaginian describes is that which an artist may use at will, arbitrarily, and hence is opposed to conventionality of necessity in the first example. It also differs from conventionality as reflected impression in that “arbitrary” conventionality is recognized as being “made up” or unreal by readers in its own time. Shaginian calls this use of conventionality a “game” and warns that no true artistic style can result from it. The one exception to this, she claims – but does not explain – is the genre of the fairy tale, where the arbitrary use of conventionality does not result in “stylelessness” (*besstilie*) and “ungroundedness” (*bespochvennost*). Ironically, it is precisely this type of conventionality that Shaginian employs to such striking effect in *Hydrocentral*; the novel’s *matryoshka*<sup>15</sup>-like narratives within narratives, the repeated interruptions that delay the *dénouement* of the hairdresser mystery are obvious “games” Shaginian plays with her reader. Yet it is her artful interweaving of real-life *realia* – the prosaic, earthy (and occasionally revolting) *minutiae* of rural Soviet Armenia in the late 1920s – with her myriad conventional devices that, paradoxically, enables them to work together to reveal a concrete and continuously unfolding *bytie*, the “objective reality” that fulfilled the official demand for a new socialist literature.

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<sup>15</sup> *Matryoshka* is the Russian name for the country’s famous wooden nesting dolls.

## Shaginian, “Everyday Life” (*byt*) and “Objective Reality” (*bytie*)

Equally important to the polemic regarding the role (and proportions) of conventionality and the realia of everyday life in Soviet literary works of the 1920s was the fraught nature of everyday physical realia (*byt*) and their ability to foster or hinder the development of the new socialist society. The issue became the focus of a group of literary critics, writers, and other artists sympathetic to the Bolshevik Revolution. Many of them had been active members of the Futurist movement in the 1910s. In 1922, they formed a new artistic grouping known as LEF (Left Front of the Arts [*Levyi front iskusstv*]) and wholeheartedly applied their energies and talents to the task of creating a new socialist society through their art. A central plank of LEF’s aesthetic platform was the promotion and practice of the “literature of fact” (*literatura fakta*), also known as factography. The goal of factography was to “actively transform reality” through a work of art or literature, not simply portray or replicate it. For LEF artists, the fact was no longer a *thing*, but an action, a productive process, or as Devin Fore writes: “The fact [was] quite literally *made*.”<sup>16</sup> The new Soviet man and women were to be instilled with the requisite proletarian mindset through the creation of facts that reflected the new objective reality (*bytie*) as unceasing dialectical movement under conditions of socialism.

The factographers of LEF strongly believed in the power of new technology (radio and cinematography) as tools to effect the production of new “facts” reflecting the new reality. The concept of facts as productive processes, along with the advent of new artistic media also had significant impact on the reconception of literary and other artistic genres. Generic boundaries began to fade as new artistic hybrids, such as the photo-essay, appeared on the horizon. Shaginian herself participated in this trend in her own literary endeavors; she initially conceived

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<sup>16</sup> Devin Fore, “Introduction,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006): 4, 5.

of *Mess-Mend, or Yankees in Petrograd* as a “novel-fairytale” (*roman-skazka*), and subtitled *K.i.k. (The Witch and the Communist)* a “combination-novel” (*roman-kompleks*). She did not abandon the practice with the penning of *Hydrocentral* either. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, it is the profusion and merging of manifold genres that comprise the main axis of the novel’s multiplicity.

Sergei Tret’iakov (1892-1937), one of the founding members of LEF, adamantly believed that *byt*, or life’s everyday realia, must undergo a radical socialist transformation in order to remold the average Soviet man and woman into politically conscious citizen-workers. Tret’iakov distinguished between two types of *byt*: “subjective *byt*,” by which he meant the psychological aspects of daily life, such as typical habits of mind and automatized beliefs about the world, and “objective *byt*,” which referred to everyday physical objects. The old prerevolutionary bourgeois *byt* had to be vanquished and a new socialist *bytie* established in its place: “Not the habits and objects of everyday life (*byt*) dependent on the stereotypical order of things, but objective reality (*bytie*), a dialectically perceptible reality found in the process of continuous becoming. Reality [as] a never-forgotten movement toward communism.”<sup>17</sup>

In *Hydrocentral*, *byt* and *bytie* interact differently. Where Tret’iakov calls for the abolition of old bourgeois-capitalist *byt* as a means of achieving the new socialist *bytie* as unceasing dialectical becoming, Shaginian’s attitude toward *byt* is not to annihilate it, but rather to co-opt it in the service of portraying this *bytie*. Her endless descriptions of everyday items, smells, textures, and images are pressed into service as useful tools. Shaginian effects an artistic (conventional) reworking of life’s everyday realia through the use of repeated narrative and

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<sup>17</sup> Sergei Tret’iakov, “Otkuda i kuda? (Perspektivy futurizma),” *Lef* 1 (1923): 200.

multiple genres in order to demonstrate the new objective reality as endless process. Tretiakov's conception and Shaginian's portrayal of objective reality (*bytie*) in *Hydrocentral* are nearly identical, with one notable exception: "dialectically perceptible reality as a continuous becoming" in *Hydrocentral* becomes *an end in itself*. While movement toward communism is posited in a speech in the novel's final chapter, *Hydrocentral's* cosmology is characterized by pointless wheel-spinning and missteps. As will be demonstrated in Part II, the novel's objective reality as "endless becoming" with no end in sight resonates most closely with Goethe's "Unity of Nature."

Shaginian signals her polemic with LEF in the character of artist Arshak Gnuni, whom the reader and Arno, the novel's hero (and also known as "Red" because of his hair color) meet in Chapter One. Arshak introduces himself to Arno as "Gnuni, LEF artist." A few pages later, Arshak confides to Arno that he is in the depths of a creative crisis: he can no longer paint anything. To back this up, he shows Arno a blank canvas and declares that what he paints nowadays is "worse than nothing." He complains that the problem of rendering artistic form is what is bogging him down:

"I want form to be like a wireless telegraph. Without transmission belts. When you listen to Beethoven, it's nothing but transmission belts – all kinds of arpeggios and variations; the theme changes to a new key or God knows what else. What's the purpose of a transmission belt in artistic form? Let the listener make the connection ... without any transmissions. That's my problem." <...>

"I'll explain it to you," replied Red. "We are now converting to a new system of communication. A radical turning point. The second time [it has happened] in human history. The first time was [the switch] from hieroglyphs to letters. And now we're going back – from letters to hieroglyphs."

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“Cinematography, radio music, radio broadcasting – think about it, what is it? [It’s] the relaying of forms from one person to another by means of a process. The thing is dying...”

“That’s terrible! Everything wants to be an action and not a thing!”<sup>18</sup>

This passage contains all the earmarks of a LEF debate: the appeal to new media, the advent of communication as process, Arno’s declaration that “the thing is dying.” The irony here is that it is Arno, not Arshak, who is well-versed in LEF aesthetic tenets and is tasked with explaining the new aesthetic reality to him. In fact, the narrator informs the reader that Arshak “was suffering the torments of a half-educated person.”<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Arno’s strange remarks about letters and hieroglyphs may be read as an idiosyncratic rendering of Boris Arvatov’s (1896-1940) argument about the dualism of *byt* and *bytie* under capitalism. Another founding member of LEF, Arvatov believed that a “rupture” between people and things occurred under capitalist economic conditions, with the result that a split between everyday life (*byt*) and objective reality (*bytie*) occurred and “[people] have not been able to free themselves from the classic dualism in bourgeois philosophy between the material and the ideal.” His solution was to create a proletarian culture that will “eliminat[e] that rupture between things and people that characterized bourgeois society... proletarian society will not know this dualism of things.”<sup>20</sup> Arno’s statement that the radical shift in communication is moving back from letters to hieroglyphs is evidence of a socialist mending of the dualism of *byt* and *bytie* under capitalism. If one holds – as materialist philosophers believe – that a physical object is the actual thing-in-itself, then the hieroglyph, as a pictorial representation of the object,

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<sup>18</sup> Marietta Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*. *Roman*. (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo pisatelei v Leningrade, 1931): 16-18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Christine Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005): 30.

is at one conventional level of remove from the physical object, while “letters” (meaning the alphabet and words) are at two conventional levels of remove. The movement from letters as representations of physical objects back to hieroglyphs in the present era of socialism can be understood as a shortening of the conventional distance between the thing-in-itself and its signifier.

### **Artistic Parallels with Belinskii’s Pathos**

Shaginian’s intentional inclusion of conventional elements in *Hydrocentral* was but one of two major topics of discussion among her literary contemporaries. The second, the novel’s pathos (in Russian, *pafos*), was discussed with equal if not greater frequency in reviews of *Hydrocentral*, from the time of its appearance in 1931 through the 1960s. The notion of *pafos* had been a national literary obsession dating back to the mid nineteenth-century, when Vissarion Belinskii pronounced it the essential marker of the true artistic quality of a literary work.<sup>21</sup> In his article on Pushkin, Belinskii began by explaining that a truly artistic literary work could never be the result of intellectual endeavor alone. If this were possible, he argued, then everyone with an idea who put pen to paper could be considered a poet. Rather, a true poet is such only by nature or vocation. Because the act of genuine poetic creation is extremely arduous, the true poet must be very driven to complete his work.<sup>22</sup> This drive to see the project through stems from the poet’s *love* for the artistic idea, very similar to (one’s) love for another living being. The poet

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<sup>21</sup> V.G. Belinskii, “Stat’ia piataia” *Sochineniia Aleksandra Pushkina*. Moskva: “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1985), 220-278.

<sup>22</sup> Shaginian herself echoes this sentiment. During a discussion with beginning writers about her experiences in writing *Hydrocentral*, she tells them, “[I]f [writers] want to create a genuine work of art, then there are no other ways, because the material must be acquired through struggle...” (Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 22).

perceives the idea not just intellectually or even physically, but “with the fullness and completeness of his moral being.” It is this drive to create, the love for the idea, that Belinskii calls pathos.<sup>23</sup>

Pathos, Belinskii warns, should not be confused with passion. Passion is an emotional drive that can be directed at sensual, earthly objects. It inheres in “the individual, the personal, the self-interested.” It can be mean and base, while pathos contains a moral element: it is “purely spiritual, moral, heavenly passion,” arising from the poet’s “soul set afire” by the artistic idea. Pathos is responsible for “convincing” readers of the correctness of the poet’s idea. Finally, it is the ingredient that unites the form and the idea of the work into an organic whole; the reader sees no “basting stitches or welding seams” (*sshivka ili spaika*) tacking the two elements together.<sup>24</sup>

Like their predecessors, Soviet critics remained enamored of Belinskii’s conception of the centrality of pathos to the process of artistic creation and constantly invoked it during the enormous task of creating a socialist literary culture. Belinskii’s definition of pathos as a noble, infectious and uniting passion for an idea was ideally suited to the tasks of Soviet literature: to convince the reading masses of the correctness of the idea of socialism, awaken their enthusiasm, and unite them through the idea into an organic whole, like the literary works themselves. Another important feature of Belinskii’s definition was that it was broad – pathos could arise from any idea and could be incarnated in any form, as long as the idea was moral and the form was organically merged with it.

Shaginian uses the word pathos at the end of *Hydrocentral* to describe the Chief Engineer’s enthusiasm about his profession in ways that bear striking similarities to Belinskii’s

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<sup>23</sup> Belinskii, “Stat’ia piataia,” 231.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

definition. As MizinGES's original author and ultimate savior, the Chief Engineer is deeply moral, civic-minded. Originally resistant to reengaging in the project, he feels a moral, even maternal responsibility to rescue MizinGES from the scrapheap of economic history. The Chief Engineer's solution, itself a pathos-driven epiphany, is the apotheosis – *à la* Belinskii – of the merging of form and idea. The physical redesign of MizinGES relocates it as part of a larger organic whole – the future Hydrocentral. The Chief Engineer's pathos is infectious – his report at the end of the novel reunites and refocuses the warring factions at the plant, and one of the schoolchildren in the audience is so smitten with the Chief Engineer and his presentation that he resolves then and there to pursue a future career in engineering. We will return to a deeper examination of the role of Belinskiian pathos in the character and motivations of the Chief Engineer in the dissertation's final chapter.

### **“Art” and “Real Life”**

In 1918, four years before publishing her article “Conventionality and Everyday Life,” Shaginian gave a series of eight lectures at the Rostov Conservatory in southern Russia in which she describes in considerable detail the differences between art and real life from a Neoplatonic perspective, one that was shared by the majority of bourgeois intellectuals in Russia in the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> In her second lecture, Shaginian explains the difference between “real-life” objects in “nature” (*priroda, byt*) and works of art. To illustrate the essential differences between them, she compares an actual horse and a drawing of one with eight-legs. Although real horses do not have eight legs, she asserts, the drawing that doubles the actual animal's limbs is

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<sup>25</sup> These lectures were later published as “Vvedenie v estetiki,” *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1971), 685-728.

truer to the idea or essence (*ideia, sushchnost'*) of a running horse than the “real” horse. In other words, during the process of artistic creation, the artist selects and reworks (even multiplies) those features of the “real-life” object that most clearly express its essence. The implication here is that in nature or real life, the essence of an object is, in a sense, “cloaked” by a multitude of other attributes preventing its immediate recognition. Thus, Shaginian defines the artistic process as a special kind of recreation of the real-life object, a transformation that reveals its essence more fully. It is this transformation that is the purpose of art, through which the real-life object acquires eternal objective reality (*vechnoe bytie*) in the recreated artistic object.

Shaginian describes art and real life as operating under opposing tendencies or sets of laws: Real life (*byt*), or what Shaginian terms “nature,” tends towards “real-life” multiplicity: “many-ness” or manifoldness – the proliferation of trees, flowers, animals, and facts – is its ultimate goal. The dynamic intrinsic to art, on the other hand, is toward unity. Put another way, “Nature ... reveals to us the *sum* of phenomena; art exposes the *idea* of a phenomenon.”<sup>26</sup> This would suggest that for Shaginian, the principle of multiplicity as many-ness omnipresent in *Hydrocentral* serves to make the novel closer to “real life,” when up until now I have been arguing quite the opposite, namely, that most instances of multiplicity in *Hydrocentral* serve to foreground its conventional devices. Which is true? The answer is that *both* are correct, if the concepts of multiplicity and repetition are defined more precisely. By “multiplicity” in this essay, Shaginian is referring to a “real-life” multiplicity in which no immediate relationship is perceived between the individual parts, a kind of plurality or “manifoldness.” This is the plurality one finds in nature. Repetition is a narrower, more unifying kind of multiplicity in which the parts are perceived to exist in some sort of relationship, a “conventional multiplicity” in which

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<sup>26</sup> Shaginian, “Vvedenie v estetiku, 698. Emphasis added (J.R.).

the parts bear some kind of a resemblance to each other; it implies a sense of redundancy. It is for this reason that multiplicity as repetition “feels” more contrived than multiplicity as many-ness. Multiplicity as repetition and multiplicity as plurality are equally present in *Hydrocentral* and complement each other to reveal Shaginian’s “objective reality” – the sum as well as the idea of events, just in the same way that the addition of four legs to the “naturalistic” drawing of a horse uncloaks its true, noumenal essence as movement.

Shaginian uses the term “architectonic-ness” (*arkhitektonichnost’*) to describe this perception of relatedness among the many characteristics of repetition. Architectonic-ness refers to the sense that a certain symmetry or balance exists among the many parts creating the impression of a harmonious whole. For Shaginian, architectonic-ness is the defining feature of an artistic work and distinguishes it from “nature,” where a sense of structure or constructedness is less evident. Thus, for Shaginian it is the need to perceive a systematic relationship among the parts, a desire for symmetry -- *whether founded on repetition, cyclicity, or redundancy* -- that is the *ur*-impulse of Art. Even in its most conventional aspects (its repetition and contrivance) Art does not do violence to (or misrepresent) reality; rather it brings to light or reveals (*vyiavlivaet*) its most essential aspects.

Shaginian’s characterization of artistic-literary architectonics was a radical departure from Belinskii’s formulation of a seamless boundary between idea and form. In fact, Belinskii described this connection in metaphysical terms, asserting that a truly pathetic literary work contains a “living beauty of form that attests to the presence of a divine idea...”<sup>27</sup> Belinskii’s conception of an ineffable element uniting form and idea was shared by many nineteenth-century

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<sup>27</sup> Belinskii, “Stat’ia piataia,” 231-32.

writers, most famously, perhaps, by Lev Tolstoy (1828-1910). Following the publication of *Anna Karenina* (1877), Tolstoy received a letter from his good friend, a retired professor of botany S.A. Rachinskii, dated 27 January 1878, in which he expressed the opinion that the novel suffered from “a fundamental defect” in its construction: “It has no architecture,” he claimed. “Two themes are developed side by side – and developed magnificently – but are unconnected in any way to each other. I was so pleased when Levin and Anna made each other’s acquaintance. ... It was at this point that the opportunity presented itself to tie together all the threads and provide an integrated finale.”<sup>28</sup> Tolstoy disagreed with Rachinskii’s assessment:

Your evaluation of *Anna Karenina* seems to me incorrect. On the contrary, I am proud of the novel’s architecture – its vaults are put together in such a way that it is impossible to notice where the keystone is. It was this aspect [of the novel] I worked hardest on. The connections of the edifice are not built on the plot line, nor on the relationships between characters, but rather on an inner connection. ... I fear that in your haste to read through the novel, you did not notice this inner connection. ... [The] connection is the very thing that made the entire endeavor meaningful to me. The connection is there in the novel – go look and you’ll find it.<sup>29</sup>

For Tolstoy, then, the best architectonics are the work’s “inner connections” that function to present it as a unified whole. What is clear from this characterization is that Tolstoy conceived of interpersonal relationships between characters and parallel plot lines as “external” devices. By this remark, Tolstoy seemed to insinuate that such externalities detracted from a work’s architecture by revealing its “seams,” showing, in a sense, the mortar and bricks of a work. In Shaginian’s architectonics, by contrast, such seams establish the conventional multiplicity – the visibly connected moments – necessary in a successful work of art.

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<sup>28</sup> L.N. Tolstoi. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 62 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennoi literatury,” 1958), 378 note 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

Although *Hydrocentral* purports to be a portrayal of real, everyday life in Armenia in 1927, its structure, like its images of bridge girders, is visible for all to see. The self-conscious use of repetition, seeming to appear chiefly for its own sake rather than as a means to an end, foregrounds the architectonics of the novel in a way that is impossible to ignore. It is an admission, a defiant proclamation, that multiplicity as conventionality is part and parcel of artistic creation, just as multiplicity as plurality is itself a part of “nature” (*priroda*) or “real life” (*byt*).

**CHAPTER 2**  
**“CONVENTIONAL” TRUTHS:**  
**THE PROLIFERATION OF FICTIONAL GENRES**

**Fairy Tales**

Architectonically true to form, *Hydrocentral*'s last chapter features a strange (and strained) conventional moment in the form of a repetition (the construction project as do-over), while its first chapter offers the reader a heaping dose of *uslovnost'* in the form of what turns out to be the first of the novel's fictional sub-genres: the fairytale (*skazka*). In Chapter One (“The Labor Exchange” [*Birzha truda*]), in fact, the reader is treated to not one, but two fairytales, recounted, back to back, to the novel's hero, Arno Arev'ian. The presence of such patently conventional tropes as fairytales in the opening chapter of a Soviet production novel, whose ostensible goal is to give “the truthful historically concrete portrayal of reality in its revolutionary development,” is highly unorthodox. But in Shaginian's hands these fairytales, paradoxically, are enlisted in the service of portraying that “concrete” or objective reality (*bytie*). As previously mentioned, Shaginian believed that the conventional device of the fairytale was the only genre that did not detract from a work's aesthetic value, and the use of which did not result in “stylelessness” and “ungroundedness.”<sup>1</sup> What Shaginian misses, however, is that the reason for this is the undisputed fact that fairytales are – by definition – unoriginal. The fairytale's “style” lies precisely in its “stylelessness” (*besstilie*), in its formulaic, repetitive

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<sup>1</sup> Shaginian, “Uslovnost' i byt,” 718.

structure.<sup>2</sup> Curiously, it is this very quality that, for Shaginian, makes the fairytale an ideal choice for inclusion in *Hydrocentral*.

The trope of the fairytale – and tale telling in general – is perhaps the most obvious indicator of the central role of narrative conventionality in Shaginian’s artistic universe. In Chapter One a total of three tales are told, the first two of them fairytales told to Arno by the LEF artist, Arshak Gnuni. The first tale is essentially an ironic rehashing of what we have just read as the first half of Chapter One: using the conventional trope of the “tale within a tale,” Shaginian has Arshak recast the circumstances of his acquaintance with Arno as a *skazka*. Noticing an old woman staring at them from the street, Arshak remarks:

"In fairytales these grannies, these *nany*, live on the outskirts of cities," said the artist. "Eastern fairytales always start like this: Once upon a time there lived on the outskirts a fine young man. He invited a passerby to his house and the passerby became employed by him. The fine young man became envious of this and asked his employee to employ him. All this began like a fairytale, one rejected by the State Education Council.<sup>3</sup> You and I have fallen out of naturalism."

Red confirmed this with a nod<sup>4</sup>

This story-retold-within-a-story (a double repetition) has two functions: it foregrounds the act of narration and is a technique of characterization, providing the first hint of Arshak’s flawed perception of contemporary Soviet reality. In addition to making a crack at the expense of the State Education Council, his playful assertion “You and I have fallen out of naturalism” indicates

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of the formulaic patterns in fairytales, see V. Propp, *Morfologiya skazki* (Moskva: “Nauka,” 1969) as well as Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 255-60 (Appendix A).

<sup>3</sup> In Russian, *Gosudarstvennyi uchenyi sovet* or as known by its Soviet acronym, GUS (pronounced **GOOSE**). This agency advised against the teaching of fairytales to Soviet schoolchildren. Arguing that they promoted superstition and ignorance, it promoted realistic stories with a communist moral.

<sup>4</sup> Marietta Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*. *Roman* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo pisatelei v Leningrade, 1931), 21.

his own self-distancing from and ridicule of the “real world,” which he perceives, erroneously, as “naturalistic.”<sup>5</sup>

The second fairytale Arshak tells Red is embedded in a section afforded its own title: “Story (*rasskaz*) of the LEF Artist.” Like the unproductive production novel, the *rasskaz* about Arshak has almost nothing to do with Arshak. After giving a brief biographical sketch about his father’s professional life as a tailor, the LEF artist launches into what he calls a “Baku Fairytale” involving his father’s brother, Uncle Mikhak, and his elaborate scheme to cheat a purveyor of medicinal balms out of his fortune:<sup>6</sup>

Once something exciting happened – a real event. A Persian man arrived in Baku, an inventor of an ointment for all kinds of maladies. The panacea was sold in white jars. The jars were labeled with a portrait of the handsome bearded and full-cheeked Persian, a list of diseases against which the ointment was effective, and an inscription: “Satisfaction guaranteed or your money back.” A jar of the stuff cost five rubles. One of our neighbor ladies bought it for jaundice, another bought it for insomnia. People were buying it for cholera, drunkenness, celibacy, rheumatism, and as far I can recall, the ointment worked wonders.<sup>7</sup>

Mikhak’s money-making strategy takes advantage of the “guaranteed or your money back” clause: One morning, Mikhak shows up at Arshak’s house with a cartload of empty jars, glue, labels and balm-making ingredients. First a cart pulls up in front of the house, then countless deliverymen begin to arrive on foot, carrying sack after sack of what Arshak imagines is the “fairytale wealth” (*skazochnoe bogatstvo*) of his wizardly uncle. But it turns out that the sacks contain “hundreds and thousands of empty white jars.” Mikhak takes over the kitchen and

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<sup>5</sup> Naturalism is frequently understood to include elements of the grotesque. Arshak’s distorted, “grotesque” view of reality receives full billing in Chapter Two.

<sup>6</sup> Again, Shaginian demonstrates the centrality of the intermingling of *uslovnost’* and *byt* in her aesthetic worldview: In her diary, she reports that the story had its basis in fact; a family friend told her this story about his Uncle Mikhak (Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 256 [2-9 January 1928]).

<sup>7</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*, 23-24.

spends a week brewing, bottling and labeling the jars of ersatz balm. Then he begins “returning” them to the honorable Persian, who “refunds” the money:

Через неделю к персу начали поступать целыми партиями «возвращаемые банки». Все честь честью: банка, портрет, надпись, мазь. *Перс платил. Банки возвращались. Перс платил. Банки возвращались.* Когда перевалило за тысячу, отчаявшийся перс, бросив чемодан, бежал из гостиницы в Персию. Дядя заработал на этом деле три с половиной тысячи. (*Gidrotsentral'*, 24).

A week later, entire batches of “returned jars” began to make their appearance at the Persian’s hotel. Everything was as it should be: jar, portrait, label, ointment. *The Persian paid; Jars continued to be returned; the Persian paid; Jars continued to be returned.* When the number of returned jars exceeded a thousand, the despondent Persian abandoned his suitcase and fled the hotel to Persia. My uncle made three and a half thousand on that deal.<sup>8</sup>

The passage abounds in multiplicity-as-conventionality: the multiple framing of the *skazka* within-the-story within-the-novel; the repetitive paying and returning; the manifold sacks, porters and jars; and even the “magical” effectiveness of the potion against multiple maladies is a conventional (and pluralistic) touch. Also noteworthy is the dual “conventional and real” nature of the jars; they are both containers *and*, as Arshak describes metaphorically, a “fairy tale treasure” (*skazochnoe bogatstvo*). While the story of Mikhak’s outlandish scheme seems ripped from the pages of a fairytale, the treasure is a very real-life 3,500-ruble boon that changed the course of Arshak’s life.

Arshak concludes his tale:

This is how Arabian fairytales were made in Baku. A hundred out of the 3,500 was put aside for me 'for education': I went to off to Moscow and lived with relatives. Then – school, jobs, war, revolution, and futurism. Now you tell me about yourself!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I supply the original Russian to illustrate the repetitive, formulaic nature of the tale. Emphasis added (J.R.).

<sup>9</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 24-25.

Arshak's distaste for 'real reality' both complicates and multiplies the meaning of the two *skazki* in Chapter One. On one level, the second fairytale re-emphasizes his cynical attitude toward the world. Major events – war, revolution, even Futurism – get passed off as an unimportant footnote in a humorous anecdote about a scheming uncle. But on another level, the “story” (*rasskaz*) subheading can suggest an aesthetic proposition that literature as art results from the combination of everyday life (*byt*) and conventionality (*uslovnost'*).

By framing Arshak's story with its own title, Shaginian cleverly undermines Arshak's penchant for belittling real life by turning it into a fairytale and hence underscores his aesthetic immaturity. By embedding these patently conventional literary devices into the text of the novel, Shaginian makes the opposite argument about the nature of *uslovnost'* and *byt*, that the two are intimately related and intertwined, not only in relation to the novel's narrative project but, as will be shown in later chapters, to its epistemological one as well. Taken as a whole, *Hydrocentral* demonstrates that the most “real” Reality is the one that incorporates conventionality, of which conventional multiplicity is predominant.

### ***Hydrocentral* as Detective Mystery**

The *skazka*, formulaic as it is, becomes, in Shaginian's hands, a forum for multiplicity on another front: the longest one doubles as a detective mystery. Of all the generic variants at work in *Hydrocentral*, the detective plot (*detektivnyi siuzhet*) was most frequently cited by the novel's critics as a major weakness, precisely for its contrived, conventional aspect (*Kak ia rabotala*, 32-33).<sup>10</sup> The mystery story was a genre that Shaginian had employed earlier in her 1924 “novel-fairy tale” *Mess-Mend*. In the “Author's Foreword” to the 1971 edition of *Mess-Mend*, it is clear

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<sup>10</sup> Shaginian defended the inclusion of the mystery, claiming it “did not for one moment harm the novel's real conception” (*Kak ia rabotala*, 32-33).

that Shaginian viewed the genres of fairy tale and detective-adventure story in a relationship of natural complementarity and made use of this complementarity as a generative ploy:

The novel was written using conventional-fantastic material, like literature in translation, from the point of view of an imaginary American proletarian writer named Jim Dollar. (...) From the very beginning, a half-fairytale, half-parodic tone was taken in the novel. Using the typical boilerplates of western European detective mysteries, I leveled their cutting edge at the destructive forces of imperialism and fascism of the 1920s, and all the positive romanticism and happy fairytale quality of the work toward the glorification of the artistic, creative power of the working class of all countries and peoples. ... In this way, a completely unique genre of the novel-fairytale was born.<sup>11</sup>

Even Shaginian's association of the detective mystery – and other “conventional-fantastic” literary genres – with Western European literature suggests yet another kind of conventional multiplicity, that of the doubling or repetition intrinsic to the act of producing novels in translation.

The mystery story in *Hydrocentral* unfolds around the drama of Arno's recent professional past as a barber. In Chapter One, Arno, also known as “Red” (*ryzhii*) – so named for his frizzy carrot top – arrives at an Employment Office in the fictional Armenian city of Masis<sup>12</sup> and begins scanning the job postings for barbers. He is befriended there by Arshak, who hires him instead to put a roof on his hut. Arshak soon learns that Red, in addition to having worked as a roofer, holds a Ph.D. from a German university and is multiply skilled as a barber, forester, galosh maker, and house painter. Out of all these professions, however, Arshak is only interested in how and why Arno became a barber. The reappearance of the *nana*, however, forces Arno to cut his story short: begin the “barber mystery.”

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<sup>11</sup> “Predislovie avtora,” *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, vol. 2 (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo “Khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1971), 233.

<sup>12</sup> *Masis* is the Armenian for Ararat, the mountain that looms over the real-life capital city of Erevan.

It is the motif of the interrupted story, repeated *ad nauseum*, that propels the mystery: each time Red attempts to tell his story, he is hindered by an intervening event. Usually the interruption is in the form of another character's arrival on the scene; at one point, however, it is the high drama of a train derailment that prevents Arno from finishing his story. With each reenactment of the story-cut-short (yet another clever way of proliferating parallel scenes), the air of mystery surrounding Arno grows ever thicker, becoming a veritable fog when Arno's boss, Zakhar Petrovich Mal'ko, learns that the police are looking for Arno. Mal'ko, whose suspicions have been aroused by his employee's misplaced enthusiasm for low-wage archival work, has dashed off a letter of denunciation to the Office of Criminal Investigation (*Ugrozysk*).

The *dénouement* of the barber mystery occurs only in the novel's final chapter. Red is summoned to the local *Ugrozysk*, not to be arrested (as the reader has been half expecting), but to receive the personal effects stolen from him by two wayfarers on a mountain road six months earlier. The two men apparently worked as barbers and initially approached Arno for information on where they might find work. This is as much of the story as Arno manages to tell. It is left to the reader, however, to infer that these men must have taught Arno their trade and then later robbed him of his belongings.

In addition to generating text-internal suspense, the motif of the itinerant barber signals the presence of an intertext. And, like translations of foreign literature, intertextual references are themselves a form of textual echoing. In this case, the motif of the traveling barber instantly reactivates the famous barber sequences in Miguel de Cervantes' (1547-1616) *Don Quixote* (1605) and Pierre Beaumarchais' (1732-1799) dramatic trilogy, *The Barber of Seville* (1773), *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784), and *The Guilty Mother* (1792). The fact that *Hydrocentral* also contains explicit references to these particular works suggests that Shaginian did indeed associate

western literature in translation with conventional plot structures (*Gidrotsentral'*, 219).<sup>13</sup> The parallels between these earlier works and *Hydrocentral*, however, extend beyond the superficial thematic layer. The shared trope of the itinerant barber merely points the way to deeper aesthetic issues, namely, the nature of the narrative act and the interpenetration and ambiguity of the realms of conventionality (*uslovnost'*) and everyday life (*byt*).

In *Don Quixote*, it is Chapter VII of Book III, “Of the high Adventure and Conquest of Mambrino’s Helmet, with other events relating to our invincible Knight,” that features a traveling barber. Don Quixote and his faithful Sancho Panza come upon a strange horseman wearing a highly polished basin on his head. The narrator informs the reader that this man is a barber and blood-letter who serves the needs of two small villages. To Quixote’s mind, however, the basin is none other than the famous Helmet of Mambrino, and he decides to capture it as a deed of knightly valor. Charging at the hapless stranger with lance drawn, Quixote easily acquires his trophy as the peaceful and unarmed barber/blood-letter runs off in terror, abandoning even his donkey in an effort to beat a hasty retreat. With the Helmet/basin in hand, Don Quixote embarks on a lengthy narrative-*cum*-fairy tale, in which he paints his future as a famous knight-errant in the most lustrous hues.

Besides being an object with multiple practical uses – it is both a shaving basin and a bowl for catching blood -- the Helmet/basin is imbued with multiple aesthetic properties: It is a perfect iconic representation of the interpenetration of conventionality (*uslovnost'*) and everyday life (*byt*). Fittingly, as the earlier discussions of fairy tales and tale telling has shown, the inextricable nature of conventionality and everyday life is a central aesthetic premise of

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<sup>13</sup> Two characters, the hydrometrician Areul’skii and his assistant Mkrtych are compared to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza; also Areul’skii is likened to “Almaviv in a trenchcoat” (a reference to Count Almaviv in *The Barber of Seville*).

*Hydrocentral*. Seen by Panza as a shaving basin, the object reveals its “realistic” or “everyday” (*bytovaia*) side. When viewed through Quixote's eyes, it exhibits its conventional (*uslovnaia*), “fantastic,” or “romantic” aspect as Mambrino’s Helmet.

The Mambrino Helmet intertext also draws our attention to the parallel act of narration in Chapter One of *Hydrocentral*. Like Arshak’s tales in Shaginian’s novel, Don Quixote’s story is more than one kind a narrative, in this instance a fairy tale with all the highly conventional and formulaic components of the chivalric romance: a wandering knight, a beautiful princess, the accomplishment of impossible feats of bravery, and ultimately, the king’s reward of his daughter’s hand in marriage. The element of mystification at work in their titles is yet another similarity. Like the “Tale of the LEF Artist” (which tells next to nothing about him), the actual “high Adventure and Conquest of Mambrino’s Helmet,” (occupying all of half a page in a nine-page chapter), is merely a pretext for an examination of the narrative act and illustrates the interpenetration of *uslovnost’* and *byt*.

As in the Chapter One stories in *Hydrocentral*, Quixote’s tale encounters several stumbling blocks. As Quixote tells his story to Sancho Panza, the latter interjects with several revisions or criticisms. The most notable one concerns the problem of Quixote’s lowly origins. The king, Panza points out, will hardly agree to marry his daughter to a commoner, no matter how brave and dashing. Panza’s statement thus foregrounds the conflict between the fantasy (Quixote’s brilliant future) and reality (his humble birth). Quixote, for his part, devises a clever solution to this problem. He decides to bequeath his story to a future historiographer who will “upwardly revise” his genealogy. Hence future generations will know Don Quixote as a nobleman – that is, the fantasy will, over time, become the reality. This episode highlights the palimpsestic nature of the narrative act: stories are fraught precisely because they inhabit the

space between *uslovnost'* and *byt*, and are hence highly susceptible to all manner of alterations: revision, variation, and even destruction. The multiplicity generated by this form of revision and variation is particularly pointed; it is a function of the interplay between *uslovnost'* and *byt* and foregrounds its own workings.

While the Mambrino Helmet episode and *Hydrocentral* both feature objects with dual (conventional and real-life) functions, the novel's invocation of the *Figaro* plays is more obviously motivated by structural parallels. Most palpably, the *Figaro* plays foreground the kind of hyper-conventionality that Shaginian associated with western European detective clichés. Like *Hydrocentral's* detective mystery sub-plot, they evince a distinct preoccupation with "laying bare the device." Thematically, it is only the barber that is common to the *Figaro* plays and *Hydrocentral*. Figaro, like Arno, is a multiply skilled wanderer who has worked as a surgeon, apothecary, veterinarian, and poet, and, like Arno, is the positive hero in all three works. Structurally, however, the plays have much in common with *Hydrocentral*, because conventional multiplicity looms large in them. The plays abound in multiple identities, cross-dressing and disguises. The trilogy is rich in repeated scenes and situations: the plays feature numerous marriage ceremonies and adulteries, as well as countless escapes through open windows. Then come the intricate plot lines, which contain so many intrigues, twists and turns, that it is frequently difficult to remember exactly which character knows what, or even whether the character in question is real or an impostor. The raw material for intrigue consists of standard conventional ploys such as secret nocturnal meetings, intercepted letters, and astonishing revelations regarding the parentage of various "orphans." Perhaps the most contrived aspect of the plays are the numerous sets of characters who are endlessly scheming against each other. They appear side by side onstage, yet remain oblivious to one another as they reveal their

“secrets” to the audience in loud asides. These conventional contrivances, which resonate loudly with some of Shaginian’s own, are the real purpose of the barber sub-plot and exemplify her fascination with structure and conventionality.

### **Love Stories: The “Eros of Labor”**

In addition to the genres of fairytales and detective mystery, *Hydrocentral* also contains a love story, or more precisely, a profusion of love stories whose characters not only interact with each other romantically, but also engage the labor process itself erotically. In fact, Shaginian declared *Hydrocentral*’s central object lesson to be the love of labor: “The goal of *Hydrocentral* was to portray labor as being so tasty, so infectious, ... that it would make a person’s palms itch and he would want to start working himself.”<sup>14</sup> But Shaginian was not content to describe the desire to engage in enthusiastic, productive labor as mere love. She referred to the phenomenon as the Eros of Labor (*eros truda*), a concept to which she devoted considerable attention both within and beyond the novel’s confines. While Eros for Shaginian was a “physiological necessity (*fiziologicheskaiia potrebnost*),”<sup>15</sup> she did not limit it to the realm of the sexual. “What is Eros?” she asked rhetorically. “An increased sense of life, lyrical excitement, passion... One shouldn’t write a novel without Eros, but Eros in a novel doesn’t have to take the form of a love story between a man and a woman. One can put Eros into anything at all.”<sup>16</sup>

Like those of most bourgeois intellectual writers who remained in Russia after the revolutions of 1917, Shaginian’s artistic and philosophical consciousness evolved (along with

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<sup>14</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 154 [9 January 1926].

<sup>16</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 30.

her politics) into an increasingly Marxist-Leninist worldview over the years, and yet her reflections on the nature of Eros changed very little. As one would expect of a budding Marxist-Leninist, Shaginian “socialized” her understanding of Eros. Prior to 1917, she had framed it in distinctly individual terms. In late July 1914 – on the eve of the outbreak of the first World War – Shaginian wrote *Journey to Weimar (Puteshestvie v Veimar*, published in 1923), a travelogue of her pilgrimage to the birthplace and adult residence of her lifelong idol, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In this pre-revolutionary text, Shaginian used the word Eros to describe the German thinker’s serial fascination with the numerous scientific studies he undertook in his lifetime:

Regarding Goethe’s eroticism of learning ... He somehow had to fall in love with a subject the way a woman falls in love in order to begin studying it; this capacity for falling in love accompanied him in all his endeavors... He was completely unable to “learn in general”; that sort of “objectivity” was simply outside his experience, nor did it confer experience; his whole purpose for learning was focused on gaining experience. Goethe’s method consisted of a deeply personal, intimate relationship to the object of study, always connected with choice, with a certain unfairness – i.e., with a preference for one thing over another.<sup>17</sup>

Shaginian characterizes Goethe’s serial romances with a multitude of scientific endeavors in distinctly “bourgeois-individual” terms - as preference, selectivity, even “unfairness” – as Goethe’s particularizing razor-sharp focus on one object above all others. However, Goethe’s dogged pursuit of concrete practical experience as opposed to abstract “book learning,” is very much present in Shaginian’s later, more socialist musings on Eros.

In 1921, following the chaos and devastation of World War I and the Civil War, Shaginian first took up the notion of a “socialized” Eros when she espoused her belief that the

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<sup>17</sup> Shaginian, *Puteshestvie v Veimar* (Moskva, Petrograd: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1923), 107. In *Literature and the Plan (Literatura i plan)*, a collection of essays published in 1934, Shaginian abandons the use of the term “Eroticism” for the more modest formulation of “predilection” or “partiality” (*pristrastie*) when characterizing the proper socialist attitude toward work. (“Delo bylo v Khar’kove,” in *Literatura i plan*, Moskva: Moskovskoe tovarishchestvo pisatelei, 1934), 15).

best way to “infect” and “inspire” the masses to view their work as creation was to portray it to them artistically. Without specifically using the words “passion” or “Eros,” she nonetheless likened the Soviet artist’s “sales-pitch” to the work of a matchmaker:

Oral agitation in the field of industry is the same thing as oral match-making: no matter how much you praise the girl, until you show her, she will not excite interest. ... [A]rt should intervene in order to show [labor] in a *special way*, to make it look – as children say – appetizing. ... Learn how to show labor as creation, and you will cause the most incorrigible idler to acquire a taste for it, [as if it were] a rare form of amusement.<sup>18</sup>

In *Hydrocentral*, Shaginian assigns the role of matchmaker to Arno, the itinerant intellectual of German and Armenian origins and the author’s mouthpiece in the novel. In a diary entry from 1928, Shaginian referred to Red as “a kind of benchmark by which one can gauge the book’s intellectual level. [He possesses a talent for] organization and personal magnetism in order to imbue the reader with the will to work.”<sup>19</sup> In both the diary entry and the 1921 article, Shaginian adduces the example of Tom Sawyer whitewashing his Aunt Polly’s fence as a textbook example of the artistic presentation of the labor process that inspires and infects others. Forced to whitewash the fence as punishment, Tom devises a brilliant plan to avoid doing the work himself:

He picked up the brush, dipped in the paint, applied a single stroke, then stepped away to admire his work – he even stuck out the end of his tongue. He applied another dab of paint, and again stepped back to admire his handiwork. In other words, he “put on a show,” depicting compulsory labor as voluntary labor. Then he begins to notice a crowd gathering, but he pretends not to notice, so absorbed is he by the work. His onlookers began to bother him: “Tom, let me have a turn.” He didn’t want to give up his paintbrush and spent a long time haggling over the price of participation; finally, he gave up his brush for payment in apples, a pen knife, and something else, and his companions began to delight in

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<sup>18</sup> Marietta Shaginian, “Proizvodstvennaia propaganda i kinematograf” in *Literaturnyi dnevnik, 1921-1923 g.g.* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., expanded (Moskva-Peterburg: “Krug,” 1923), 69. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>19</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 260 [8 February 1928].

the right to work which they had purchased from him, work that had been a punishment from his aunt.<sup>20</sup>

There's an ideal example of industrial propaganda for you. What did Tom do? He put art into motion. He theatrically *portrayed* the labor process to his audience, not in a wearisome and senseless light, but in a rational, creative, and interesting one. And that is why the work became alluring and contagious.<sup>21</sup>

Like his American literary predecessor, Arno manages to take on the dullest and most unrewarding work possible – the organizing, cataloguing, and synopsising of a mountain of dusty archival papers -- and eventually turn the product of his labor into a theatrical *tour de force* that not only entertains his office mates, but is instructive on multiple levels. (A detailed examination of how this happens appears below in Chapter 6.)

In 1933 during her seminar for beginning “worker-writers,” Shaginian made her clearest connection with Eros as a mass phenomenon. Her task, she said, in *Hydrocentral*

was not to banish Eros from the book, but on the contrary, to saturate the entire work with it – soundly, fully saturate it with Eros, to present it not in the sense of one individual to another, but in the sense of the masses to themselves, when class is conscious of itself as a whole. [My goal was] to instill this Eros into a love of construction, into the total ability to sense the values of objective reality, as when you create, when you participate in creative work.<sup>22</sup>

Over a twenty-year period, Shaginian's conception of Eros evolved from that of a highly individual, personal urge into a mass phenomenon. According to her, it was through the participation in erotic, creative labor in the context of new socialist economic relations that people acquired an awareness of belonging to a greater whole; through the passionate pursuit of labor, it became possible to apprehend objective reality. It is this last, epistemological aspect of

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<sup>20</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 25-26.

<sup>21</sup> Shaginian, “Proizvodstvennaia propaganda,” 70.

<sup>22</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 30-31.

Eros, that, as we will see, endows it with philosophical and ideological significance for Shaginian.

In 1934, Shaginian again made reference to Eros in her speech to the Eighth Session of the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers. In discussing the importance of reading and studying the socialist literature of other nationalities within the USSR, she raised the problem of the literary portrayal of love, of the difficulties Soviet poets and prose writers were having in portraying love in their works “so that it infected and excited and, at the same time, socially educated the reader to be attracted to the types of new people.” She explains that the problem is that “we too narrowly understand the nature of love, we understand it as some kind of personal thing, when in fact love depends extraordinarily on the form of social development. It is precisely in personal love as in nothing else that class and its ideology are most strikingly and clearly revealed.” She makes her point by contrasting the Soviet socialist conception of love with that of Fascist Germany.

The fascization [*fashizatsiia*] of German culture fostered in German poets and writers the ideal of love within the confines of a pure race, the ideal of love between a blonde-haired, blue eyed German man for a blonde-haired, blue-eyed German woman. Not only was national chauvinism hidden beneath this ideal but something more – a metaphysical belief in the stability and holiness of certain species and forms of nature, a belief that these species and forms should exist ‘now and forever.’ However, the result of such an isolated national conception of Eros was that the same kind of degeneration that occurs with *love* itself, in real life – when you close it off inside one caste, tribe or race - began to occur with the *theme* of love in literature.<sup>23</sup>

Shaginian’s description of German “fasciscized” Eros as a kind of Neoplatonic national chauvinism strangely echoes her 1914 characterization of Goethe’s Eros of learning (*eros*

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<sup>23</sup> Marietta Shaginian, “Rech’ M.S. Shaginian. Zasedanie vos’ moe,” in *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934. Stenografichekii otchet* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1934), 208.

*poznaniia*) as a kind of unfairness. Goethe's individual preferencing of "one thing above all others" – a good thing that leads to the apprehension of objective reality – becomes, on a national scale (and in his own country), the evil doctrine of Aryan racial purity and the cause of Germany's cultural (and sexual) degeneration.<sup>24</sup> At the end of her speech, she contrasts the isolated, degenerate Eros of fascist Germany to the display of love and affection of ethnic Russian children toward children of other races and nationalities during a recent visit she made to a pioneer camp: "It was, comrades, a special kind of affection, one associated with kindness, tactfulness and sensitivity, with the desire to render a service to them; it was a falling in love with another, unfamiliar form. ... When our children grow up and become [politically] conscious [Soviet citizens], they will make that broadened affection, that instinctual love into *a new form of humanism*, a new form of Eros."<sup>25</sup> Here Shaginian comes full circle: Eros as the preference for static unchanging forms will be abolished and replaced by the dialectical embrace of otherness. Yet, ironically, in *Hydrocentral* it is the portrayal of individual eroticized labor processes that takes center stage. Erotic labor as a historically conditioned "mass" phenomenon is present only as future potential.

Within the universe of *Hydrocentral*, individual Eros is Platonic in nature, above all in its understanding of desire as a continuum – from the most sexual to the most abstract, philosophical kind of longing. Toward the higher end of this continuum is the desire for what one lacks intellectually – hence the burning desire to learn, to know, to find out, as Arno's

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<sup>24</sup> Shaginian went on to attribute "the manifestation of homosexuality and other forms of perversion," as well as a fierce hatred of anything "biologically alien" to the degeneration of German literature (Ibid., 209).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

interlude with the archival papers demonstrates.<sup>26</sup> But it is the bodily aspect of Eros in the work process that takes center stage in *Hydrocentral*, where Eros in any sphere of human endeavor is intimately bound up with its physiological, sensual, and sensory aspects. The physicality of inspired effort appears repeatedly in every kind of work – intellectual, artistic, and manual labor.

Shaginian had a clear purpose for depicting the physicality of various labor processes under emerging socialist economic conditions in such detail. As per the official definition of socialist realism that *Hydrocentral* played a role in forming, she was providing a “concrete” portrayal of the process of inspired productive labor for the purpose of “ideologically remold[ing] and educat[ing]” her readers “in the spirit of socialism.” *Hydrocentral*’s many instances of impassioned labor reflect Shaginian’s personal views on the nature of inspired artistic creation, which, she believed, originated with the dawn of humanity and was a “reworking” of reality, a “theurgic desire to reproduce the universe [that] was connected to the first movement of Eros in the heart; light, like the quiver of a [bird’s] wing in flight... [C]reation is impossible without the expenditure of powerful constructive [*sozidatel’noi*] energy given by Eros to every living thing.”<sup>27</sup> In the novel, Shaginian demonstrates that *all* creative labor originates with Eros.

Shaginian’s emphasis on the physicality of productive labor is, unsurprisingly, ideologically motivated by the materialist philosophy of Karl Marx. As the author of dialectical materialism, Marx described labor in pointedly somatic terms. Marx referred to man as an “embodied, living, real, sentient, objective being with natural powers” who has “*real, sensuous*

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<sup>26</sup> Plato’s “ladder of love” is delineated in his *Symposium* in the speech of Diotima (208E-212B). However, in its simultaneous instantiation of several levels of Eros, Shaginian’s continuum parts ways with Plato’s which casts the rungs of the ladder as strictly sequential in nature, progressing from one to the next.

<sup>27</sup> Marietta Shaginian, *Chelovek i vremia. Istoriia chelovecheskogo stanovleniia*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1: 62-3.

objects as the objects of his being.”<sup>28</sup> Under conditions of alienated labor (capitalism), Marx held man’s natural physiological response to stimuli, such as hunger and the urge for procreation, manifested themselves as baser “animal functions,” but elsewhere in his writings he acknowledged man’s animal instincts as a natural part of his human makeup.<sup>29</sup> Because man is driven by physical needs, he is “a *suffering* being, and since he feels suffering, a *passionate* being. Passion is man’s faculties striving to attain their object.”<sup>30</sup> Marx also argued that “the worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous, external world”:

To say that man lives from nature means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange in order not to die. The statement that the physical and mental life of man, and nature, are interdependent means simply that nature is interdependent with itself, for man is part of nature.<sup>31</sup>

Reflecting Marx’s idea of passion as the “striving to attain [one’s] object,” Shaginian presents the physical characteristics of Eros-inspired labor – regardless of type – as an intense mental focus or trance-like state. As workers enter their “zone” of productivity, they become oblivious to their surroundings. This intense focus is accompanied by physical processes such as puffing, wheezing, muttering, and sweating. Even a biochemical process – the brain’s combustion of phosphorus – is a recurring event among workers of all classes. The analogy of burning phosphorus was one that Shaginian used elsewhere in her descriptions of creative labor within the novel and outside of it. In her seminar with worker-writers, she asked rhetorically: “What is the creative process? Our bodies ignite phosphorus, and the energy allotted to each of

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<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx, “First Manuscript,” 207.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 125, 207.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 123, 126-7.

us is converted to some kind of work. Thus, when you are working creatively, you are burning phosphorus and you say that you have ‘inspiration.’ ... So, it’s in that sense that I talk about creation ... as the combustion of phosphorus.”<sup>32</sup>

Let us turn now to some of the more colorful examples of erotic labor in the novel. One of the first featured, and one of its loftiest incarnations, is the depiction of Arno’s work on the mess of archival papers at MizinGES:

...Red gazed upon the papers, and, damn, the way he looked at them! A library maniac would look that way at a set of old novels in translation, where murders take place and the detective wanders through the pages, delaying the finale, [where] the detective and *dénouement* hate each other in order to tire out the reader; in a word, where all the spices make a tasty relish out of gray, everyday life. Not satisfied by just looking at them, Red suddenly approached a packet of envelopes and picked it up the way that [other people] retrieve a purchase. After laying it on the table, he untied the string and began to finger the envelopes, examining them and shaking the dust off each one. His agile fingers pulled out the papers, which lightly and pleasantly rustled as they were unfolded – a long novella proceeded from one envelope to the next.<sup>33</sup>

Arno’s intensity of purpose as he creates order from the chaos is bewildering to his ideologically backward co-workers:

It was as if he talked to [the packets]. His head wagged to and fro on its long neck with unusual expressiveness: his hands doubled, tripled, and quadrupled before the astonished clerks; he switched from puffing to muttering. But the strangest thing was his tenacious endurance, his inertia, a slow intensification of energy... Red’s indefatigability loomed over the office like a menace, becoming more insurmountable with every passing minute.<sup>34</sup>

Arno’s covetous gaze, his fingering of the dusty papers, and their pleasant rustling testify to Eros. The narrator’s wry comparison of the archives to detective novels in translation

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<sup>32</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 55-6.

<sup>33</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*, 121-22.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

foregrounds the conventionality of the narrative act in this instance as a sensory exploration of the palate in which grey, everyday life is culinarily transformed into a “tasty relish.” Arno’s love affair with the archives also echoes Shaginian’s conception of creative labor as a “theurgic desire to reproduce the universe”:

The place [where the archives had been scattered about earlier] had been purged. In the six days Red [Arno] had been at the site, all the debris of obsolete paper, saved for some unknown purpose, had been settled in harmonious columns in cabinets along the walls, [all of them] numbered, bound, furnished with a mysterious system of letter codes, and even put into outline form.<sup>35</sup>

On the morning of the seventh day, Arno completes the work. But before giving a full account of his findings to MizinGES office manager (*nachkants*) Zakhar Petrovich, he “rests” and eats breakfast. An exploration of the philosophical undercurrents of the archival episode will be the focus of Chapter 5 in Part II.

Shaginian reinforces the ideological message that *all* types of labor, even the most concrete and unsophisticated, can be erotically driven in the description of four bore-hole drillers working at the site. Eros appears both mentally, as a trance-like indifference in their brains, and physically/biochemically, as rhythmic movement, nausea and the burning of phosphorus in their brains: “... Zargarian and his three comrades, straining, turned and turned the rod... The workers were no longer interested in what was happening at bore hole two, their reddened faces were indifferent in the same way that the faces of gravely ill people become indifferent to life.”<sup>36</sup>

Shaginian echoes this curious analogy of intense concentration to gravely ill people in a diary entry written at the time of writing *Hydrocentral*: “[A]rtistic creation (*tvorchestvo*) is a very

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 207.

serious thing, like childbirth, like death.”<sup>37</sup> Shaginian even invokes the image of childbirth as the quintessence of creative labor in one character’s recollection. Klavdiia “Klavochka” Mal’ko, wife of office manager Zakhar Petrovich, poses for a portrait painted by the artist Arshak. It is the artist’s panting and sweating as he works that spurs the memory:

The woman’s thin face gleamed with sweat, her hair tangled and wet on her forehead, a ‘working’ – or, as they say nowadays – a ‘laboring’ (*trudiashcheesia*) expression on her face. Bending her whole torso, she wheezed busily and with concentration. Her eyes flickered over Klavochka; it was evident that she looked past her, she was looking at something inside herself, into the depths of the work taking place there.<sup>38</sup>

In these depictions of inspired labor of every sort, Shaginian demonstrates to her audience what erotic engagement in authentic socialist labor looks like, and what they, in turn should be on the lookout for (and practice themselves): a combined mental and physical intensity of purpose and a passionate striving to attain one’s object that resemble a trance or “indifference” to surrounding life and events.

### **Love Stories: Erotic Tales**

Expanding the erotic continuum in the novel are several actual love stories between human beings that are refracted in every tonality, from the smelly to the sublime. Even the previously-mentioned interaction between Klava and Arshak is just as much a figurative (and eventually literal) tale of seduction as a concrete portrayal of erotically inspired artistic creation. Shaginian uses the portrait painting episode to illustrate a much lower-brow version of Eros than we have seen in the examples of Arno’s archival work and in that of the drillers. Arshak’s portrait painting is a place where Shaginian foregrounds the sexual aspects of Eros-driven labor

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<sup>37</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 269 [3 February 1928].

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

as a form of ideological satire: the reader learns through Arshak's creative process that Klava is a socially undesirable element. In the previous section Arshak's panting, sweating and intense inward focus remind Klava of childbirth. However, Shaginian's ideological focus in the portrait painting scene is on the *onset* of sexual relations – not its end process – as a comic metaphorical seduction, penetration, orgasm – and even decapitation.

Arshak, like Arno, is a heavy breather whose intensifying passion leads to a trance. Foreplay begins as the initial sketching: “his eyes took on a terrifying expression; his lips commanded: Shhh! Not a peep out of you! Now sit still!”<sup>39</sup> After completing the initial sketch and before picking up the paintbrush (metaphorical heavy petting), Arshak describes the beginnings of the portrait to Klava in pointedly vaginal terms: “Well, Klavochka, ma'am, you can move again. What you are is still unclear... The tendency itself and all the rest of it – it's like the feathers on a tail. But it isn't the tail that gives birth. It's what, *pardonnez-moi*, is beneath the tail that gives birth.”<sup>40</sup>

The painting phase of the portrait is described as gradual gathering of creative steam. The metaphorical penetration begins: “Again, the terrifying eyes, the somewhat heavy breathing. Again, a step toward the canvas, a step back, the creative glances transferred from the model to the canvas, from the canvas to the model, a human camera-obscura, all wound up and disheveled, the taut magnetism of his unerring gesture. ‘Be still, more still’ he begged and implored her with his eyes. Or rather he paid no attention to her whatsoever...”<sup>41</sup> The climax, the

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<sup>39</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

ultimate moment of sexual, artistic, and epistemological clarity, comes about as Arshak captures Klava's inner essence on the canvas:

At this point the artist, now completely pale, screwed up his eyes at her. The final mystery of the thing, the elusive expression, ... the soul of Klavochka, the idea, the content, the name of the portrait ... Whatever, dammit, whatever it was, if only [he could] snatch it, transfer it [to the canvas], tear off its head. ... Disheveled, like a rooster and almost hopping about, the artist stared frantically at the fleeting expression on Klavochka's face, and the paintbrush began to run over the canvas. Goosebumps ran down his spine.

"Oh, what the f--!" he suddenly squealed in a most vulgar tone. "Enough! Don't overdo it. He threw down the brush, snatched the picture off the easel, and ran into house. When he returned, he looked damp and steamy. He wiped off his hands with a rag greasy with turpentine. His eyes had taken on their usual everyday luster, and like a clown he began bustling around Klavochka who had gotten up from the stump she had been sitting on.

--Wait 'til you see who I paint you as, my dear, just wait! You'll be a parasite in my painting, Klavochka, that's who!

--A parasite?

-- Yes, yes, a wonderful parasite! Oh, Klavochka! The kind of parasite a foolish man puts his soul in, in whom he fritters away his semen. Forgive me though, it's impossible to explain. You'll be a woman of outstanding beauty in my picture. I'll bring it to an exhibition! Tomorrow at the same time, agreed?<sup>42</sup>

Arshak's humorous unmasking of Klava lays the groundwork for the ideological lesson. Now that the reader knows *that* Klava is a parasite, in the chapters that follow the reader learns that Klava has no job at MizinGES or anywhere else. She does *no* work, including housecleaning or cooking. Instead, she spends her time in town where she carries on an adulterous liaison with the artist, or at the construction site where she lives in what the narrator describes as a filth-encrusted "lair" (*logovo*), spreads false rumors, and makes passes at other women's husbands.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 78.

Shaginian continues to make the connection between unseemly love affairs and ideologically suspect characters. One more is worth briefly mentioning here: the adultery of Markarian's wife, the MizinGES switchboard operator, and office worker Volodia-the-merino sheep, so named by the narrator for "a most enormous head of hair that hung down low over his forehead ... like the horns of a Spanish merino sheep."<sup>43</sup> The reader learns that Markarian's wife eavesdrops on private telephone conversations and kowtows to the politically retrograde administration on the site. Just to make sure there is no doubt about the ideological unsoundness of the woman, the reader is also informed that she wears a dog fur stole and cheap-smelling (and ineffective) perfume, that she regularly engages in the enjoyable activity of scratching her dirty armpits, and that her lover finds this quite sexually arousing.

At the opposite end of the ideological (and olfactory) spectrum is the one truly sublime love affair of Arno and Mardzhana, the young niece of schoolteacher Anush Malkhazian and Bolshevik women's department (*zhenotdel*) activist.<sup>44</sup> As a love affair, however, it goes almost unnoticed in the novel, since both Arno and Mardzhana, being Eros-inspired and enthusiastic workers, rarely have time to reflect on their relationship, much less to pursue it. In fact, for the first three quarters of the novel, it seems that it is only Arno who carries a torch. The culminating scene of their mutual -- and wordless -- declaration comes only near the end of the novel and is so subtly presented that even Mardzhana appears surprised by it. The only overt discussion of love the two have is about a lack of love in Mardzhana's failed affair with someone

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>44</sup> Women's Department. *Zhenotdel* is the Soviet acronym for *zhenskii otdel*. These departments were adjuncts to various Communist Party committees and provided various services to worker and peasant women, such as ideological education (agitation and propaganda), literacy, and medical care. See L.A. Shevchenko, "Deiatel'nost' zhenskikh organizatsii v sisteme Sovetskogo obshchestva v 1920-e g.g. (na materialakh Irkutskoi gubernii) in *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. 2011: No. 2 (14). Source: <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/deyatelnost-zhenskih-organizatsiy-v-sisteme-sovetskogo-obschestva-v-1920-e-gg-na-materialah-irkutskoy-gubernii>). Last accessed 12/16/16.

else, the “man, unremarkable in every way” (*nichem ne primechatel'nyi chelovek*) seen talking to the German writer on the train. This is all we learn about the potential romance of Mardzhana and Red; it, like the construction project, is afforded neither a climax nor a *dénouement*.

There is one other, less dignified love-plot that echoes the Mardzhana – Arno story and that also serves as an imperfect rehearsal for her budding romance with Arno. It is the final “love affair” – really more of a vignette – and appears only once: it is the unrequited love of Gino for Gagik. Gino is a *zhenotdel* colleague of Mardzhana, a woman of indeterminate age who has a crush on a village youth who does not return her affections. The discrepancy in their ages becomes grist for the scandal mill among the village women, and Mardzhana is dispatched to the scene to deal with the situation. The potential danger of this affair is that Gino’s authority as a representative of Soviet power has been undermined; the village women no longer look up to her because she is mooning over a boy many years her junior. This vignette serves two purposes: ideologically, it is an object lesson to all future women’s department delegates on how to conduct themselves when working “among the masses;” and aesthetically-conventionally, it highlights Mardzhana’s own tormented heart and represents in miniature, in less perfect form, as a kind of “rehearsal” of the love affair beginning between Arno and Mardzhana. As an episode of unrequited love, it also echoes Mardzhana’s ended relationship with the “unremarkable man.”

In sum, the erotic impulse in *Hydrocentral* runs the gamut from an earthly physiological desire to create, to a loftier, metaphysical longing to understand and make sense of the chaotic universe of socialist construction; for Shaginian, the presentation of *multiple* forms of Eros is part and parcel of her aesthetic aim of portraying Soviet *bytie* of the late 1920s. It is likely that the lower end of the novel’s broad erotic diapason contributed to its problematic status as canonical socialist realism. In the mid-1920s, during the time Shaginian first conceived of and

began the background research for *Hydrocentral*, such detailed literary renderings of the physiological side of Eros were still appearing in the Soviet press. Well-known literary works such as Boris Pil'niak's *Naked Year* (*Golyi god*, 1922), Aleksandra Kollontai's controversial short story "Three Generations" ("Liubov' trekh pokolenii," 1923), Fedor Gladkov's *Cement*, and Sergei Semenov's popular *Natalia Tarpova* (1927) all contained overtly sexual material, including, in the case of *Cement*, an act of rape. However, by the early 1930s, there was a palpable shift in the critical and political reception of sexually charged subject matter, and writers responded accordingly and began to pen more upright, stable, and socially/politically virtuous characterizations of love and relationships.<sup>45</sup> Because of this shift, *Hydrocentral*, published in 1930-31, overshot the sexual "statute of limitations"; had the novel been published three years earlier, its images of erotic physicality would have been less of a factor in its canonical fall from grace.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For an exhaustive and highly nuanced account of the issue of sex in Soviet literature of the 1920s-1930s, see Gregory Carleton, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> In the 1949 edition of the novel, Shaginian excised or replaced many of the more overtly sexual or unseemly details from the original 1930-31 edition: Arshak and Klava do not engage in relations following the portrait painting; As will be seen in a later chapter, Lazutin's libidinous physiological response to the presence of manganese in the ground becomes merely a desire to "let [his] hair down" instead of "going to see the girls and let [his] hair down" (196), Markarian's wife's armpit scratching becomes "fortune telling with cards that had become oily with age" (185) (*gadanie promaslennymi ot vremeni kartami*); and Arno and Mardzhana's romance begins in earnest following Arno's impassioned declaration to join the Party (326-28). (Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'. Peremena*. Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1949), 7-382.

### CHAPTER 3

## CONCRETE REALITY, ARTISTIC FORM: NON-FICTION AND THE REAL WORLD

### **The *Ocherk*: Lazutin's House-Museum**

We now turn our attention to the multiple non-fictional (everyday) genres in the novel that complete the recipe for Shaginian's unique portrayal of objective reality during the early years of the first Five-Year Plan: a sketch (*ocherk*) describing an excursion to a geological house-museum, two lesson plans, an industrial report, an architectural debate, and an engineer's report. Like *Hydrocentral's* fairytales and mystery genres, its non-fictional elements are further evidence of Shaginian's fascination with the shifting boundaries of conventionality (*uslovnost'*) and real, everyday life (*byt*) in the process of literary creation. Paradoxically, it is Shaginian's patently conventional (*uslovyne*) inclusions of "typical, everyday" (*bytovye*) textual snippets – passages that unabashedly foreground the novel's structural seams – that serve as the building-blocks of Shaginian's unique vision of objective reality as an eternally – and seamlessly – unfolding present.

The *ocherk* – possible English translations include literary sketch or essay – was perhaps the genre in which Shaginian was most comfortable writing. She excelled in its incarnation as travelogue, writing dozens of them throughout a literary career spanning nearly a century. Among her most notable works are the *Journey to Weimar* (*Puteshestvie v Veimar*, 1923), which we have already mentioned; *Soviet Armenia* (*Sovetskaia Armeniia*, 1923); *Strolls Through Armenia* (*Progulki po Armenii*, 1927); *A Novel of Coal and Iron* (*Roman uglia i zheleza*, 1930); *Soviet Transcaucasia* (*Sovetskoe Zakavkaz'e*, 1931); *On the Road of the Five-Year Plan* (*Po*

*doroge piatiletki*, 1947); and *A Journey Through Soviet Armenia (Puteshestvie po sovetskoii Armenii*, 1950). She penned many *ocherki* of other sorts, including the aforementioned “Industrial Propaganda and Cinematography” (*Proizvodstvennaia propaganda i kinematograf*, 1921).

The Russian *ocherk* entails more than its English equivalents suggest. Historically, it has a rich tradition in Russian literature dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. The narratorial voice is frequently intimate – the first or second person is frequently used – so that the readers easily imagine themselves conversing *tête-à-tête* with the author-narrator or even participating in the events she describes. This is done quite consciously on the author’s part, for it is the means by which she hopes to sway the readers to adopt her point of view. A journalistic-literary hybrid often containing a tendentious or moralizing element, the *ocherk* always concerns itself with real-life events, but is constructed “artistically.” Because its content is “real life” presented in “artistic” form, the *ocherk*, like the excursion to the geological museum, inhabits the space between conventionality (*uslovnost’*) and everyday life (*byt*).

Nowhere is this more evident in *Hydrocentral* than in the *ocherk*-as-imaginary-excursion to a remarkable House-Museum belonging to geologist-dilettante Ivan Borisovich Lazutin. It occurs as a narratorial aside; the reader, together with the author-narrator and Ivan Borisovich (who awaits his visitors), leave the confines of the novel proper to visit a comprehensive and fascinating collection of Transcaucasian geological *realia* and specimens. There are other conventional oddities as well: the house-museum episode has no direct bearing on the novel’s plot – its only function germane to the novel as a whole is to provide an in-depth characterization of Lazutin, which makes its introduction into the novel very tenuously motivated: it is offered as the *possible* recollection of a trip Arno had either made himself or heard about from others. To

top it off – unlike virtually everything else in *Hydrocentral* – Lazutin’s museum is an utter fabrication; no such geological museum existed at the time the novel was written. Paradoxically enough, the Lazutin House-Museum is as fully real as it is imaginary. All its exhibits are based upon factual geological data. Shaginian went to great lengths to collect and assimilate the information over the course of a decade, making numerous journeys – many on horseback through rough mountainous terrain – throughout the Caucasus in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while the excursion is pure fantasy, the knowledge acquired on it is genuine. In this sense, the House-Museum episode essentially represents Shaginian’s “conventional” operation on authentic geological *byt*. As Shaginian herself put it: “Lazutin’s museum is *a piece of romanticism in the realistic body of ‘Hydrocentral’*.”<sup>2</sup> Thus Shaginian’s “romantic” (*uslovnyi*) manipulation of the real and factual (*byt*) is performed for the purpose of revealing objective reality (*bytie*). In the imaginary excursion to Lazutin’s collections, *uslovnost’* functions as a kind of telescope into the future, a time when the universal synthesis of every artistic and scientific discipline (*byt*) has made a more comprehensive knowledge (*bytie*) of the world possible.

## Lesson Plans

Anush Malkhazian’s “Lesson on the Sun” is yet another example of Shaginian’s genre-wandering. As informational text embedded in the novel’s plot, it serves multiple purposes. On the surface, it is a short course on Armenian economics and geography presented to the reader as

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<sup>1</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 18. Much of this information is reproduced in Shaginian’s *Dnevnik: 1917-1931*, where numerous pages are filled with detailed outlines of agricultural, industrial, economic and scientific processes and statistical data. During the 1920s, Soviet newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* commissioned Shaginian to travel to these remote regions and cover stories on their cultural, political, and economic transformations under socialism. Shaginian also wrote numerous articles for several regional and central newspapers (*Bakinskii rabochii*, *Zaria vostoka*, *Rabochaia gazeta*) and literary journals (*Zhizn’ iskusstva*, *Krasnaia nov’*, *Zvezda*, and *Ogonek*) during this period.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis in the original.

well as to the schoolchildren. A veteran teacher delivers a passionate and engaging lesson that serves as one of the novel's many positive examples of workers engaged in a process of creative labor. On a deeper level, it is a demonstration of *Hydrocentral's* epistemology; in addition to teaching about Armenia's geographical and economic *byt*, the lesson about the sun works as a vehicle – one of many – for inscribing Shaginian's own pedagogical method in the novel.

Anush Malkhazian first makes her appearance in Chapter One, “The Labor Exchange” (*Birzha truda*), where Arno accurately identifies her as “old, experienced – a born pedagogue,” and notes that the muff she is holding is empty without student notebooks.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter Three (“Morning” (*Utro*)), the reader learns that Malkhazian was fired from her previous teaching assignment due to a bluntly expressed opinion of the new GUS<sup>4</sup>-approved textbooks to a local Narkompros<sup>5</sup> official: “She was horrified – These strident, empty little books didn't give the kids anything – neither knowledge, nor images, nor feelings. They were incapable of stimulating children's minds. They ruined the children's language, both their native tongue as well as Russian.”<sup>6</sup> After thoroughly condemning the officially sanctioned textbooks, Anush describes good teachers as “artists” of their craft; they do not follow a year-long template of lessons written in advance by distant bureaucrats but instead work lesson-by-lesson, attuned and constantly adjusting instruction to meet their students' particular needs and interests. Anush is a believer in the perennial socialist favorite – community work (*obshchestvennaia rabota*), and an advocate of one of the newest teaching methodologies of the time – the laboratory method.

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<sup>3</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> State Education Council (*Gosudarstvennyi uchenyi sovet*).

<sup>5</sup> Peoples' Commissariat of Education (*Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia*).

<sup>6</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 52.

Formally known as the laboratory-brigade method of instruction (*laboratorno-brigadnyi metod obucheniia*),<sup>7</sup> it was the official pedagogical approach in the USSR from the late 1920s to early 1930s. At the elementary school level, it took the place of traditional teacher-led lessons to the whole class. Instead, students were assigned to “brigades” and worked cooperatively with limited teacher guidance to complete tasks and projects. Under the laboratory method, pedagogues were no longer known as “teachers” (*uchitelia*), but instead were called “leaders” (*rukovoditeli*). Student brigades could be organized according to differing criteria; they could be heterogeneous, combining students of varying ability and/or age levels, or homogeneous, grouping students according to ability levels (“A” students in one brigade, “B” students in another, etc.). The brigades could also be created for reasons of practical convenience according to students’ places of residence. Student brigades’ achievements were assessed collectively; no individual grades were given.

Organized according to the laboratory-brigade method, Anush Malkhazian’s lesson on the sun is informational content given in a literary format. It begins as an itinerary of the travels of the sun each morning. On the first day of her new assignment, Anush piques her students’ interest by asking: “What does morning start with in our country?” After the students give a number of entertaining answers, she answers that it is the sun that begins each morning. The sun thus becomes the connective tissue of her lesson, which combines content knowledge in a

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<sup>7</sup> The laboratory-brigade method was denounced by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in a resolution dated August 25, 1932, entitled “On educational programs and norms in elementary and middle schools” (“Ob uchebnykh programmakh i rezhime v nachal’noi i srednei shkole”). The resolution stated that while “the new programs have improved, [they] still have significant defects. The most serious [of which] is the overloading of curricula which has the result that a number of school subjects are covered superficially, without enough assimilation and strengthening of knowledge.” (N.A. Konstantinov, E.N. Medynskii, and M.F. Shabaeva, “Sovetskaia shkola i pedagogika v period nastupleniia sotsializma po vsemu frontu i uprocheniia sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva (1931-1941),” in *Istoriia pedagogiki* (Moskva: “Prosveshchenie,” 1982). Source: <http://www.detskiysad.ru/ped/ped135.html>). Last accessed December 22, 2016.

multiplicity of disciplines – among them, geography, geology, mathematics, engineering, biology, botany, and economics.

By narrating the sun’s downward itinerary, from Armenia’s mountainous peaks to its table lands, Anush introduces four “zones” that make up Armenia and describes the terrain, natural resources, economic basis and demographic features of each: the pasture zone located on the mountain slopes, where nomadic peasants maintain their livestock in spring and summer; the garden-orchard zone situated in the valleys at the base of the mountains, where fruits, grains, and vegetables are grown; the field-crop zone on the table lands, where grains and cotton are grown; and, finally, the urban zone; the towns and cities where markets and factories are located. She then divides the class into the three rural zones, forming a student brigade for each and designating her role as that of “the City,” where the members of each zone will come to buy and sell goods. Every brigade member, she explains, will be responsible for becoming an expert on their assigned zone. They will create physical models of lodging, implements, and animals, learn about the natural resources, people and economic relations endemic to their zone. They will keep an inventory of people, tools, crops, and animals, where they will record all their business transactions (buying and selling) with “the City.” As each brigade becomes proficient in a content area or skill, Anush will assign additional work of greater depth and challenge. Unsurprisingly, the children are extremely excited by this hands-on, *byt*-filled undertaking and cannot wait to get started. Malkhazian wants to begin a “lesson on water” she has prepared, but as a battle-tested pedagogue, she recognizes that the children are not ready for it; they are demanding more details about their zones, which she provides.

In addition to providing a road map of the sun’s travels, and insofar as it shapes the children’s inquiry, Malkhazian’s “Lesson on the Sun” is at the phenomenological level

Shaginian's own schematic of the path to apprehending objective reality. Students will reach the deepest and most thorough understanding of their native land by literally immersing themselves in the everyday *realia* of its multiple and endlessly interrelated aspects. However, they will do so within a conventional (*uslovnyi*) framework – as miniature recreations of the three geographical zones using paper, pencils, scissors, glue, clay, and other schoolroom materials. In addition to synthesizing content knowledge from multiple academic disciplines, Anush's students will gain vital experiential skills that will serve them well as future workers who contribute to the socialist construction of their country.

Anush's second project - her "Lesson on Water" – similarly foregrounds Shaginian's epistemology; like the lesson on the sun, it presents the synthesis of conventionality and everyday life as a way of apprehending objective reality. Unlike the earlier lesson, however, the lesson on water exemplifies another of Shaginian's trademark conventional devices: the interrupted narrative. In this it more closely resembles the detective story of how Arno became a barber.

The first time the lesson on water appears is as a transition from the lesson on the sun, which Anush presents to her students using the familiar conventional device of vivification: "While it [the sun] was running down from the mountain tops, [its friend and comrade] was running down them as well. That friend and comrade is water."<sup>8</sup> It is here that the lesson on water is interrupted; the second bell has rung, meaning that teachers and students are supposed to be at their next classes. The lesson on water is continued as Anush's mental rehearsal at home later the same day. Like the lesson on the sun, Anush's rehearsal entails a detailed recounting of her lesson flow: first, a review of the agricultural zones and the importance of water; next, the

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<sup>8</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 57.

development of irrigation systems followed by a brief history of their (mis)management and associated conflicts. At this point she will introduce hydropower, explain the workings of a watermill, and have the students build a small model of one over the irrigation ditch. This is the extent of her knowledge; she wants to continue the lesson, but “Anush Malkhazian herself had only a vague understanding of electricity and of how hydroelectric stations are built. This was her weakest area. Sighing, she recalled how she had gone everywhere looking for books on the subject, but there weren’t any such books. [She recalled] how she asked specialists [on the subject], but they did not know how to answer her questions; they couldn’t explain in simple and graphic terms what she and the children needed to know.<sup>9</sup> In order to remedy the deficit, she resolves to arrange an overnight class trip to MizinGES to give herself, as well as her students, real-life experiential knowledge of the new technology. The importance of having technical knowledge *and* the ability to communicate it to the average layperson “in simple and graphic terms” will be demonstrated in the final chapter of the dissertation.

The lesson on water makes its next and final appearance only in the novel’s eponymous final chapter, (Chapter Sixteen, “The Hydrocentral” (*Gidrotsentral’*)), which opens with the student excursion by train to MizinGES. Upon their arrival at the train station teacher and students are conveyed by truck to the construction site. They spend half an hour inspecting various buildings before a worker directs them to the mechanic’s shop where the chief engineer is about to give his report. The report is the long-awaited continuation of (but not conclusion to) the lesson on water; it is here that Anush and her students finally learn, in understandable and vivid terms, how water is harnessed to make electricity. They also learn the plan for the future Hydrocentral, a network of hydroelectric stations throughout the Transcaucasus that will

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 66.

permanently address the seasonal peaks and dips in demand for water and electric power that have historically plagued the region and slowed the pace of economic development. But this final image – a multiplicity of power stations interlinked to bring about socialist economic progress – is never realized in the novel. Importantly, in a stunning parallel to the unfinished hydro project, the end of the lesson on water never comes for the old teacher, her students, or the reader. A mirror image to the novel’s beginning narrative about narrative (the story of how Arno became a barber), the final narrative of the Chief Engineer’s Report/Lesson on Water is interrupted by the narrator before its most interesting part – details of the revised design of the station—and in the most conventional way imaginable. The narrator/Shaginian intrudes upon the scene to suggest to her audience that “[T]he reader, perhaps, is tired like Anush Malkhazian’s children. And the author, like the old teacher, senses with bitterness in her heart that the reader’s attention is ebbing, that his eyes are closing and saying to this book ‘enough...’”<sup>10</sup> Although the final page of the novel consists of a restatement of *Hydrocentral*’s central object lesson (that is, that in every life endeavor, we come to understand the proper way to begin it only after we have completed it), the narrator’s abrupt interjection at this juncture is an open acknowledgement of the indisputable fact that reading Shaginian’s “hymn to labor” is itself a herculean exertion.

### **The Architectural Debate: Concrete versus Tufa**

In addition to the multitude of fictional and non-fictional genres that form the building blocks of *Hydrocentral*, one episode can best be described as a generic hybrid: a debate about the relative merits of tufa (*tuf*), a stone used in building and found in abundance in Armenia, versus

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 462.

concrete as construction materials. Stylistically and physically, it resembles Malkhazian's lessons in that it, too, foregrounds contemporary *realia* afloat in the novel's fictional current.

Shaginian interweaves the fictional and non-fictional elements of the episode by motivating the debate with a plot twist: the reader learns that a prominent government figure in the nearby city of Masis has been removed from his post. His removal triggers a cascade of events that steer historical progress into a new, as yet unknown direction. Shaginian uses the image of a bridge to provide a bird's eye view of the changes afoot:

More than government officials had disappeared: it was as if a gigantic drawbridge had been raised over the country in moments such as these, allowing the passage of waiting ships through it. Raised and hanging in mid-air, the bridge held back from its right and left streams of people, carts, and motorcyclists in their harmonious, everyday hustle and bustle trying to make the crossing to the other side. And below, like the waiting ships, were cloth-bound files, appointments to new positions broken off for no reason, business issues put on hold... [now] all hurrying to pass through.<sup>11</sup>

Among the myriad people, plans, objects, and conveyances streaming under the bridge, two construction materials, tufa and concrete, are poised to do battle: “[S]tone, more loudly and forcefully than anything else, began to speak, giving notice to the average citizen of the upheaval in store.” The traditional building material of Armenia, tufa is “deeply connected to the past, to veteran contractors, to the sweaty, Egyptian work of stonemasons working alone and face to face with it.”<sup>12</sup> The arrival of its arch-enemy, concrete, is described as an invading scourge: “[U]nder the raised drawbridge, [concrete's] first warlike incursions begin to float [downstream] ... [I]t

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 274-75.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 275.

seemed that in the sphere of construction, an ancient dying race was being replaced by a new one coming into being.”<sup>13</sup>

Next, the battle moves indoors and is waged in human form as a debate. LEF artist Arshak Gnuni has found a new and more socially progressive outlet for his raging passion in campaigning on behalf of concrete as the construction material of choice for Armenia’s nascent socialist society: “To hell with stone! Make way for concrete!” he shouts at a group of academicians. He argues that tufa is ideologically suspect: “It was the church who gave us stone to build with! Nowadays factories and industry are giving us concrete. In every place where industrial construction is underway, we see new construction material. Why should we be left behind?”<sup>14</sup> For their part, the professors are steadfast in their support of stone. One contends that it is senseless to use expensive concrete when tufa is cheap and readily available; another cautions that Armenia’s national architectural style is in peril if concrete becomes the preferred construction material; yet a third, the most politically astute of the lot, points out the bourgeois-capitalist origins of concrete and asks, “Why should we be dragged about on a leash by the capitalist West?”<sup>15</sup> This polemic is typical of the early Soviet period, when virtually every aspect of human existence – art, architecture, science, history, and gender relations, to name a few – was subject to regular and intense scrutiny for its ideological soundness. The narrator pokes fun at the widespread phenomenon when describing Anush Malkhazian’s geology lesson to her students while on the train to MizinGES: After providing a colorful description of the surface features of the land, “the wise Anush Malkhazian immediately dismissed them as defective and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 275-76.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 277.

ideologically uncommitted (*bezydeinye*) and began describing the stalagtitic mysteries inside the caves – tasty geological layers – and laid them out before the children like sandwiches.”<sup>16</sup>

Shaginian’s purpose in including the stone debate is twofold: the bridge scene and debate are pieces of contemporary *byt* presented within the novel’s conventional narrative. The other purpose, emblemized in the bird’s-eye view of the drawbridge, is to show the totality of the people, goods, and chattel from all sides and in cross section. Shaginian noted in her diaries that “[t]he chief goal of the novel was to show *Hydrocentral* – from all sides and with the country and social relations as the background and its theme – to present it from a planning angle (*v planovom razreze*) and, in general, to reveal one or another facet of socialist planning in every chapter.”<sup>17</sup> Shaginian constructs an extended metaphor of socialist planning as a raised drawbridge and combines it with long descriptive lists of everyday minutiae (*byt*), confronting *uslovnost’* with *byt* to reveal the objective reality of socialist construction – in particular, the end of the rehabilitation period and beginning of the reconstructive – as an unceasing ebb and flow of energy and ideas.

### **Industrial Reports**

The final nonfictional genre featured in *Hydrocentral* is the industrial report. There are two iterations of it: early in the novel, as the summarized contents of Arno’s archives (“The Chigdym Affair” (*Chigdymskoe delo*); and in the novel’s final chapter, as the report of the Chief Engineer to the assembled workers, management, and guests at MizinGES. As with every other genre, Shaginian bends the typical boundaries between fiction and non-fiction here as well. Both industrial reports are physically distinct from the rest of the narrative; they are either afforded

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 448.

<sup>17</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 379 [11 July 1930].

their own subheadings, have reduced margins, or a combination of the two. Thematically, they are closely related, as the Chigdym Affair describes an earlier hydroelectric construction project in a neighboring village, while the Chief Engineer's presentation is likewise a historical and technical summary of the trials and tribulations of the current MizinGES project. Both reports describe stages in the human technical and social learning curve in a dialectical fashion; not only does the dialectic inhere in each episode taken by itself, but the two episodes are interrelated dialectically – the previous Chigdym project is a less perfect version of the current project at MizinGES. These reports will figure prominently in Part II of this dissertation, which undertakes to identify the philosophical ground on which Shaginian's own construction project takes shape.

## **PART II: BASE**

## INTRODUCTION

### IDEALISM AND MATERIALISM: CONFUSION OR CONFLATION?

Although it was completed four years before the adoption of Socialist Realism as the official artistic method for Soviet authors, *Hydrocentral* meets its official criteria – “the truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development,” which simultaneously “must be combined with the task of ideologically remolding and educating [the working people] in the spirit of Socialism.”<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in Part I, the novel was aligned with the official definition because *Hydrocentral* itself was a formative influence on it. And yet, Shaginian’s “hymn to labor” simultaneously upholds and strangely undercuts the ostensibly materialist underpinnings of this official literary method. The problem, according to Shaginian’s contemporary, critic Mikhail Lifshits (1905-1983), is that throughout her literary career Shaginian “had difficulty distinguishing idealism from materialism.”<sup>2</sup> It is this “confusion,” whether unconscious or intentional, and the ways in which plays out in *Hydrocentral*, that is the focus of Part II. Before continuing with that analysis, it makes sense pause briefly here and give brief definitions of the two philosophies and offer a hypothesis as to the causes of Shaginian’s tendency to conflate idealism and materialism.

In general terms, the philosophy of idealism holds that we can never actually know “the thing in-itself,” in the sense that any object the human mind perceives can never be known for what it truly is because what is there can only be perceived through the filter of our human consciousness. This means that what is truly “real” is the result of our own exercise of mind or

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<sup>1</sup> “Ustav Soiuza,” 712.

<sup>2</sup> Lifshits’ polemic with Shaginian will be taken up in Chapter 8 of Part II.

reason, or as the idealist philosopher G.W.F Hegel put it, “What is rational is real; And what is real is rational.”<sup>3</sup> Shaginian, who began learning German at the age of four or five, studied Hegel as a university student and, at one point, even intended to write her thesis on his theory of Becoming (*Das Werden*). Once as an octogenarian Shaginian was asked by a young man how she regarded Hegel. She indignantly replied, “That’s almost like asking how I regard Goethe ... Hegel, Hegel scorches, he scorches! I’m an old woman, but I [still] can’t read *Science of Logic* with indifference. I remember how I read it as an eighteen-year-old in my first year in the Philosophy Department at the Higher Women’s Courses. It burned me to the core.”<sup>4</sup>

While the *Science of Logic* electrified Shaginian, it was Hegel’s pronouncements on the role of individual consciousness on the development of human history that are most salient to the cosmology of *Hydrocentral*. Hegel’s theory of historical development is teleological and rational, an upward dialectical spiraling of human consciousness toward the realization of universal human freedom as a merging with Absolute Spirit (God). Central to this process for Hegel is the intimate relationship between the development of subjective individual consciousness (as a finite form or part of Absolute Spirit) and the movement of objective human history. In *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1830), Hegel claimed that “[h]istory is a process whereby the spirit discovers itself and its own concept.”<sup>5</sup> What will be shown in the following episodes are the ways in which Shaginian echoes Hegel’s idealistic view of history by portraying historical movement as a chaotic dialectical struggle of individual human

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<sup>3</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. 6. Source: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/philosophy-of-right.pdf> Last accessed 12/17/16.

<sup>4</sup> K. Serebriakov, “O Mariette Shaginian,” *Voprosy literatury* 2 (1988): 197, 198.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*. Translated by H.B. Nisbet with an introduction by Duncan Forbes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 62.

consciousness (the Part) toward a deeper, more comprehensive knowledge of objective reality (the Whole).

Given that Shaginian's literary portrayal of socialist construction is *Hydrocentral's* central project, it comes as no surprise that materialism, especially the philosophy of dialectical (also known as historical) materialism of Karl Marx is featured prominently in the novel. Broadly speaking, the philosophy of materialism holds that every object in the universe is "the thing-in-itself," meaning that what the human mind perceives is what actually exists. According to the *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*, materialism holds that all thought is "causally dependent upon physical processes, or even reducible to them." Karl Marx, one of the Young Hegelians (also known as the Left Hegelians), used Hegel's teachings as a springboard for his own philosophical system. Like Hegel, Marx believed in an endpoint to history that resulted in complete human freedom, but disagreed on the means by which that endpoint would be achieved. Writing in *The German Ideology* (*Die Deutsche Ideologie*, 1845-46), Marx "stood Hegel on his head," declaring that "[l]ife is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the ontological movement was from Whole (objective economic conditions) to Part (the individual human being). Marx's view of historical development, in contrast to Hegel's, did not reflect a dialectical clash of ideas, but a very physical, materially-based conflict between economic classes of people. In Greek and Roman ancient times the conflict was between free men and slaves; later, under the system of feudalism, lords oppressed serfs; and in the current era of capitalist economic relations, the bourgeoisie kept the proletariat in poverty by alienating them from the product of their labor and the means of production. Marx believed the source of the problem lay in the institution of private ownership of property, which

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, 69.

was the source of human greed and conflicting economic interests. The solution to this endless cycle of class conflict and exploitation was through the elimination of private ownership of property that would bring about socialist economic relations in which workers would now be in control of both the product of their labor and the means of production. The abolition of private property would also mean that, eventually, economic classes and even wages would disappear. The result – Communism – would be the universal emancipation of humanity.

Shaginian was a relatively late convert to Marxism, but with the advent of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, her philosophical worldview was transformed. In the same way that Hegelian philosophy had “scorched” her as an 18-year-old university student, the October Revolution effected a total reincarnation of her world outlook:

When October came, I was already in my thirties. And I considered myself a profoundly old, worn out, exhausted person. ... I saw myself as an old woman; that is, my face [had] an expression of sleepy weariness with life, there was a kind of hopelessness in my eyes. In a word, I had already stopped counting on anything for myself... But with the advent of October, I changed physically, spiritually, psychologically, not just into a young person; I turned into a young girl with a desperate desire to work.<sup>7</sup>

Because Shaginian came to know and love German romantic idealism in the figures of Hegel and Goethe during the earliest, most formative years of her youth (she first read Goethe as a schoolgirl), it is my contention that the materialism of Marx and Lenin acquired in her thirties was never as deeply ingrained in her consciousness (or neural pathways) and that Marxism-Leninism became a materialist philosophical overlay to her more deeply-held idealist convictions. However, given that Marx derived his theory of history from that of Hegel, Shaginian’s acquisition of the overlay was not overly fraught with complications. If one puts to

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<sup>7</sup> “Marietta Shaginian. Vliublennaia molniia.” Documentary originally aired on Russian television. Source <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMnqNva98b0> Last accessed 11/17/16.

the side for the moment the central issue of what Reality *is*, it is easy to imagine how this ideological grafting occurred. Marxism and Hegelianism have two significant areas of commonality: first, they are both teleological, and the *telos* in each case will be characterized by complete human freedom. Secondly, both Hegel and Marx were deeply convinced that the nature of historical movement is a dialectic – messy, even bloody at times, but always moving forward toward an endpoint.

Shaginian’s prickly response to the young man who asked her about Hegel demonstrates that while Hegel “scorched” her, it was Goethe who was her first and life-long love. Those who knew Shaginian personally or were regular readers of her work were aware of his centrality to her aesthetic and epistemological worldview. Simultaneously a product of and seminal influence on his cultural milieu, Goethe was, philosophically speaking, an idealist like Hegel, but one with an appreciation for the pantheistic teachings of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). Because the finer points of Spinoza’s pantheism will be discussed in a later chapter, I will focus here on the ways Goethe’s and Hegel’s worldviews coincided. Like Hegel, Goethe shared a Part-to-Whole ontological view of the universe. He believed that the Absolute – what he called God or the Unity of Nature – was the dialectical relationship among its many parts, a unity in multiplicity, or what Shaginian referred to as “unity in heterogeneity” (*edinstvo v mnogoobrazii*). Shaginian believed (as do many present-day scholars) that Goethe’s worldview informed his scientific method and that his investigations in the fields of botany and comparative anatomy formed the foundation upon which Charles Darwin (1809-1882) developed his theory of the “transmutation” (evolution) of species. Darwin himself acknowledged Goethe as an “extreme partisan” of his theory in the introduction to the third edition of *The Origin of Species* (1859-

1872).<sup>8</sup> Goethe's belief that true knowledge was an *experiential* quest to apprehend the Absolute/Unity of Nature (the Whole) was a theme that also extended to his literary works: *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship* (*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 1795-96), the story of a young man's coming of age, is the origin of the literary term *Bildungsroman*.

According to Lifshits, Shaginian's confusion of materialism and idealism was a professional weakness in her literary essays (*ocherki*). He humorously relates several examples of it in a 1954 review of *Shaginian's Diary of a Writer (1950-52)*. What Lifshits does not mention, however, is that Shaginian's "mix and match" approach to idealism and materialism extended to her interpretation of the philosophers themselves, particularly after 1917. The grafting of Marxist-Leninist materialism on top of Shaginian's foundation of idealism following the Bolshevik Revolution was reflected in her literary output. Her vacillating treatment of Goethe is a case in point.

In addition to half a dozen articles and essays for newspapers and journals on Goethe, Shaginian produced two major works: the aforementioned pre-revolutionary travelogue *Journey to Weimar* (*Puteshestvie v Veimar*, 1914), which portrays Goethe as the quintessential German romantic idealist in the field of literature, and, in the realm of science, as a successful researcher blessed with rigorous analytical skills and intuition in equal measure. She connects Goethe's "intuitive spirit" to his passion for acquiring experiential knowledge as a vital adjunct to formal "book learning." Some 35 years later, Shaginian penned a biography of her hero, *Goethe* (*Gete*, 1950), published in the last years of the Stalin era. In it, Shaginian characterizes Goethe's scientific pursuits as being grounded in dialectical materialism, but then uses his affinity for

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<sup>8</sup> *The Origin of Species by Charles Darwin, a Variorum Text*, ed. Morse Peckham (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), 61.

Spinoza's pantheistic view of Nature to support her contention.<sup>9</sup> Gone are all references to his intuitive faculties, faculties that Goethe himself had acknowledged as the basis for his ability to view Nature's Unity in its heterogeneity. Closer to the truth was Shaginian's admission that Goethe was no historical materialist. "Goethe's theory of knowledge is dialectical – but not dialectical *to the end*," she confessed. "Goethe's dialecticism (*dialektizm*), like his materialism, is inconsistent. Goethe as a materialist did not understand the laws of social development; Goethe as a dialectician did not understand the necessity of "sudden leaps" in nature, of revolutionary changes in history."<sup>10</sup>

Shaginian's references to Hegel in her writings are much more infrequent. Her major work on Hegel was limited to an article celebrating the two hundred-year anniversary of his birth. In the article, entitled "On the Nature of Time in Hegel" ("*O prirode vremeni u Gegelia*", 1970), Shaginian described Hegel as an idealist philosopher with a "substrate" of materialism. She cites a passage in *Philosophy of Nature* in which Hegel defines time as becoming, as containing what she perceives as a "substrate of the existing/the real" (*substrat sushchego*), or the presence of "something material underneath the ideal."<sup>11</sup> While she admits that "it is possible that professional philosophers will find my reasoning to be naïve and dilettantish, anyone who, immediately after reading Marx and Lenin, has had to closely read Hegel more than once will

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<sup>9</sup> Marietta Shaginian, *Gete*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 8 (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1989), 129.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>11</sup> Marietta Shaginian, "O prirode vremeni u Gegelia," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6 (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura,"), 733.

understand me: it explains the unusual ease and philosophical inevitability of turning the Hegelian dialectic from its head to its feet accomplished by Marxism.”<sup>12</sup>

The chapters of Part II will explore the ways in which Shaginian’s confluences of idealism and materialism, grounded as they are in her unique (and politically opportunistic) interpretations of Hegel and Goethe, work in tandem to paint a distinctive portrait of objective reality as unity in multiplicity through endless dialectical processes.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4:

### ARNO AND THE GERMAN WRITER: SOVIET INDUSTRY/GERMAN SOURCING

The economic debate between Arno and a visiting German writer is, like many other scenes in *Hydrocentral*, a “truthful, historically concrete portrayal of reality” in the form of a conversation topic that engaged Soviet socialist enthusiasts and their western visitors in the mid-to-late 1920s. Beginning in 1927, the USSR moved from the relative free-market deregulation of Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP) to the nationalization of “commanding heights” industries (such as manufacturing, metallurgy, energy and others) to a series of Five-year plans under Joseph Stalin (1878-1953). The polemic centered around the relative merits and shortcomings of the Soviet socialist planned economy – the first attempt in human history to implement Marx’s economic theory – and the free-market economic systems of capitalist countries of western Europe and North America. For the USSR, the stakes were enormous: if successful, the Bolshevik government would demonstrate the legitimacy of Marxism and thereby justify its own existence and the countless bloody sacrifices made in the name of the 1917 Revolutions and ensuing three years of Civil War.

In the context of *Hydrocentral*, the economic debate between Arno and the visiting writer resembles Anush’s lesson on the sun and water and the concrete-tufa debate in that here, too, Shaginian skillfully interweaves non-fictional topicality into the novel’s fictional body. It appears early in the narrative (Chapter Four: “The Railroad” [*Zheleznaiia doroga*]), during Arno’s train trip to MizinGES where he has landed as job as the site archivist. As in the novel’s other hybrid generic moments, Shaginian uses imagery and analogies drawn from multiple and disparate disciplines to demonstrate a Hegelian dialectical epistemology at multiple levels of the

novel's plot. On an individual level, the German writer gains a deeper understanding of the new economic reality "in its revolutionary development" in the course of his interaction with Arno. On a societal level, Arno's exegesis on the "new economic principle" describes the dialectical progression of history as the expansion of accumulated human knowledge.

The debate was, unsurprisingly, the episode most frequently cited by contemporary reviewers of *Hydrocentral*. Arno's rebuttal to the writer's criticisms of the new economic system articulates the author's conception of the country's *Zeitgeist* at the inception of the first Five Year Plan (1927-1932). Shaginian once again combines conventionality (*uslovnost'*) and the realia of everyday life (*byt*) to portray the new objective reality (*bytie*), harnessing both conventional (*uslovnaia*) and everyday (*bytovaia*) multiplicity as her primary tool. Yet the objective, "revolutionary" reality she reveals emerges from her interpretation of a dialectical epistemology grounded in the nineteenth-century idealist thought of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, as well as the twentieth-century Modernist *Lebensphilosophie* of Georg Simmel.

Here, in the account of the debate, multiplicity as conventionality appears in the familiar guise of repeated narrative, first as the narrator's "pre-telling" of Arno's speech, next as the speech itself, and finally, some 55 pages later, as the German visitor's own rebuttal to the criticisms he had leveled in the first place. In its first iteration, the narrator begins by characterizing the language of Arno's presentation: "[Arno] bowed to the writer and began to speak to him in the most beautiful German, the language of Simmel<sup>1</sup> and the philologist

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Simmel (1858-1918), German sociologist and philosopher who was an academic outsider. "[I]n his academic career Simmel was long frustrated, apparently because of his Jewish origin, his nonprofessorial brilliance, and his intellectual attitude, which some felt to be destructive. It was 15 years before he even became titular professor, and all attempts to achieve a full professorship failed until, at the age of 56, he was finally called to a

Chamberlain,<sup>2</sup> a language full of symbolic strength and established culture, of that lofty dilettantism by which its speaker uses analogies drawn from the repertoire of the exact sciences.”<sup>3</sup> The narrator’s mention of Simmel and Chamberlain as representatives of “lofty dilettantism” is as deliberate as it is odd.

At issue in the debate is the German writer’s perception of the lack of a “new principle” at work in the Soviet Union. First, he compares the new Soviet system to the economic practices of his homeland, remarking arrogantly, “Yes, you here have started to make things and have begun talking a lot about the fact that you are making them. But we [in Germany] have been making things of a very high quality for a very long time, [and] we don’t waste time talking about it.”<sup>4</sup> Next, he opines that worker productivity is low and product quality poor under the new system because workers are constantly hampering one another by jostling for position: “[E]veryone wants to give orders and no one wants to follow them.”<sup>5</sup> Arno counters that the new principle is, in fact, this very “bothering one another” (*meshat’ drug drugu*):

“You wanted to see a new principle here in our country, correct?” thus Red started his speech. “But in order to see the new principle, you have to think causally. Why is it, for what reason, are the things you mention happening? Because it is a phenomenon of societal heat. When molecules are heated, they start to move, jostle each other, and expand. We here, now, we are the molecules, we’ve been heated up by the explosion of revolution. We move, bump into each other, become enlarged, and perhaps that expresses itself in what you call

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chair at the University of Strassburg in 1914” Source: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/people/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-biographies/georg-simmel>. Last accessed 11/8/16.

<sup>2</sup> Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927), born in England and later moved to Germany. He was the author of several books (in both English and German) on natural science and political philosophy, as well as an 800-page biography of Goethe published in 1912. He was also the son-in-law of composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883). Chamberlain’s racist views became very popular with the Nazi Party in the 1930s.

<sup>3</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral*, 97.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

“bothering one another.” But how else can we build a new society? How do we find limits [*mera*] in this process? And what are limits anyway? ... The fact that we bump against each other and get in each other’s way is actually a meeting of forces, a path to balance, a search for limits. That is in fact the principle of our new system.”<sup>6</sup>

Arno’s emphasis on process is made even clearer at the end of his speech, when he redirects the writer’s focus from “the thing (produced)” to “the thing *plus...*”:

“You said: we make things, and Europe makes things, makes them better, cheaper, cleaner, and faster than we do. Yes, Europe makes things, but what we’re making isn’t things at all! That’s the crux of the issue, that’s what you didn’t see, there’s the new principle, there’s your explanation!”

“You’re not making things? Then what are you making?”

“We are making *planned* things (*planovuiu veshch*’), my dear Herr! The difference? The difference is enormous, colossal. At every factory, every construction site, every manufacturing plant you will visit, what is being produced, or refined or built is a thing plus a new society, a thing plus a labor union, plus the political armoring of our youth, plus club work, plus a workers’ conference, plus inspection, plus inventory, plus the plan!”<sup>7</sup>

Although ostensibly Arno functions as an impassioned statesman for the Soviet economic experiment, he becomes, in Shaginian’s hands, a covert operator whose idealist philosophical formulations resonate loudly with those of Goethe and Hegel. Having become acquainted with the literary and scientific writings of Goethe as a teenager Shaginian, according to one critic, re-read his complete collected works in the original nearly every six months throughout her long life.<sup>8</sup> Reading and reflecting on Goethe was an indispensable part of Shaginian’s daily routine: “Before sitting down to write and beginning my work day in general, I would invariably read two or three pages of Goethe as a way of putting my thoughts in order. This was just as essential

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>8</sup> M. Dimov, “Marietta the Flying Dutchman,” *Soviet Literature* 2 (1986): 147.

to me as bathing.”<sup>9</sup> In several diary entries she also conducted an internal polemic with a number of Goethe’s scientific ideas, such as those in “On Morphology” (*Zur Morphologie*).<sup>10</sup> Here he outlines the difference in meaning between the terms *Gestalt* and *Bildung* – both usually translated as “form(ation)” in English – that works beautifully as a succinct summary of Arno’s argument and as well as the root of the German writer’s misunderstanding of the “new principle”:

The Germans have a word for the complex of existence presented by a physical organism: *Gestalt* [structured form]. With this expression they exclude what is changeable and assume that an interrelated whole is identified, defined, and fixed in character.

But if we look at these *Gestalten*, especially the organic ones, we will discover that nothing in them is permanent, nothing is at rest or defined – everything is in a flux of continual motion. This is why German frequently and fittingly makes use of the word *Bildung* [formation] *to describe the end product and what is in the process of production as well*.<sup>11</sup>

The German writer errs in conceiving of the principles as imposing, static structures (*Gestalten*), when Arno’s explanation suggests that the new principle consists of a dynamic process. Only by *combining* the terms of Goethe’s opposition (*Gestalt* and *Bildung*) into result *plus* process do we arrive at the authentically “new principle.”

However, as will be seen again and again, this “new principle,” in the universe of *Hydrocentral*, regardless of Arno’s explanations to the contrary, consists entirely of endless becoming, of struggle and process. The German’s snide remark that the Soviet economy has

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<sup>9</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 96 [22 September 1924].

<sup>10</sup> See *Dnevnik*, 72 [11 December 1923] for her thoughts on the essay. See also *Dnevnik*, 280 and 393 [25 January 1929 and 5 January 1931, respectively].

<sup>11</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “The Purpose Set Forth,” *On Morphology*, in *Scientific Studies*, ed. Douglas Miller (series – *Goethe Edition*, vol. 12). (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988), 63-4.

“started to make things,” and that its spokespeople “have begun talking a lot about the fact that [they] are making them” is, from his (and any westerner’s) perspective, right on the money.

During his visit to MizinGES, he does not see a single finished product of any type. In fact, the high point of his stay, an evening program in which he is to be introduced and welcomed as a guest, never takes place; instead it is derailed by a flurry of workers’ well-founded complaints about poor management at the site.

Arno’s “thing *plus..*” has direct resonance as well with Hegel’s concept of Becoming (*Das Werden*), a notion that Shaginian returned to in her writings on numerous occasions. As mentioned earlier, she had first been introduced to Hegel in the early 1910s as a student of philosophy in Moscow and, in fact, initially planned to write a master’s thesis on “Hegel’s Theory of Becoming as Containing the Whole” (*Teoriia stanovleniia kak sodержashchego v sebe tseloe – u Gegelia*).<sup>12</sup> Some 60 years later, at the age of 82, in an article entitled “On the Nature of Time in Hegel” (*O prirode vremeni u Gegelia*, 1970), Shaginian returns to Hegel’s notion of “Becoming,” characterizing it as “one of the most important first principles (*osnovy*) of Hegelianism” and citing in support of this a passage from the *Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807):

For the real subject-matter is not exhausted in its purpose, but in working the matter out; nor is the mere result attained the concrete whole itself, but the result along with the process of arriving at it. The purpose [in and] of itself is a lifeless universal, just as the general drift is a mere activity in a certain direction, which is still without its concrete realisation; and the naked result is the corpse of the system which has left its guiding tendency behind it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marietta Shaginian. *Chelovek i vremia. Istoriia chelovecheskogo stanovleniia*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1 (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1986), 532.

<sup>13</sup>G.W.F Hegel, Preface, §3. *Phenomenology of Mind*. Source: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ph/phprefac.htm> Last accessed 10/2/16. “From Harper & Row’s Torchbook’s edition (1967) of the *Phenomenology* (1807), translated by J B Baillie (1910), from University of Idaho, Department of Philosophy, thanks to Jean McIntire. § numbers from the Baillie translation have been

Shaginian goes on to interpret Hegel's words for the reader in layman's terms:

Here, exactly, like a formula, Hegel conveys his understanding of the *whole* thing (the act), not as a "naked process" exempted from its realization, but as the result along with the entire process of *becoming* (Werden). *Every* step, every change in the process is essential and not exclusive.<sup>14</sup>

While for Hegel, the real crux of the matter lies in a consciousness of both purposeful striving (the Becoming) and its final result, for Shaginian, it is Becoming – each step in a continuous process – that is foregrounded in Arno's explanation of the new principle as "the thing *plus...*" For Arno, as for Shaginian, the "real subject matter" is the struggle to establish socialist relations of labor through the abolition of private property and the nationalization of industry.

Arno's gloss on the movement of heated molecules as a "search for limits" is a layman's illustration of another Hegelian formulation as well: dialectical movement. Though the Hegelian dialectic is widely known in terms of its three stages - thesis, antithesis and synthesis (terms first used by Kant) – Hegel himself described each of these as a "moment." Hegel's first stage, or moment, occurs when our understanding makes an initial distinction between the self and the other and sees the two as independent and self-sufficient entities. In terms of Arno's "revolutionary molecules," this first dialectical moment entails an awareness that each molecule is a distinct and complete entity in itself. The second phase, which Hegel termed the "negatively rational moment," involves the realization that the initial *distinction* between self and other actually posits an *interrelationship*, meaning that neither entity is truly self-sufficient. This is the stage in which Arno's human molecules find themselves, experiencing the discomfort of interrelationship – pushing and shoving, "getting in each other's way" – but lacking, as yet, any

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inserted into the text of the Baillie translation and linked to explanations by J N Findlay.  $\Phi$  links to original German text [link]: [Phänomenologie des Geistes.](#)"

<sup>14</sup> Shaginian, "O prirode," 734-5.

way of resolving that impasse. The final moment, which Hegel termed “speculative” or “positively rational,” comes about when the entities realize that the only way to resolve the contradiction between independent and interdependent (and acquire a higher level of understanding) is to reach a mutual awareness of self *in* other. This moment, too, will come in *Hydrocentral*.

An onlooker to Arno’s debate – a mustachioed railroad engineer – opines that it isn’t only workers who are interfering with each other, but also the multitude of “tourists” who visit the factories, farms, and construction sites and whose presence drains valuable resources: workers are pulled off their jobs to serve as guides and official vehicles must be diverted to drive tourists around. Arno counters that this tourism actually works to educate the public and therefore plays an indispensable role:

Everyone who feels like it comes out in droves to the factories, they get in the way of the work being done, they interrupt the workers. [Comrade Engineer here] used a very appropriate word – he called it tourism. But this too is another new principle – the new principle of universal education. It’s true that we lose in one way, but we gain in another. All the millions of molecules we’ve stirred up and heated, they can’t learn what they need to in school. There isn’t a single Narkompros<sup>15</sup> anywhere that could teach them. ... And so, there you have it – the overhead cost to our economy is the education and enlightenment of the masses. It is exactly this free tourism by which we educate the masses, and we ourselves are endlessly learning from them in turn, from their presence, from their criticisms, from their exactingness.<sup>16</sup>

What the railroad engineer calls “free tourism” – and Arno justifies as a vehicle for mass education – is described in dialectical terms. Hegel’s third moment – the development of mutual

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<sup>15</sup> Narkompros = People’s Commissariat of Education (*Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia*).

<sup>16</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*, 98-9.

awareness of self in other – will emerge from the respective self-interests of workers and “tourists,” which turn out to benefit both constituencies.

Shaginian presents real educational progress as the result of a direct exchange of experience and struggle, and not only *between* “people-molecules.” “Free tourism” is an especially apt formulation for describing the consumers of this “mass enlightenment” – a largely illiterate rural populace that lacks even a rudimentary formal education. Arno’s explanation reflects Shaginian’s interest in Hegel’s theory of cultural development as a dialectical progression through forms of knowledge. As another scholar writes, “Hegel’s absolute Knowing is not merely an intellectual event but a living experience and mode of life. As such it arises from concrete life-forms located in some definite historical time and in a social and geographical place.”<sup>17</sup> In the economic debate, Shaginian conceives of the new era of the first Five-Year plan in classic Hegelian fashion by concretizing its “life-forms” as rudely jostling people-molecules searching for new limits as an analogy of dialectical movement, and by likening Hegel’s Becoming as result plus process to Arno’s “new principle” as the “thing *plus*...” In this way, the movement and struggles that *Hydrocentral*’s characters experience represent, for Shaginian, a concrete, historically based example of the Hegelian path to absolute Knowing.

Not only is real educational process the result of exchange *between* people, but also – like the German writer’s process of grasping the “new principle” - *within* them, as their individual working out or thinking through content. The final rebuttal to the visiting writer’s criticisms of socialist construction is – in true dialectical fashion – given by the writer himself. After arriving at MizinGES, he is invited to dinner at the quarters of site chief Levon Davydovich, his Belgian

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<sup>17</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel. “Introduction,” in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Hegel’s Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translation and Running Commentary by Yirmiyahu Yovel. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2005, .5-6.

wife, and the elderly and deaf engineer Aleksandr Aleksandrovich, all of whom espouse *ancien régime* attitudes and values. When they begin complaining about the chaotic and primitive state of affairs at the site, the writer responds “Well, now, you are being too harsh. ... New social forms don’t come about without a struggle.”<sup>18</sup> It is here, in the internalization of Arno’s point of view, that the new economic principle at work is the “struggle for limits,” that we see (albeit at a different level), the recognition of self in other.

The dialectical processes described by Arno and enacted with the participation of the German writer are but two of a multitude of such moments that unfold and interact at every level of the plot, from the individual cognitive process of the German Writer, to Arno’s explanation of the “new principle,” to the lesson on water, which one contemporary reviewer called the novel’s overarching theme.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the novel’s *Gestalt* (in concert with its *Bildung*) bears some resemblance to that of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as a dialectical spiral of ever-widening spheres of consciousness. However, Shaginian’s *Hydrocentral* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology* eventually part ways: *Hydrocentral*’s spiral is more of a broken record of endless Becoming, since nothing gets built – while Hegel’s soars upward to the ultimate *telos* of universal consciousness as Absolute Spirit.

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<sup>18</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*, 134.

<sup>19</sup> B. Aikhenval’d, “Metod ‘Gidrotsentrali’,” *Krasnaia nov’* 2 (1933): 196.

## CHAPTER 5: THE CHIGDYM AFFAIR: CONSTRUCTION, RECONSTRUCTION, RECOLLECTION

Appearing some 75 pages after Arno's Economic Debate with the German writer, the Chigdym Affair – a chronicle of the trials and tribulations of the earlier erection of a hydroelectric plant in a neighboring town – further highlights the fraught quality of Shaginian's ostensibly Marxist paean to socialist construction. On the surface, the Chigdym Affair is an object lesson in Socialist labor relations, but the episode itself is grounded in idealist and modernist foundations that trace their origins to Hegel, Goethe, Albert Einstein, and, possibly, Henri Bergson in the way the episode presents the deformation of time, the nature and persistence of memory, and the presence of imagery that suggests vitalism/hylozoism.<sup>1</sup>

In the Chigdym episode, the principle of multiplicity manifests itself in both its everyday (as manifoldness) and conventional (as interrupted and repeated narratives) forms. The repeated narratives are Arno's creations, no fewer than four manipulations that add increasing amounts of conventionality (*uslovnost'*) to the mass of petty detail (*byt*), achieving thereby a vision of objective reality (*bytie*).

Arno's first pass at the narrative consists of the painstaking work of sorting through and organizing the chaos of raw unadulterated *byt* represented by the archival papers he has been asked to organize. It represents his first "conventional manipulation" of the material. As

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<sup>1</sup> These two doctrines are interrelated insofar as they share a belief in the existence of life or life force inhering in inorganic, or even immaterial substances (such as spirits). Originating in ancient Greece in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, the theory of hylozoism holds that all matter – organic and inorganic – possesses life. Vitalism, which originates with Aristotle (384-322 BCE), is the belief that all organic functions are the result of a vital principle existing in plants and animals, a kind of "soul" or impulse that cannot be explained in materialistic-mechanistic terms.

mentioned in Part I, the archival restoration has taken a full six days to complete. On the morning of the seventh day, it will be recalled, “all the debris of obsolete paper... had been settled in harmonious columns, ... numbered, bound” and given a coding system. When Office Manager Zakhar Petrovich arrives at the office, Arno (who naturally, was the very first to arrive), informs him that he has completed the job, that the archive is remarkable, but then breaks off his narrative – and keeps everyone in suspense – for a biblically-inspired seventh day “rest” and leisurely breakfast of tea and bread. Following the repast, he informs his boss that, among the masses of documents, he has discovered 17 files of “extraneous content” (*postoronnego sodержaniia*) that describe the earlier project at Chigdym and bear no relationship to the current project at MizinGES.

Already suspicious of Arno’s passionate interest in such low-paying and tedious work, Zakhar fears a national security leak and sends Arno away on a bogus errand in order to inspect the contents of the archive unhindered. He picks up one of the extraneous files, Folder No. 4 which, in addition to the actual “raw data” (pure *byt*) of archival documents, also contains Arno’s second conventional manipulation of the Chigdym narrative: his written summary (*konspekt*) and a mysterious-looking diagram. The diagram immediately puts everyone on edge when Volodia expresses his certainty that it contains an encoded message to British intelligence.

From the reader’s point of view, the ensuing five pages of text certainly seem to be extraneous content, irrelevant not only to MizinGES, but to the novel as a whole. Even their physical appearance differs markedly from the rest of the novel. Written in a laconic notational style, the report is printed in a tightly-packed, reduced typeface. Wide margins on both sides of the text accommodate brief headings, such as “Work Force,” “Difficulties in Acquiring Cement, Lime, and Shovels,” “Collective Agreement with Labor Union.” It is as if Shaginian spared no

effort in making this part of *Hydrocentral* as dry and unpalatable as possible – and succeeded admirably. For the first page and a half, multiplicity as manifold *realia* benumbs the reader, who must shuffle catatonically through endless ordered lists of techno-industrial *byt*: the types of industry existing in and around the village of Chigdym; the numerous tsarist-era enterprises that merged to form the Soviet conglomerate El'mashtrest<sup>2</sup>; the numbers and types of engineer-specialists hired to build the hydrostation; the actual construction plan broken down into phases; inventories of tools and supplies, wage tables; results of cement testing, and so on.

The second half of Arno's *précis* is marginally more engaging. Here, Arno's third conventional manipulation of raw archival data has resulted in a change from his laconic notational style into complete, but bone-dry, sentences with subjects and predicates. In this section, Arno's countless inventories of inanimate objects give way to various descriptions of human interaction; people now begin to be identified by their surnames in addition to their official titles. Disputes between labor and management, shortages, budget deficits, construction accidents, brawls, and acts of sabotage – all scrupulously recorded – culminate in the malfunction of the hydroelectric station when it is brought on line three months behind schedule. Thus ends the narrative that the reader has read peering, as it were, over the shoulders of Zakhar Petrovich, local Party secretary Agabek, and Volodia. Upon reaching the end of the summary, Agabek is troubled by a “vague recollection” (*smutnoe vospominanie*): “There was something strange, not altogether typical in what he had just read. It was familiar and yet unfamiliar; it had both an approximate resemblance to reality, and an obvious lack of resemblance.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *El'mashtrest* is the acronym for Electric Machine Construction Trust (*Elektromashinostroitel'nyi trest*).

<sup>3</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 193. The possible origins of Agabek's moment of *déjà-vu* will be explored below in the analysis of the philosophical undercurrents of this episode.

When Arno returns to the office, Local party committee chairman Agabek invites him to explain the contents of this indigestible story. In its fourth iteration, the Chigdym Affair receives an additional and invigorating dose of conventionality (*uslovnost'*), taking the form of an infinitely more compelling oral presentation by Arno to his co-workers. In this final rendition, Arno makes effective and ample use of artistic and literary convention. Referring to his summary as a “novel” (*roman*), “He began to re-tell it the way kids do when coming home from the cinema: first the place of action, then the actors, [then] the first scene, the second scene, the third scene.”<sup>4</sup> Arno further augments his novel’s artistic effect by imitating the voices, gestures, and expressions of the Chigdym project’s engineers, managers, union officials, workers, and peasants. He waxes poetic at unexpected moments in the story: He refers to the Soviet industrial conglomerate *El'mashtrest* as a “caudate wonder” (*khvostatoe chudishche*) and rhetorically asks: “Just read this character’s letter of recommendation.<sup>5</sup> What poet could possibly think up [something] that says so much and so little simultaneously?”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, he is enthralled by the sounds in the name of a local orchard owner, Meshadi Kyafar Karpali Kasim-Ogly: “Red [Arno] would pause repeatedly on the long tangle of this name, he would balance its sounds in the air and then issue a challenge to no one in particular: ‘Well now, just go ahead and try to come up with something like that on your own’.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>5</sup> The original word in Russian is *kharakteristika*. However, the English term “letter of recommendation” doesn’t capture the full meaning. In the Soviet era, such letters described not only a job candidate’s job qualifications, but also his or her political soundness, level of political-social activism, and general behavior.

<sup>6</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 197.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Following the performance, Arno makes the bizarre recommendation to the reader and all assembled that his archival feat of mock-biblical (re)creation be consigned to the dust-heap due to the contents' "datedness and uselessness" (*za davnost'iu i nenadobnost'iu*) and rationalizes the ridiculous amount of time and effort he put into creating a summary of the Chigdym documents by claiming that he "felt sorry for them" (*ia zakonspektiroval ikh iz zhalosti*),<sup>8</sup> and then adduces his mysterious parabolic graph (the one supposedly intended for British intelligence) to back up his assertion. According to Arno, the parabolic "Curve of the Rate of Obsolescence of Archival Documents" (*Krivaia tempa ustareniia arkhivnykh bumazhek*), shows that archives dating back to tsarist times continued to be used – and useful – for decades, yet were "motionless, horrifying in their durability. Over the course of a decade, neither conditions, relations [of production], nor prices – nothing changed. Time and everyday life [*byt*] stood still..."<sup>9</sup> As a point of comparison, Arno points out that the Chigdym and MizinGES archives, though only four years apart in age, represent "two different epochs" in the history of socialist construction. For one, labor relations were different: in the Chigdym epoch, labor unions fought against a wage system based on piecework, a system universally adopted in the current period of MizinGES and one that has resulted in increased productivity. For another, Chigdym was conceived "primitively" (*kustarno*), with no thought given to the future, while the MizinGES project assumes there will be future industrial development and increased energy demand. Because of the significant technological and economic advances in construction in the time between the two epochs, Arno's parabola makes the case that time itself has accelerated in recent years.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 199.

While ridiculous on its surface, the underlying significance of Arno's wearying tale of (re)creation and destruction is that it re-introduces the theme of narrative-as-palimpsest.<sup>10</sup> Each successive retelling of the construction story renders previous versions "unnecessary and outdated," for every narrative that follows incorporates the preceding version. The history of Chigdym (as contrasted with the experience at MizinGES) is an instructive reenactment: Arno's "Rate of Obsolescence Curve" is also a learning curve. The serial reconstructions of the construction of the Chigdym station essentially constitute a rehearsal for the later endeavor at MizinGES. The knowledge and experience acquired on the Chigdym project is cumulative; its lessons have become part of the store of knowledge from which the workers of MizinGES draw, and, unlike Folder No. 4, impossible to destroy. Unsurprisingly, it is Arno's suspicious "Curve of Obsolescence" – the pity-inspired interpretation of a musty heap of papers – that signals a modernist side to the Chigdym episode, one that reflects the ideas of duration espoused by French philosopher Henri Bergson as well as the cutting-edge scientific theories of relativism propounded by Dutch and German physicists Hendrik Lorentz (1853-1928) and Albert Einstein (1879-1955).

Shaginian was quite familiar with the thinking of these three men. Bergson's *Creative Evolution* first appeared in 1907. When, in 1908, the 20-year-old Shaginian enrolled in courses for women in the philosophy department of a university in Moscow, she reports (disingenuously excluding herself), that her fellow students were "girls from bourgeois families, who had already been affected by the decadence, neo-Kantianism and Bergsonism that had become fashionable."<sup>11</sup> In a diary entry of 1923, she mentions reading French astronomer Charles

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<sup>10</sup> The palimpsestic nature of the narrative act was described in Part I in the discussion of the fairy tales in the novel's opening chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Goering, "Marietta Shaginian," 1192.

Nordmann's (1881-1940) popular account of Einstein's theory of General Relativity that makes passing reference to Bergson's "luminous" study of psychological time.<sup>12</sup> Writing in 1914, Shaginian expressed the hope that Lorentz's theory would shed a new light on Goethe's optics experiments in the preceding century, experiments that had been dismissed by Goethe's scientific contemporaries as dilettantism.<sup>13</sup>

Now almost universally accepted, Einstein's theory posits that time is not absolute – meaning it can only be measured in relation to something else, and that our physiological perceptions of it as linear and passing at a constant rate do not fully describe its essence – hence, the acceleration of time in Arno's "Obsolescence Curve." His presentation-*cum*-object lesson paints a bright and optimistic future for socialist construction, and the addition of his diagram puts the Chigdym narratives into an overtly cutting-edge scientific context, as well as a Bergsonian one. The irony of the matter is that Arno's acceleration curve represents his *own* subjective understanding of the archive's contents. That Arno's experience of time is "psychological" resonates with Bergson's conception of subjective time as duration (*durée*). "Duration," in turn, bears similarities to Hegel's and Goethe's notions of objective reality as unending process that inform the economic debate between Arno and the German writer.

Party Cell Chairman Agabek's odd moment of *déjà-vu* (his "vague recollection" having "both an approximate resemblance to reality, and an obvious lack of resemblance"<sup>14</sup>) is another subjective experience of time, but it also draws upon Hegelian and Bergsonian notions about the

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Nordmann, *Einstein and the Universe: A Popular Exposition of the Famous Theory*. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd., 1922), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Shaginian, *Puteshestvie*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 193.

characteristics and persistence of memory. In her 1970 jubilee article on Hegel (“On the Nature of Time in Hegel,”) Shaginian devoted considerable attention to the topic of Hegelian memory, organizing her discussion around the famous “childbirth” passage from the Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Comparing the new epoch in which he lived as a “birth-time” and period of transition from old to new ways of thinking, Hegel continues:

But it is here as in the case of the birth of a child; after a long period of nutrition in silence, the continuity of the gradual growth in size, of quantitative change, is suddenly cut short by the first breath drawn – there is a break in the process, a qualitative change and the child is born. In like manner the spirit of the time, growing slowly and quietly ripe for the new form it is to assume, disintegrates one fragment after another of the structure of its previous world. ... This gradual crumbling to pieces, which did not alter the general look and aspect of the whole, is interrupted by the sunrise, which, in a flash and at a single stroke, brings to view the form and structure of the new world.<sup>15</sup>

Referring to this passage, Shaginian rhetorically asks the reader: “An embryo is alive, but *how*? It is not yet an individual entity, it hasn’t yet been given an independent existence. It is still, as it were, a small piece of Nature. It is without individuality, it does not yet have *self*-consciousness, but some kind of form of *consciousness* inherent to it – but still not an individual one.”<sup>16</sup>

Shaginian then takes the reader to the last pages of the *Phenomenology* to answer her question, explaining the role of recollection (*vospominanie*) in the embryo’s process of becoming a self-conscious individual. Writing first in layman’s terms, what she calls “general language,” Shaginian characterizes the embryo as an undifferentiated part of “Nature” (by which she means the physical universe). As long as it is in this state, unaware of its own individuality, the embryo has access to – “recollection of” – the enormous store of knowledge and experience acquired by

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<sup>15</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*. Preface, §11. Source: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ph/phprefac.htm>. Last accessed 12/27/16.

<sup>16</sup> Shaginian, “O prirode,” 742. Emphasis in the original.

all of humanity over millennia. However, at the moment of birth, the infant becomes a self-conscious individual, and its connection with Nature and access to the universal storehouse of human knowledge is gradually severed, and the growing child slowly “forgets:” “The older he becomes, the more strongly his consciousness is transformed into a limited *self-consciousness* of a strengthened, isolated individuality, and the more faded and distant his recollection becomes, like a lifeless reel of cybernetic memory tape.”<sup>17</sup> Restating this in Hegelian terms, she writes: “The embryo contains all the Becoming of self-cognizant Reason amassed over the past billions of years, and that which has been amassed – from the vague, still not yet departed recollections of infancy, when the isolation of the infant from World Spirit, its individuality, is not yet sufficiently established – is gradually *erased*, forgotten, regresses inwardly over the course of years as the child grows and develops.”<sup>18</sup> Shaginian concludes her musings on Hegelian recollection with a hypothesis about the origins of *déjà-vu*: “It is true, however, that in everyday life it sometimes happens that people suddenly experience moments when they ‘recollect’ something that had never happened to them, something they had never seen or heard – a piece of Nature, an event – and they ask themselves: ‘That has already been seen and heard by me – it is familiar to me.’”<sup>19</sup>

Shaginian’s equation of the common human experience of *déjà-vu* to the vestiges of universal consciousness (World Spirit, Nature) helps explain Agabek’s “vague recollection.” It also informs Arno’s emphasis on acquired collective experience in the economic debate. In the instance of *déjà-vu* especially, Shaginian gives the reader an important clue about the Party

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<sup>17</sup> Shaginian, “O prirode,” 743.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Committee Chairman's own level of consciousness. Agabek is the quintessential "spontaneous" character, one of the two "types" – spontaneous and conscious – described by N. Kostelevskaia in her seminal 1919 article "Two Types" (*Dva tipa*)<sup>20</sup> and that populate Soviet fiction of the 1920s.

Agabek is a promoted Party worker, a *vydvizhenets* from the exploited masses (a leather-tanner by trade before the Revolution) who sided with the Bolsheviks during the Revolution and Civil War. He is barely literate, able to sign his name in Armenian in the Persian manner only, omitting the vowels--*Gbk*--and has difficulty reading Arno's written summary. He has received only the most rudimentary instruction in Marxist-Leninist philosophy and therefore finds himself at a distinct disadvantage in the intensification of the class struggle at the site following the bridge collapse (to be discussed in a later chapter). Up until that moment, however, his lack of "political preparedness" does not detract from his strength and popularity among the workers and Komsomol activists at MizinGES. Agabek has the unerring ability to take the correct measure of people: until the bridge collapse, his "class instincts" are in perfect working order.

When examined through a Hegelian lens, however, Agabek's "unpreparedness," his "spontaneity," and his moment of *déjà-vu* mark him as a classic embryonic figure. He is a dead ringer for what Shaginian describes as the as-yet-not-fully-formed, undifferentiated "piece of Nature," a conscious but not yet *self*-conscious denizen of World Spirit. It is both a strength and a weakness for Agabek; a strength because he has maintained a link to what Shaginian characterizes as the collective store of human knowledge amassed over millennia, but also a weakness insofar as he lacks the individuality and self-consciousness to make use of,

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<sup>20</sup> N. Kostelevskaia, "Dva tipa," *Pravda* No. 264 [25 November 1919], cited in Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 83.

communicate, and add to that reservoir of knowledge. Agabek represents the quintessential dialectical moment of undifferentiated consciousness.

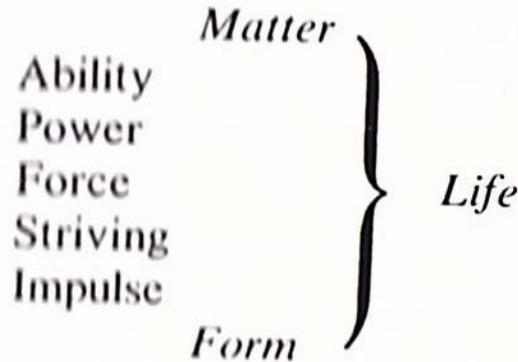
The other important element of the Chigdym affair as repeated narrative is that, with each new iteration, increasing amounts of conventionality are added to produce Shaginian's vision of the connected objective realities of Chigdym and MizinGES as an endless process of Becoming in which linear time is suspended. This is important on two levels: Arno's/Shaginian's creation of the "fully-formed" Chigdym narrative reflects Goethe's scientific concept of intensification, and Goethe's hylozoist beliefs about the physical world.

We will start with intensification. For Goethe, intensification was one of the two great driving forces of Nature (the other being polarity). Intensification refers to "a change in quality which makes something new of [a] phenomenon, bringing forth an unexpected and higher form ... a clear manifestation of the underlying idea through the material nature of the phenomenon. ... Such qualitative intensification exists throughout nature: the process of crystallization in minerals; high barometric pressure (which Goethe attributed to magnetic effects from the earth's gravitational field), the major key in music, even the full development of the organic realm from primitive, undifferentiated life forms (like the *infusoria*) to the tree in the plant kingdom and man in the animal kingdom."<sup>21</sup> Goethe frequently made use of the concept when creating outlines and schematics on his scientific writings. The schematic below, excerpted from the conclusion to

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<sup>21</sup> Douglas Miller, "Introduction," Goethe, *Scientific Writings*, xi-xii.

“The Formative Impulse” (*Bildungstrieb*, 1817), is a typical example casting intensification as upward movement (source: Goethe, *Scientific Writings*, 36):



Shaginian used similar schematics to formulate her thoughts. In May 1928, during the writing of *Hydrocentral*, Shaginian made a diary entry that reveals the extent of her philosophical and epistemological allegiance to Goethe, Spinoza, and Hegel. I cite it here in its entirety:

This entire universe (physical matter) is not devoid of Reason<sup>22</sup>; it just doesn't require it, since it repeats mechanically what Reason was needed for previously. This goes in stages:

- I. Reason – human beings;
- II. Habit – animals;
- III. Instinct – plants;
- IV. Elements – physical matter.

I am in complete agreement with the idea that every cell contains a degree of consciousness, but at stage IV – [at] that stage [the degree of consciousness]

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<sup>22</sup> Shaginian's initial statement regarding Reason has its philosophical roots in Hegel, for whom Reason is “the fundamental principle that explains all reality.” In Hegel's usage, “Reason” does not refer to any mental attribute of a human subject, but rather, is “the sum of all reality. In accordance with this belief, Hegel claims that reason and reality are strictly identical: only reason is real and only reality is reasonable.” The basis of Hegel's contention that Reason and Reality are one and the same are the assumptions that “(1) knowledge of reality is only possible if reality is reasonable, because the world would not otherwise be accessible to cognition, and (2) that we can only know that which is real.” Source: [www.xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/lisle./dial/hegel.html](http://www.xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/lisle./dial/hegel.html) Last accessed 10/11/16. The strangeness of Shaginian's negative phrasing of this Hegelian sentiment (“not devoid of Reason”), along with her added clarification of *universe* are efforts to establish her Marxist-Materialist point of view.

borders on muteness, so fully has it overflowed into existence/being/objective reality (*bytie*). But according to that view, Nature is higher than human beings, [Nature] knows more than humanity, [that] humans are only the initial limitation, just a cry from without.”<sup>23</sup>

Shaginian’s four stages of “the entire universe”—from humanity to physical matter – are based on intensification, but demonstrate it in reverse. Shaginian’s Reason,<sup>24</sup> while always present, appears in progressively smaller concentrations as one moves down the evolutionary ladder.

In the Chigdym Affair episode, Arno’s multiple manipulations of everyday *realia* (*byt*) to produce a fully-formed narrative can be understood as the process of intensification. Each successive operation on the raw data of Chigdym infuses an additional measure of conventionality, first as a kind *ersatz* Genesis narrative of (re)creation – creating rudimentary order from the initial chaos – then as a written synopsis that becomes progressively more interesting as human details are added. It finally culminates in the theatrical oral presentation that represents a highly-distilled portrayal of objective reality, one that brings about that “change in quality which makes something new of [a] phenomenon, bringing forth an unexpected and higher form ... a clear manifestation of the idea through the material nature of the phenomenon.”<sup>25</sup> That “clear manifestation” is Shaginian’s conception of objective reality (*bytie*) as endless *process*, a Hegelian Becoming, in which “[e]very step, every change in the process is essential and not exclusive,” as well as a Goethean intensification, and a modernist collapse of linear time in which memory is sublated (erased, and yet preserved).

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<sup>23</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 271-2 [14-24 May 1928].

<sup>24</sup> The second use of Reason in the entry – to describe humanity – departs from the first use of the word in its Hegelian meaning as “the sum of all Reality.” Within the context of her stages, Shaginian is using the word in its everyday meaning to refer to the specific attribute that animates human consciousness.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, “Introduction,” in Goethe, *Scientific Writings*, xi.

As has been noted, Arno's successive conventional manipulations of raw, dry *byt* in the process of giving form to the Chigdym narrative involve the addition of human detail. But in the final iteration, Arno takes a large "qualitative leap" (to quote Hegel) into a thoroughly "vitalist" universe. The narrator describes Arno's oral exposition as an "enlivening" or "vivification (*ozhivlenie*)."<sup>26</sup> We have already noted Arno's characterization of El'mashtrest – a nationalized industrial conglomerate – as a "caudate wonder,"<sup>26</sup> but Arno vivifies several other inanimate entities. In fact, the entire oral version of Folder No. 4 is swimming with examples:

He [Arno] talked, bringing each column of the file to life. ... Like a great whale, [the hydroelectric] station swam into the puddle of petty rural daily life (*byt*). But then, daily life (*byt*) began to seek revenge ... Complaints and bellyaching oozed into even the bureaucratic language of documents, they turned yellow from the bile. Reading it aloud, Red [Arno] brought that bile to life. On the opposite side of the see-saw he depicted the labor union and labor exchange, leaning with their stomachs on their end of the plank.<sup>27</sup>

Not only are sea creatures and cranky bureaucrats present in this passage, but, in the Russian original, the reader encounters a metaphorical multitude of busy, buzzing insects who also zoom around. Arno's oral reenactment features a generous dose of alliteration in the form of the letter *zh* [ж] – recalling the buzzing noise of Russian bees, beetles, mosquitoes and their cousins, who do not *buzz* as they do in English-speaking countries but *zhhh* when flying around:<sup>28</sup>

On govoril, *ozhivliaia kazhdyi stolbets papki ... Stantsiia vplyvala ... v luzhitsu ... zhaloba protekaet dazhe ... zhelch'iu zhelteet v papke. Chitaia, Ryzhii ozhivlial etu*

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<sup>26</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 196-7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>28</sup> In Armenia, flying insects, when buzzing in their native tongue, either *bzzz* (բզզբզ, which beetles do), or *tzzz* (տզզտզ, which flies do). Source: "Zvuki zivotnykh po-armianski" <http://openarmenia.com/index.php?/topic/29024-звук-животных-по-армянски/&page=2>. Last accessed 12/9/16.

*zhelch'*, i tam, na drugom kontse kachelei, pokazival ... birzhu, *zhivotom*  
nalegshie na tu *zhe* dosku.<sup>29</sup>

While the vivification of inanimate objects is (and has been for centuries) a widely-used literary device, it is my contention that in Shaginian's case, it does double-duty as an idealist and modernist tool for depicting objective reality. Shaginian's moments of vivification resonate at various levels with Goethe's idea of a "formative impulse" and with Bergson's concept of a "vital force" (*élan vital*) driving evolution.

For evidence of Shaginian's bent for vitalistic conceptions of the universe, we need only to return to her diary entry of May 1928. Her statement in the entry's second half – "I am in complete agreement with the idea that every cell carries a degree of consciousness within it" – resonates with Goethe's hylozoist-pantheist-vitalist leanings. Hylozoism and vitalism were defined in a previous footnote. Pantheism, the belief that all of reality and divinity are one and the same, that the universe is essentially the manifestation of an immanent, all-encompassing god.

In this, Goethe went against the prevailing philosophical-religious view of his time that "man was separate and higher than all the other forms of nature, and that nature had been created for the purpose of fulfilling man's needs."<sup>30</sup> A professed pantheist, Goethe believed that human beings were a part of Nature; indeed, Nature was God. In "The Formative Impulse," Goethe characterized what he called the "refinement" of the scientific theory of epigenesis first proposed by German anatomist Caspar Friedrich Wolff (1733-1794). Epigenesis postulates that an

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<sup>29</sup> "Он говорил, оживляя каждый столбец папки ... станция вливала большим китом в лужицу мелкого сельского быта. Тогда начинал мстить быт: ... жалоба протекает даже в язык казенной бумаги, желчью желтеет в папке. Читая, рыжий оживлял эту желчь, и там, на другом конце качелей, показывал союз и биржу, животом налегшие на ту же доску."

<sup>30</sup> Douglas Miller, "Introduction," xii.

“organism is not fully formed at the beginning of embryonic development; rather, its form arises gradually, changing shape and acquiring its adult parts over time.”<sup>31</sup> Goethe described Wolff’s presupposition for his theory as “an organic element which nourished every being destined for life as an organism.” Wolff named this substance “essential force” (*vis essentialis*), “a force adapted to all that was generated and thus elevated in its own right to a generative power.” Some years later, German physiologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) renamed this substance much more to Goethe’s liking. Blumenbach, according to Goethe, “achieved the ultimate refinement of the term: he anthropomorphized the phrasing of the riddle and called the object of discussion a *nisus formativus*, an impulse, a surge of action which was supposed to cause the formation.” Goethe, however, took issue with the two scientists’ idea of a *causal* material-mechanical relationship between the formative impulse (*nisus formativus*) and the organic material and insisted that “*we must think of this action [the formative impulse] as always coexisting with the underlying material, the two forever present at one and the same time.*” Personified, this prodigy confronts us as god, as creator and sustainer, whom we are constrained to worship, honor, and praise.<sup>32</sup>

Shaginian echoes this notion of an eternally-present formative impulse in the latter half of her diary entry:

I am in complete agreement with the idea that every cell carries a degree of consciousness within it, but at stage IV [elements-physical matter] – [at] that stage [the degree of consciousness] borders on muteness, so fully has it overflowed into existence/being/objective reality [*bytie*]. But according to that view, Nature is higher than human beings, [Nature] knows more than humanity, [that] humans are only the initial limitation, just a cry from without.

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<sup>31</sup> Zumbo (author), “Preformation versus Epigenesis.” Draft of paper. Source: [http://physiology.med.cornell.edu/faculty/mason/lab/zumbo/files/ZUMBO\\_preformationism\\_epigenesis\\_DRAFT.pdf](http://physiology.med.cornell.edu/faculty/mason/lab/zumbo/files/ZUMBO_preformationism_epigenesis_DRAFT.pdf). Last accessed 12/25/16.

<sup>32</sup> Goethe, “The Formative Impulse,” 35. Emphasis in the original.

Shaginian again attempts to straddle the materialist-idealist divide by making a quasi-materialist distinction between physical matter and *bytie* which, in this context could be translated as “being,” “existence,” or even “universe” as she uses it in this entry. But then she once again contradicts herself and returns to idealism by giving stage IV the organic attribute of muteness. Finally, she considers Goethe’s argument that “Nature is higher than human beings” who are only the “initial limitation” (*pervichnoe ogranichenie*) and she has taken herself full-circle back to Spinozian pantheistic idealism.<sup>33</sup>

All of this is the background against which tension plays out in the Chigdym episode. Arno’s impassioned re-creation of the history and lesson of Chigdym through five manipulations of raw, everyday *realia* – results in a compelling Marxist-Leninist (dialectical materialist) treatment of the struggle for new labor relations. But Shaginian contradicts this materialist worldview by making Arno’s struggle and victory over the paper chaos by comparing it to the biblical story of creation – the *ultimate* Eros-inspired act of labor. More than anything, the vivification in Chigdym episode is an elegant manifestation of Shaginian’s deepest philosophical conviction that origins of Eros-inspired labor lie in an infinite Nature-inspired formative impulse that breathes life into anything in the universe, whether a story, an individual cell, or an industrial conglomerate.

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<sup>33</sup> The idea of limitation comes from Spinoza’s idea of Substance is sum total of objective reality, the united aggregate of nature and God, eternal and infinite. Spinoza believed Nature and God were one and the same entity, and that Nature/God was the cause of its own being (*causa sui*). According to the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, “Substance as expressed by Spinoza cannot be limited by a finite number of attributes (i.e., attributes intrinsic to Substance and which are inseparable from its qualities); the attributes of Nature are infinite, but all of them are only various manifestations of a single essence – Substance” (“Spinoza,” *Bol’shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 52. (Moskva: OGIZ SSSR, 1947), col. 420). Shaginian’s reference to humanity as the “initial limitation” of Nature refers to humanity as a finite attribute of infinite Substance.

## CHAPTER 6: LAZUTIN'S GEOLOGY: EXPERT DILETTANTISM

The tension between materialist and idealist worldviews reaches its climax in the character of Ivan Borisovich Lazutin. As *Hydrocentral's* head geologist, this enthusiastic autodidact represents the most profound expression of Goethe's wide-ranging (philosophical, aesthetic, and epistemological) influence on Shaginian. Ivan Borisovich embodies everything that is good – and bad – about “dilettante scientists,” people who undertake in-depth and sustained investigation of areas of the natural or physical sciences without any systematic formal education in their fields. Like Lazutin, Goethe was a passionate scientific investigator in the field of geology (as well as meteorology, botany, optics, zoology, and other disciplines) who lacked formal training in all of them. Lazutin's and Goethe's scientific activities parallel each other in multiple ways: their scientific method, preoccupation with space and spatial arrangement, specimen collections, thought processes – even their biographical details – parallel one another.

Goethe's unique scientific approach to apprehending what he called “the Unity of Nature” as embodied in “the Archetype,” as we shall see, is vividly reflected in Lazutin's varied geological endeavors. For Goethe, as for most scientists of his day (and ours), all scientific investigation began with empirical observation. When engaged in botanical and osteological inquiries, Goethe would collect multiple plant samples and animal skeletons and then examine them using little more than his five senses and a magnifying glass. Based on these observations, he would arrange the samples “in sequence,” as he expressed it, “not ... in some hypothetical way

nor made to show the dictates of some system.”<sup>1</sup> His thoughtful placement of artifacts proceeded rather from “intuitive perception,” which Goethe defined as “[t]he seemingly independent creative power found in the creative faculties”<sup>2</sup> and which ultimately permitted him to see the Unity of Nature as embodied in the Archetype: “[L]aws [are] revealed not to our reason through words and hypotheses, but to our intuitive perception through phenomena. We call these phenomena archetypal phenomena because nothing higher manifests itself in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Goethe’s postulation of a Primordial Plant (*die Urpflanze*) was just such an Archetype, for he believed it to contain, in rudimentary form, all the parts from which every plant species on earth could develop. “The primordial plant,” he wrote to a friend, “is turning out to be the most marvelous creation in the world, and nature itself will envy me because of it. With this model and the key to it, an infinite number of additional plants can be invented (...)”<sup>4</sup>

After months of careful study and classification, he was able to synthesize all he had learned and intuited and draw a representation of his Archetypal Plant. For Goethe then, achieving a vision of the Archetype was the result of a three-step process; the collection of a multitude of samples, their careful arrangement according to an intuited inner logic or connection, and finally a synthesis of the myriad elements – a mental or even physical distancing from his work, a stepping back to obtain that bird’s-eye view – that allowed him to glimpse the “Unity of Nature.”

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<sup>1</sup> Goethe, “The Experiment as Mediator Between Object and Subject,” *Scientific Studies*, 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Goethe, “Theory of Color Part Two, §17” *Scientific Studies*, 194-95.

<sup>4</sup> Goethe, *Italian Journey* (series – *Goethe Edition*, vol. 6), trans. by Robert R. Heitner. Intro. and notes by Thomas P. Saine (New York: Suhrkamp, 1989), 256.

Like his real-life predecessor, Lazutin achieves multiple visions of the Archetype through the painstaking collection of geological samples and their careful arrangement inside the museum, and by projecting a bird's-eye view in the form of a detailed lithological map of the Transcaucasus, the first of its kind. Ivan Borisovich, the reader is told, has crawled all over the Transcaucasus on his hands and knees collecting myriad rock and soil samples. He has arranged his collections carefully, organizing them by geographical region and displaying the artifacts in such a way as to afford his visitors a topographical view of the whole of Transcaucasian mineral wealth. One of the exhibits features vertical drill core samples of carboniferous strata whose sizes have been adjusted to scale in order to fit inside the room. These are separated by large placards denoting the distances between bore holes. The visitor is able to visually travel from one core sample to the next and see the changing profiles as cross sections of coal sediment.

The lithological map of the Transcaucasus represents the apotheosis of Lazutin's Goethean endeavors and itself serves as a geological overview of the region. The map represents a kind of shorthand or a microcosm of the region's mineral resources: "Each ore was represented by its own color, symbol of capacity, quality, and application."<sup>5</sup> The narrator likens the lithological map to Mendeleev's Periodic Table of the Elements in terms of how they were created (methodology) and what they represent (an Archetypal vision of the Whole): "By filling in the spaces with your mind's eye, by tectonically travelling through the depths [of the earth], by grasping the harmonious connection between the seemingly random threads of the ore-fields

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<sup>5</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 244.

– you learned to unravel the [mysteries of the] Earth’s crust, to populate the voids, to correctly predict...”<sup>6</sup>

For Lazutin, as for three of Goethe’s own fictional characters, the exercise of intuitive perception is not only a mental process, but a physiological one as well: “He had what was known as a nose for ‘useful minerals,’ he physically sensed the proximity of ores in the ground. Once, while reading Goethe, he stumbled upon a mysterious page in *Wilhelm Meister* about a similar ability and marked it with pencil. From that time on, he would tell people, “If you don’t believe me, then, if you please, believe Goethe...”<sup>7</sup> Though Goethe’s characters’ reactions fall well within the realm of the innocuous, the effects of different minerals on Lazutin do not: “I sense mineral springs 500 *sazhens*<sup>8</sup> off – my skin itches. ... Copper causes me spasms. Manganese..., hmm, about manganese... there aren’t any ladies present, are there? Well, after working with manganese, damn it, I go see the girls to let my hair down.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. The sentence ends in an ellipsis in the original. The reference to Mendeleev’s Table signals the vital importance of intuitive perception in apprehending the Archetype. The history of its creation is the quintessential Goethean quest. Like Goethe’s primordial plant, Mendeleev’s Table featured a vision of all possible elements as a table with boxes. Some boxes were occupied with known elements (approximately 56 at the time of the 1860s), while others were left blank, for those elements yet to be discovered. The organizing idea for the Table as the interconnectedness of the elements according to atomic number and valence came to Mendeleev as a flash of intuitive insight: “I saw in a dream a table where all the elements fell into place as required. Awakening, I immediately wrote it down on a piece of paper – only in one place did a correction later seem necessary.” (B.M. Kedrov, “On the Question of the Psychology of Scientific Creativity (On the Occasion of the Discovery by D.I. Mendeleev of the Periodic Law),” (*The Soviet Review*, Summer 1967, Vol. VIII, No. 2, 38).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 239. Jaro-Montan hints to Wilhelm Meister that he has the ability to sense minerals (*Wilhelm Meister’s Years of Travel, or The Renunciants* (Book, Two, Chapter Nine). Two other Goethean characters have this ability as well: Otilie in *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1809) becomes physically ill near a spot containing rich coal deposits (*Elective Affinities*, trans. with an intro. by R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 246); Mephistopheles in *Faust Part II* (*Faust. Der Tragödie zweiter Teil*, 1832) similarly describes “Nature’s unceasing power... from her ultra-subterranean regions” to induce physiological symptoms in people (*Faust*, Part II, Act 1, lines 4985-4996, as cited in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust I & II*, ed. and transl. by Stuart Atkins (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 130).

<sup>8</sup> A *sazhen* [сажень] is equivalent to 7 feet.

<sup>9</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*, 239.

Like intuitive perception, the careful arrangement of objects in space is, for both Goethe and Lazutin, central to the apprehension of the Archetype; the two share an intense preoccupation with the physical layouts of their respective museums. In her travelogue *Journey to Weimar*, Shaginian gives a detailed description of the residence where Goethe lived and worked for 50 years (1782 – 1832). Goethe’s house in Weimar is characterized by architectural symmetry; it is comprised of three floors, featuring a central rectangular structure with a wing added on each side. The entrance is in the center with several steps leading up to it.<sup>10</sup> Inside, the obsession with symmetry continues, as does Goethe’s fierce predilection for neatness and organization. Shaginian noted that “Goethe couldn’t stand even the hint of what we in Russia call ‘poetic disorder,’ not even a whiff of bohemia.”<sup>11</sup> “[He] required order and tidiness in order to think more clearly, to find what he needed more quickly, and to better spread out [display] his things and his work in time and space.”<sup>12</sup> Furniture in the rooms, according to Shaginian, is symmetrically arranged, and paintings are hung according to their inherent similarities. The rooms have an uncluttered air; no furniture is placed in the middle where it could block the views of open space. Goethe’s scientific collections, located on the second floor, were strictly systematized, with separate halls for his investigations in optics, the life sciences, and geology.<sup>13</sup> Goethe’s predilection for order extended to the temporal realm as well; he kept detailed work schedules for all his pursuits - scientific, job related, and literary.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Shaginian, *Puteshestvie*, 99.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 102.

<sup>12</sup> Shaginian, *Gete, Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 8, 124.

<sup>13</sup> Shaginian, *Puteshestvie*, 102.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

Like Goethe, Lazutin keeps a daily record of what work has been done and what items have been added to the museum collections.<sup>15</sup> Lazutin, too, organizes his collections in a systematic way, grouping them geographically, and, in the case of Georgia, also geologically; those specimens are placed in separate rooms corresponding to mineral type. In each exhibition, Lazutin, a true Goethean synthetic thinker, varies his educational methods. A small square room showcases the multiple practical applications of Chiatura manganese in cosmetics, medicine, and industry.<sup>16</sup> An adjoining room features coal from two coal-producing regions in Georgia. Here, Lazutin, describing a problem and solution, makes economics the guiding principle. He shows how seeming wastefulness of poor quality Tqibuli coal dust can be converted to economic profit by pressing the loose material into briquettes and selling it abroad.<sup>17</sup> Lazutin even addresses the romantic-aesthetic inclinations of his female visitors, as well as their propensity for boredom and exhaustion, by bringing them to a “Room for Ladies,” an elegant whitish-pink space containing luminous crystals of Kutaisi barite, which visitors are invited to “caress” while resting at a dainty table covered with a barite-based paint substitute.<sup>18</sup>

Shaginian’s scientist has been created in the image of Goethe. Like Lazutin, Goethe was an impassioned self-taught scientist whose writings in various scientific fields comprise 12 of the 68 volumes of his collected works (*Werke*). He achieved significant recognition for his investigations in comparative anatomy. The term “morphology” originated with Goethe – his empirical observations of myriad plant and animal specimens led him to the idea that anatomical

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<sup>15</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral*, 241.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

formations were fluid creations that evolved between species rather than static structures (the predominant belief among his contemporaries in the life sciences). He was the first to prove definitively the existence of an intermaxillary bone in *Homo sapiens* and made important contributions in the field of botany. And like Lazutin, Goethe was an enthusiastic earth scientist; his collection of geological specimens was the largest in Europe at the time; and, like Lazutin, Goethe was a cartographer. Lazutin's lithological map is, in fact, an echo of the one Goethe himself helped to create during his lifetime. Based on the conclusions drawn from his experiments in optics, Goethe worked out the color schemes used to denote various mining strata in the map legend of the very first geological map of Central Europe published in 1821.<sup>19</sup>

Goethe's predilection for qualitative analysis of empirical data generally worked well for his investigations in the life sciences, but proved to be woefully inadequate for the physical sciences. His qualitatively-based analyses of the nature of light and color were soundly rejected by the formally-educated majority of physical scientists who were adherents of Isaac Newton's quantitatively-derived theory of light. As a result, Goethe became saddled with the moniker of dilettante for his erroneous conclusions. He was greatly tormented by the charge and invested considerable energy in attempting to acquit himself of it. This aspect of Goethe's biography is directly paralleled in Lazutin who, for all the marvels of his house-museum and lithological map, suffers from the same label. Although Lazutin's museum collection is famous throughout the Transcaucasus, the narrator wryly informs us that "[he] abused his originality. It failed him, as it had certain fashionable physicians." Even his most faithful admirers say that "The scientific rigor of our Ivan Borisovich is not up to snuff."<sup>20</sup> The first concrete evidence of Lazutin's failings as a

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<sup>19</sup> T.B. Zdornik, "I.V. Gete: geolog i mineralog," *Priroda* 11 (1982): 95.

<sup>20</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 239.

professional geologist concerns his prediction that the soil substrate at the location for the proposed 40-meter high dam would be felsite tufa. But instead of finding solid rock, workers drilling probes at the location discover a runny clay-like paste that cannot possibly support the weight of the dam. Without the dam, the future of MizinGES is in jeopardy.

Lazutin's strengths and weaknesses as a scientist originate in Shaginian's own view of Goethe's scientific habits of mind. In one passage of *Journey to Weimar*, Shaginian characterized Goethe's cognitive strengths in an objective sense, as "an unconscious talent for strategy" (*bessoznatel'nyi talant k strategii*) in a way that resonates directly with Lazutin's overview of the Caucasus demonstrated by his museum collections and lithological map: "[Goethe] felt the perpetual need for an *overview* [to see] at one glance from an elevated point of all the elements of [his] play and work."<sup>21</sup>

This "overview" is part and parcel the objective, analytical side of Goethe's epistemological method. Three pages later Shaginian describes his subjective tendencies as the "eroticism of knowledge" (*erotizm poznaniia*) mentioned in the earlier discussion of Shaginian's Eros of Labor. In this passage, Shaginian characterizes Goethe's impassioned subjectivity as a "womanly falling in love" (*zhenstvenno ... vliubit'sia*), an "unfairness," (*nespravedlivost'*), and a "preference for one thing to all the others" (*predpochtenie odnoi kakoi-nibud' veshchi vsem ostal'nym*):

[When] he began to study meteorology, he fell in love with the barometer; when he took up geology, he fell in love with granite; when he started to pursue botany, he became enamored of the leaf. He is completely unable to learn "in general"; that sort of "objectivity" is simply outside his experience, nor does it confer experience; his whole purpose for learning is focused on gaining experience.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Shaginian, *Puteshestvie*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

These two tendencies of Goethe's – the objective (establishing an overview) and the subjective (his "unfair preferencing of one thing above all others") – would appear to function in opposition to each other, but in *Journey to Weimar*, Shaginian presents them as complementary, even dialectically related, aspects and laments what she perceives as a historical bias – the emphasis on Goethe's intuitive and impassioned subjectivity and the puzzling neglect of the objective aspects of his worldview in scholarly writings on Goethe.<sup>23</sup> By mentioning this bias, she tacitly acknowledges the charges of dilettantism that had been aimed at her hero during his lifetime: "None of the supposed scatteredness (*razbrosannost'*) in Goethe's works, none of the superficial planlessness (*besplannost'*) of his writings ... should overshadow this ingenious attribute [his objective tendencies – J.R.]."<sup>24</sup>

Goethe himself had made statements about the subjective and objective impulses in the quest for knowledge in some notes written on the subject of dilettantism for an article on the subject undertaken in conjunction with his good friend, German Romantic poet, philosopher and playwright Johann Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) in 1799. While the article was abandoned after several months and never published, Goethe retained the notes from the project and in 1823 asked his friend and eventual editor of his complete works, Johann Peter Eckermann (1792-1854) to assemble them. They were published posthumously in 1832. At the time of his work with Schiller, Goethe was 49 years old and had been enjoying his literary stardom for a quarter century after having gained widespread critical acclaim.<sup>25</sup> By that time, he had also achieved a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> By this point, his first two novels *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 1774), and *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship* had been published.

measure of fame in connection with the publication of his first scientific work, *Metamorphosis of Plants* (*Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu Erklären*, 1790), which “[told] the story of botanical forms in process, to present, in effect, a motion picture of the metamorphosis of plants.”<sup>26</sup> Goethe’s *Metamorphosis* was the first work to accurately describe homologous leaf structures (cotyledons, photosynthetic leaves, and flower petals) among different plant species, the finding that led to the development of his famous Archetypal Plant. It would be another 11 years before he would publish *Theory of Color* (*Farbenlehre*, 1810) and be accused of dilettantism himself by the formally-trained members of the scientific community of his time.

Given the critical literary and scientific acclaim he enjoyed in 1799, Goethe clearly did not consider himself a dilettante, and the definition of dilettantism in his notes is anything but flattering: he characterizes the work of dilettantes as lacking seriousness, describing their interest in their chosen subject as “halfhearted,” and their pursuits as a mere “game, a pastime.”<sup>27</sup> While these notes relate generally to the discussion of dilettantism in various artistic disciplines, one particular pronouncement of his applies equally to areas of scientific endeavor. It has direct resonance with Shaginian’s understanding of Goethe’s literary and scientific endeavors and, by extension, bears direct relevance to the activities of *Hydrocentral*’s dilettante extraordinaire, Ivan Borisovich Lazutin.

In his notes, Goethe described the importance of relative weight of the subjective/objective element in various artistic disciplines undertaken by dilettantes: “Where the subjective element [i.e., creative self-expression] is in itself important, the dilettante invariably

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<sup>26</sup> “Overview. *The Metamorphosis of Plants* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Intro. by Gordon L. Miller” Source: <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/metamorphosis-plants>. Last accessed 12/27/16.

<sup>27</sup> Goethe, “On Dilettantism,” *Essays on Art and Literature* (*Goethe edition*, vol. 3), ed. by John Gearey, transl. by Ellen and Ernest N. von Nardroff. (New York: Suhrkamp, 1986), 213

resembles the artist, for example in dance, music, oratory, lyric poetry. Where the reverse is true [when the objective element, i.e., technical mastery, is more important], there is a more marked distinction between artist and dilettante, and dilettantism can be harmful, as in architecture, drawing, the dramatic arts, and epic or dramatic poetry.<sup>28</sup>

That Lazutin is a dilettante in the tradition of Goethe is demonstrated by the areas of his successes and failures in geology. Ivan Borisovich, the reader is told, began working as a geologist prior to 1917, performing surveying and testing for foreign concessionaires. Over time, Lazutin acquired a formidable collection of geological samples, and at the same time, an unfortunate reputation as a dilettante. As the imaginary tour guide demonstrates, the magical, inviting quality of his remarkable House-Museum is the direct result of Lazutin's passion for his subject; like Goethe who only had eyes for his granite, Lazutin quite literally feels sexual arousal in the presence of manganese, and it is this love that has driven his thirst for knowledge. The task of designing successfully engaging museum collections – whether of artistic objects or mineral specimens – is a form of artistic creation in and of itself that requires a large measure of impassioned subjectivity. Shaginian would call the creative *élan* with which Lazutin approached the design and content of his House-Museum a “falling in love” (*obliubovanie*) with his subject. Goethe himself would ascribe the considerable measure of artistry Lazutin achieved as resulting from the overwhelmingly subjective element – artistic expression – required in fulfilling the task. However, Lazutin fails miserably when given the task of the soil assessment, a task in which the objective element (technical mastery) predominates. For all his passion, Lazutin is, in the words of those around him, a “dilettante nonetheless.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 213-14.

<sup>29</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 239.

What are we to make of Lazutin, then? As a dilettante, he is simultaneously the quintessence of creative, inspired labor so doggedly promoted in the novel and (due to a lack of formal training) a colossal professional failure. How does Shaginian resolve this subjective-objective dilemma in a way that accommodates the wacky subjective creativity of the dilettante with the sober objective analytical approach of the professional in an ideologically, technically, and economically suitable way? She does it through an elegant dialectical synthesis *à la* Hegel, using multiple observations of the countryside surrounding MizinGES, Lori Province in northern Armenia. These are increasingly informative “overviews” that reenact the epistemological process that Shaginian ascribes to her hero.

The first bird’s-eye view – the most subjective and therefore least informative – is presented during Lazutin’s walking tour of the environs of MizinGES. This geological walking tour to the site of the dam takes place shortly after his arrival and includes site chief Levon Davydovich, Arno, and engineer-trainee Fokin. Lazutin is vociferous in his insistence that his original assessment of the dam site had been correct, making the rather absurd idealist claim that the clay paste *is*, in fact, felsite tufa that had undergone a “dislocation”; in other words, its essence remains the same, even if its form has changed. Ivan Borisovich’s professional limitations become increasingly evident to Arno as the group continues its tour. Armed with his walking-stick pointer, Lazutin yammers endlessly about the geological features of the landscape, and Arno finds himself becoming increasingly irritated by it. He perceives the scientific content of Lazutin’s rambling exegesis as being possessed of a “superfluous mediocrity, with its textbook by Ilovaiskii,<sup>30</sup> with its Yaropolks and Svyatopolks, with its useless battles at Kalka painted by a

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<sup>30</sup> Russian historian D.I. Ilovaiskii (1832-1920) was the author of several popular textbooks used in gymnasia. His 5-volume *History of Russia (Istoriia Rossii)*, 1876 and 1905) was a comprehensive history of Russia from ancient times until the reign of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (1629-1676).

monk's hand as a wooden perspective, where it seemed that little pieces of imaginary luggage from the past had been placed on shelves."<sup>31</sup> After watching peasants carry heavy jugs of water up and down a treacherous mountain path, Arno finally interrupts Lazutin's geological jabbering to point out another facet of the latter's ignorance:

"Listen!" ... "There's a village up over there. Two kilometers below it is water. People are walking four kilometers for water."

"Well, so what?" asked the geologist, ... somewhat surprised.

"I'd like to know what, exactly, is the purpose of geology if a thing like this has been allowed to continue for decades... You excavate mineral strata, you locate areas of petrification; you muck about with them, you identify and classify. But take living strata, populated by living people. Is it so impossible to think about them as part of the earth, to conceive of [all of it] as a whole? It seems to me ... that geology, like history, will turn around and face forward. Otherwise we won't know how to plan. That means that [geology] too, must, in a certain sense, sociologize itself, to include in the idea of earth another small detail: [a conception of] the earth as a populated area, populated by living communities and not petrifications. Do you agree?"<sup>32</sup>

While certainly astute and very socialist plan-oriented, Arno's rebuke resonates at a deeper level with Shaginian's characterization of Goethe's scientific method as well as with Goethe's thoughts on dilettantes. Lazutin's impassioned "excavation," "classification," and "mucking about," as well as his irrelevant nattering, Goethe himself would characterize as the act of a dilettante who "surrenders himself totally to his material, instead of being master of it."<sup>33</sup> Arno's admonition to Lazutin serves to point up the latter's loss of objectivity, an inability to take a broader view of the land as being inhabited by people who rely on it for their physical survival.

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<sup>31</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 265.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 265-6

<sup>33</sup> Goethe, "On Dilettantism," 215.

The second view Lazutin brings the group to the summit of an extinct volcano where the narrator, characters, and reader are afforded a broader, more informative “bird’s-eye” view of the surrounding countryside presented, this time, not by Lazutin, but by the narrator:

From here, if one looked down, the entire Lori Plateau could be seen, upright and strange in its isolation like a bunch of billiard tables pushed together. Nearby, bluish grey smoke emanated from the restless Mount Lial’var, attracting clouds the way a magnet attracts iron filings. Like a handful of pink beads separated by the black collapse of mountain gorges, the closely-placed tile roofs of tiny Lori villages were sprinkled in five or six places. The life of the river courses went along below the villages, the life of the little squares along the river banks, of the fruit orchards with their whitened trunks and lime brick fences passed on. Further below passed the life of the railroad, which disappeared into the black holes of tunnels and breathed a foamy strip of smoke, as if instead of trains, ocean waves were splashing over the tracks.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the geological isolation of the deep mountain gorges that created the plateau, there are many indications of human life and commerce. The presence of life is foregrounded by the narrator’s repeated use of sentences beginning with “life passed along/went on...” (*shla zhizn’*). Though the gorges function as boundaries between populated areas, their rivers are sources of well-being and fecundity. Even the narrator’s description of the isolated plateau is softened by her invocation of a leisurely human pastime. The railroad tracks at the bottom of the scene are further evidence of civilization and connectedness.

And then something very strange happens: the narrator metaphorically steps away from the geologist and specialists to hand a pair of binoculars to an “amateur” (*liubitel’*) and the same landscape receives a third inspection:

An amateur with a pair of binoculars would be able to see the smallest details of the Lori landscape, so different from that other Armenian landscape, that of Ararat. If there countless irrigation ditches and sluices ran across your field of vision, these little locks are on the mouth of the world’s biggest chatterbox -- flowing water; if there you admired the remains of an arch, or a stone aqueduct, or

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<sup>34</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*, 261-2

an ancient Persian bridge where everything spoke of connection, of distribution, of the leading societal role of water, then here, on the Lori Plateau, water was a wrecker, a worm whose winding body cut apart and ate through the massifs of earth, separating people from one another, and flinging them into desert-like loneliness. Instead of bridges, those symbols of connection, monasteries entered the field of vision. Every village had its own monastery, camouflaged against the cliff face. There it stands, niggardly in its beauty, with its narrow hollows of niches, its occasional windows placed unexpectedly and making a mockery of symmetry, either in the shape of a daisy, or a cross, or a meandering star; and the soul of the ruin, a twig of heather, gray from sun and dry dust, gently sways over its stones. Even memory seemed dusty here, among the reddish burial grounds that give off an odor of iron oxide (rust) – the odor of the bottomless well of time, its depths kill all sound. Memory had an odor in these places, and only a shepherd disturbed the peacefulness of the picture by his unexpected appearance from behind the ruin. Sheep streamed after the shepherd, and the leonine maw of a dog, like the head of a leper, rose to the surface... Though it could hardly rise through that entire abyss of space within a pair of binoculars' field of vision!<sup>35</sup>

The third time around, the reader (and/or dilettante, or reader-as-dilettante) has a view of the very same Lori landscape from atop the volcano, but one that is radically different from the preceding two. To begin with, the dilettante is provided a pair of binoculars that allow her to zoom in on the smallest details. Secondly, she is armed with a knowledge of the geographical features of southwestern Armenia and is now able to view the scenery through the comparative lens of this broader understanding, one that contrasts this landscape to the very different terrain around Ararat and places the northern province of Lori in a most unfavorable light. In view of this new comparative knowledge of the south, water in the north is no longer viewed as a life-line; the new close-up view shows the rivers as “worms” and “wreckers” that carve deep chasms between villages. The railroad, a symbol of connectedness and progress in the second view, has been completely overlooked and replaced by images of isolation and medieval backwardness: a monastery atop each remote mountain village; images of death, disease, and dusty antiquity are

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<sup>35</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 262-3.

foregrounded in the third visual sweep using binoculars. Diametrically opposed to the second view, the narrator's focused portrait in the third presents a tableau of dire economic and cultural need.

This third and final view effects an elegant dialectical synthesis of the first two, combining the objective "bird's-eye overview" of the landscape with a pinpoint subjective focus on its smallest details, seeing not just panorama or detail, but the detail in the panorama. Shaginian seems to resolve the dilemma of her two Goethes. In this final passage, she celebrates the dispassionate objective strategist who sees all from an elevated point, and enlightens the subjective, empathetic "lover" whose boundaries have become blinders. The binoculars represent a tool that dialectically resolves the dilettante's subjective-objective dilemma. They simultaneously permit an overview *and* the means of "drilling down" into the minutiae. Paradoxically, they bestow a deeper knowledge at the very same time they limit it.

## CHAPTER 7:

### THE BRIDGE COLLAPSE: A NEGATION OF THE NEGATION

*Hydrocentral* is more than an “unproductive” production novel; unlike other novels of the genre, Shaginian’s opus foregrounds *actual destruction*, not merely a failure to achieve the construction or manufacturing goal usually established at the beginning of other narratives in the genre. It is the collapse of a temporary bridge due to spring flooding of the Mizinka river that serves as *Hydrocentral*’s dramatic crescendo. Instead of the triumph of a completed edifice, Shaginian offers up an arresting spectacle of failure and devastation. Her conscious choice to make destruction of a flood the novel’s central moment of tension may well have been influenced by her beloved Goethe, the most seminal figure of her artistic and intellectual life. In Part Two of *Faust* (published posthumously in 1832), Goethe included two dramatic interludes that feature references to the destructive power of water. In Act IV, Mephistopheles calls down a mock flood to vanquish the emperor’s enemies during a battle<sup>1</sup>; and in Act V, Mephistopheles predicts that Faust’s land reclamation project will fail because the dykes will be breached by the sea.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Shaginian’s initial interest in hydrostatic construction projects may well have been sparked by Goethe’s own passion for the subject. Goethe closely followed the news of the devastating flood in the Russian capital of St. Petersburg of November 19, 1824 and spoke of it to his friend Eckermann. In 1829, Goethe criticized Tsar Peter I (1672-1725) for building his capital city too close to the banks of the Neva river, believing that the tens of thousands of lives

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<sup>1</sup> Goethe, *Faust, Part II*, lines 10,710-10,741.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 11,546-11,550.

lost in the city's periodic flooding could have been avoided.<sup>3</sup> In 1827, Goethe evinced frustration to his friend that he would not live to see the building of the Panama and Suez Canals.<sup>4</sup>

While it is more than likely that Shaginian's aesthetic and thematic inspiration came from Goethe's literary and engineering interests, the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of the bridge collapse episode have their roots in the philosophical system of another German: Karl Marx. A closer look at the bridge debacle reveals that Shaginian has deftly manipulated classical Marxist dialectical materialism – destruction-as-creation – as the backbone of the episode that, in addition to making misfortune the novel's dramatic climax, ultimately serves as its official ideological cornerstone. "Although *Hydrocentral* is a harsh document, a monument to the negative phenomena at the construction site," Shaginian explained to a group of beginning writers in 1933, "it nonetheless delivers a positive charge. In the end the stern and rigorous history of DzoraGES presented a better picture of the project's positive significance than if I had painted over the experience and emasculated the truth."<sup>5</sup>

Besides representing a dialectic of destruction-as-creation, the bridge episode – by showing how *not* to build a bridge – provides a dialectical object lesson on the proper "creative" (*tvorcheskii*) attitude toward labor, a theme that, we have seen, Shaginian carries throughout the novel. She told her group of beginning writers that

*Hydrocentral* should be a hymn to labor (as a creative act), in which [any form of] labor, from that of an artist to that of a drill operator, is shown when it "doesn't flow" (*kogda ne vykhodit*) and when "it flows" (*kogda vykhodit*), when it has

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<sup>3</sup> Goethe, *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann*. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1930), 75 [9 December 1824]; 328 [12 April 1829].

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-74 [21 February 1827].

<sup>5</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 22.

established a rhythm. ... [Labor that “flows”] appears when that supreme heat [of] (inspiration) ... is gained through effort and ... is present in every job, in every form of labor.”<sup>6</sup>

The bridge episode is also a place where Shaginian continues to explore the uneasy relationship of dilettantism and creative labor, one that has its roots in the conflict between German romantic idealism and Marxist-Leninist materialism, and one that resonates at several levels with Goethe’s own life and thought.

True to form, Shaginian offers up this melodrama of destruction in terms of multiplicity, in the form of the viewpoints and reactions of various characters (as well as the narrator, who also interprets and explains) to the events as they unfold. People are scattered along the riverbank and on another nearby bridge, from which they observe the process of decomposition from beginning to end. Prior to the disaster, the reader learns that Site Chief Levon Davydovich’s brainchild is totally inappropriate for local conditions. As the narrator notes, the capricious Mizinka river, whom she also calls “a green-haired girl (*zelenovolosaia devushka*),” changes course in as many times in a day as a young woman changes dresses.<sup>7</sup> Heavy snowfall during the winter has guaranteed that spring flooding will be much higher than usual. Levon Davydovich, who earned his engineering degree in Belgium, however, approached the task of designing the bridge “formally,” as a kind of textbook exercise: “While he was designing the bridge, his mind’s eye beheld ... the melancholy rivers of Flanders with their steady and unvarying mass of water.” Once built, the bridge “was foisted upon the Mizinka like a respectable European dress on the shameless nakedness of a Papuan woman.”<sup>8</sup> The narrator’s

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 26-7.

<sup>7</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral*, 211.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 228, 229

mention of “his mind’s eye” seems to imply that Levon Davydovich never actually walked over to the Mizinka and *looked* at it prior to drawing up the blueprints. The bridge’s formal “cookie-cutter” design and Levon Davydovich’s inability to adapt it to accommodate the Mizinka’s unique characteristics recall a diary entry from 1923, in which Shaginian makes an unexpected connection between a passage from Goethe’s *On Morphology* and the essence of Marxist dialectical materialism: “[The following is] from Goethe: ‘If we wish to arrive at some living perception of nature we ourselves must remain as quick and flexible as nature and follow the example she gives.’ *All dialectical materialism is here!*”<sup>9</sup> Levon Davydovich’s catastrophic error is the result of his inability to “follow the example that nature gives.” His choice of bridge design – suited only to wide and slow-moving European rivers – is testament to this fact. The narrator’s multiple and detailed descriptions of the Mizinka’s mass of rushing green water and continually shifting river bed perfectly illustrate Goethe’s “quick and flexible” nature. In this episode, the river is teaching a lesson that Levon Davydovich seems to sleep through. This connection Shaginian makes between Goethe’s pantheism-hylozoism and dialectical materialism is harder to explain, but it speaks to her tendency to assimilate new ideas through the lens of the most seminal figure in her intellectual life. To Shaginian’s mind, Levon Davydovich’s rigid, formalistic thinking about the bridge is profoundly undialectical.

It is, unsurprisingly, the workers on site who provide the counterpoint to Levon Davydovich’s undialectical point of view and immediately recognize the problem with the bridge, even seeing it as a metaphorical “class enemy”: “[Its] heavy and quasi-solid profile seemed something like a gentleman in a bowler hat who wouldn’t know how to pick up a

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<sup>9</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 72 [11 December, 1923]. I am using the Douglas Miller translation of Goethe (“The Purpose Set Forth,” *Scientific Writings*, 64).

bucket of water when needed. ‘Is this really the right kind of bridge for these parts?’ they asked.”<sup>10</sup>

Once the bridge’s leftmost gabion begins to give way, the reader is regaled with the observations and reactions of multiple bystanders, including those of an increasingly intrusive narrator: The bridge reminds Levon Davydovich and the narrator of a drunken foreigner stumbling around with a cane; Zakhar Petrovich likens it to a student about to sit a difficult exam; to the average laypeople standing on the riverbank – the non-construction workers (housekeeper, telephone operator) and their families (Volodia’s mother) – the bridge has simply become “ugly” (*nekrasivyi*) but they cannot express why or how. As expected, it is the members of the proletariat – not only the tradesmen (the carpenters building the bridge, the quarriers (*kamnelomy*) and gravel crushers (*shchebneboitsy*) working on the dam) but also the manual laborers (*zemlekopy* ditch diggers) – are able to intuit the reason: “[They] judged [what the problem was] with that sixth sense people who make things possess... ‘The bridge is standing there, but it isn’t *doing its job*’.”<sup>11</sup> Because this is still a rather vague explanation, the narrator delicately inserts herself to explain what a hypothetical “mechanical engineer” viewing the bridge would think: “[H]e would not have been able to sense the transfer of force in the bridge, of indirect movement, of the world’s most ingenious and all-encompassing law of the lever...”<sup>12</sup> The intrusion of the narrator here to give the reader a *more* technical explanation than the layman’s proletarian observation that the bridge “isn’t doing its job” is the first hint in this episode that a “sixth sense” (in Russian, “seventh” sense - *sed’moe chuvstvo*) (intuition), though

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<sup>10</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral*, 231.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 353

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

important, is an insufficient level of understanding. Some fifteen pages later, just in case the reader is still in doubt about the meaning of the law of the lever, the narrator addresses the reader directly using an easily understood analogy: “[T]he bridge stood as it always had, strange and motionless ... maintaining the same attitude of resigned apathy. It did not work ... it didn’t *resist*. In its picturesque pose over the churning water, the bridge was essentially a material obstacle set up as if for a game; its gabions reminded one of bowling pins.”<sup>13</sup> These strange interruptions on the part of the narrator point to a tension between the idealist intuitive and passionate dilettante and the conscious, analytical materialist specialist. They also signal Shaginian’s own fraught relationship with the roles of both teacher and student. I will return to this below. For now, let us return to the actual collapse of the bridge.

It is during this dramatic highpoint – the dialectical “negation of the negation” – that the bridge suddenly becomes beautiful. As it succumbs to the river, it begins to shift and the deck planking folds, pretzel-like, into a visually pleasing shape resembling, in true Goethean terms, a work of Nature: Ursa Major (*Bol’shaia medveditsa*): “[T]he destruction turned into a continuous disintegration and disassembling of form, performing its work in reverse, the way a projectionist plays a film backwards.... And because of the fact that this work was undoubtedly done by the bridge, just as undoubtedly as it had failed to do the necessary work of resistance, it now seemed much more beautiful than before.”<sup>14</sup>

As we have seen in her comments to beginning worker-writers, Shaginian herself emphasized the importance of portraying both the creative, inspired attitude toward one’s work – an “Eros of Labor” – as well as its opposite – a formal, uninspired, even disrespectful attitude.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 361-2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 363.

Levon Davydovich's generic bridge design arouses scorn among members of the *artels* (workers' cooperatives) building the bridge. As one worker puts it, "They oughta put those engineers behind bars, that's where. The ferrymen who've been bringing us lumber – even they are laughing: 'Who are you building it for? For beauty? The first [high] water will pick it off.' He angrily threw a stone at a gabion. 'Well, that's better for us, we'll have to do the same job twice,' someone replied from above."<sup>15</sup> At the moment of its completion, just as the bridge's last board is laid in place, *artel* leader Shibko launches "with the greatest indifference" (*s velichaishim ravnodushiem*) into an irrelevant story about Chinese women: "This unexpected speech insultingly underscored the *artel's* deepest indifference for 'the present moment.' The last plank of the deck, the last nail of six-month's work they were about to hammer in, was postponed by this speech... At that moment, the workers of Shibko's *artel* were as unnaturally and affectedly monumental as the bridge they had built."<sup>16</sup> But the atmosphere at the bridge site is also as festive as it is restive: When the leftmost gabion begins to wiggle, a group of workers breaks through a police cordon and "[runs] across the bridge to the other side, clowning around and hopping about, as if testing the elastic resistance of the boards beneath them with their feet."<sup>17</sup> Zakhar Petrovich is incensed by the reactions of the representatives of the proletariat who, instead of feeling a sense of pride and ownership toward the bridge, look forward to the destruction. He shouts at one woman: "It is holding up even with flooding as bad as this – that's

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 347.

what you should say about the bridge. Hold on! That's what you should be telling the bridge. You should be defending your own structure, understood?"<sup>18</sup>

As soon as the first gabion gives way, however, the workers – without being told – spring into action to save the construction materials: “A strange human logic was [thereby] revealed: their lack of sympathy for the bridge was equal in measure to the pity they all suddenly felt for the logs and planks.”<sup>19</sup> The new-found sympathy is accompanied by a measure of joyful – even erotic – derring-do from representatives of the broad masses:

One of the amateurs (*liubitelei*) among the manual laborers, after shedding his clothes, flaunted the whiteness of his body on the riverbank. He even hopped up and down before getting into the water. Above him some daredevils who had crawled out to [the place on the bridge] where the planking had buckled tossed down a cable. These were workers who had put themselves in danger, ... free like the water itself, [they] had grown stronger with one stroke. They joyfully sensed their own physical strength. As if they were off to join a game or match, they ... [began to] disassemble and topple the girders and bind up the lumber in order to salvage the destroyed section of the deck.<sup>20</sup>

Shaginian's choice of the word “amateur” (*liubitel'*) to describe the manual laborer is, I believe, intentional. As noted in the previous chapter on Lazutin, the dilettante as Eros-inspired layperson who is gifted with a creative, inspired, playful, physiological, instinctual approach to her object of inquiry occupies a central place in Shaginian's cosmology, coming as it does from her perception of Goethe as *ur*-dilettante. And yet, as we have also seen, the dilettante's vocation is fraught with contradiction in terms of its benefits and drawbacks. The intrusive narrator during the collapse is the first signal of this uneasy standoff between the intuitive dilettante and the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 363-4.

formally-educated expert. In the aftermath of the bridge destruction, the tension is made explicit in the responses of two of the novel's "positive" characters in the days following the catastrophe.

Representing the "vanguard of the proletariat" and working full-time on the site are the two Party officials, Local Committee Chair (*predmestkom*) Agabek and the unnamed Party Cell Secretary (*sekretar' iacheiki*). Agabek, it will be recalled, is an enthusiastic Armenian Communist, a man popular with both the Komsomol<sup>21</sup> and the rank-and-file, a man with the proper proletarian class origins (he is a leather-tanner by trade), but with little formal education, limited political training, and a rudimentary knowledge of Russian. Contrasted with Agabek is the foppish and fastidious Party Cell Secretary, whom both workers and management refer to as "harmless" (*bezvrednyi*) but "qualified" (*podgotovlennyi*). Throughout the novel he is present at party meetings but plays a passive role, saying next to nothing and, on one occasion, even ducking out early before the meeting is formally adjourned.

Following the bridge disaster, the expected finger-pointing, name-calling, and political intrigue between workers and management reach a fevered pitch, with each side attempting to use data from the bridge collapse to bolster its argument that the fault lies with the other side. Sadly, it is Agabek, the man of the people, who cracks under the pressure of the intensified class struggle. Paralyzed by a feeling of doom and resignation, Agabek hides out day and night in his filthy, unheated office as scores of workers and Komsomol youth stream in and out to report the latest turn of events. Emerging unexpectedly from his tidy apartment in shiny boots and not a hair out of place, the Party Cell Secretary takes a leadership role in the ensuing chaos; he is the

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<sup>21</sup> Komsomol – the acronym for the (All-Union Leninist) Communist Union of Youth (*Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhi*), the mass social and political organization of Soviet youth founded in 1918. "The Komsomol helps the [Soviet Communist] Party educate the youth in the spirit of communism, engage them in the practical work of building a new society, and prepare a new generation of broadly developed people who will live, work, and direct public affairs in a communist society" ("Komsomol," *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, a translation of the third edition, vol. 5. New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1974, cols 231-32).

first to point out the unhealthy atmosphere that held sway in the months preceding the bridge collapse: “Is it normal that the workers are rejoicing over the destruction of the bridge? What do you think, Agabek?”<sup>22</sup> and at the general meeting with the inspectorate, he articulates the source of the problem at MizinGES:

The roots, Comrades of the Inspectorate, are in the improper organization of management at the site, the result of which was that the workers went underground. In six months, not a single production meeting was held. Perhaps the voice of the worker was correct, perhaps it wasn't, but the worker's voice wasn't heard in either case; it should be heard before the entire public, his voice should set things into action, or bring the mistake to light as soon as it happens. The worker was kept in the dark about the project; the construction project should teach us, from the manual laborer to the union representative to the [Party] secretary – teach all of us, so that the next time around on the next job we will have the benefit of experience, the benefit of knowledge. After all, it isn't just from books that we learn, but from the process of doing. If the project has been rejected as defective, then explain the reasons to us. Let us understand the general economic situation, the general state of affairs at the site. Working blind is no way to operate.<sup>23</sup>

In the end, the fact that it is the “harmless” yet “qualified” Secretary, and not the rough and intuitive Agabek, who is able to articulate the essence of the problem and save the day that demonstrates the official Leninist view – that “consciousness” (formal, completed political training) *in addition to* proper class instincts trumps “spontaneity” (intuition alone).

Katerina Clark describes the spontaneity/consciousness dialectic as a “subtext [that shapes] the master plot [of the Soviet novel]” and a “fundamental idea of Marxism-Leninism, one that is a somewhat déclassé... and more abstract version of the class-struggle account of history”:

In this version, historical progress occurs not by resolving class conflict but through the working-out of the so-called spontaneity/consciousness dialectic. In

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 441.

this dialectical model, “consciousness” is taken to mean actions or political activities that are controlled, disciplined, and guided by politically aware bodies. “Spontaneity,” on the other hand, means actions that are not guided by complete political awareness and are either sporadic, uncoordinated, even anarchic (such as wildcat strikes, mass uprisings, etc.), or can be attributed to the workings of vast impersonal historical forces rather than to deliberate actions.<sup>24</sup>

However, in certain cases, spontaneity has its uses. Paraphrasing Lenin, the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* makes the following qualification: “[While i]n most instances, the spontaneity of social movements is an indicator of their [political/ideological] immaturity and insufficient organization, ... the spontaneity of a movement may sometimes indicate its vitality and the unrestrainable pressure of the masses.<sup>25</sup> Although Agabek ultimately fails to turn things around, Shaginian, with a nod to Lenin’s qualification of spontaneity, gives voice to the importance of Agabek’s “vitality” and unrestrained nature in a humorous moment following the collapse. A government official from the water administration, Comrade Manuk Pokrikov,<sup>26</sup> gives a highly technical and abstract report to the RKI. Armed with folders of data, stacks of textbooks and reams of official documents, Pokrikov drones on and on, justifying the bridge design by adducing tedious technological data, until he is brought up short by Agabek’s apt and “spontaneous” characterization of his presentation:

[Until] at the peak of his triumph, Pokrikov suddenly heard from the side of the room where Agabek was standing an obscene, unique, and outrageous exclamation: “Alya-balya-syp, balalyaka”... Never mind the fact of its awkwardness; this ungrammatical, non-existent, nonsensical phrase, by its idiocy, humiliated the lofty tone hovering in the thickets of Pokrikov’s technical computations.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> “Consciousness and Spontaneity”, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Translation of the third edition. (New York: MacMillan, Inc., 1980), col. 55.

<sup>26</sup> The surname *Pokrikov* is a humorous touch, as it is derived from the Russian verb *pokrikivat’*, meaning to shout at once in a while (in order to criticize or to get someone to do something).

<sup>27</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*, 435.

Shaginian's message here is that, in terms of Agabek, party-mindedness *plus* proper training trumps mere party-mindedness, a standard Marxist-Leninist message one would expect to receive in the novel. The Party Cell Secretary shows his "political hardiness" (*politicheskaia zakalka*) when he steps forward and succinctly articulates the solution to the problems at MizinGES in Marxist-Leninist terms, but also in ones Goethe would embrace. Equally important to the Secretary's prescription that the worker's voice should be heard is the notion that MizinGES is first and foremost a *school*, where all the workers are *apprentices* who should be gaining practical experience, the same sentiment Arno expresses in his economic debate with the German writer. Recall, too, that Shaginian described Goethe as a man who had no use for abstract knowledge "in general." "His whole purpose for learning was focused on gaining experience."<sup>28</sup>

As various characters offer their opinions about the bridge collapse, we have seen that the author-narrator interrupts twice to explain the root of the problem with the bridge directly to the reader. The first time, she offers the technical explanation involving the "law of the lever"; the second time, she herself offers the more easily understood everyday "gabions-as-bowling pins" analogy. Her repeated insinuations into the body of the narrative signal two things: her lack of compunction in assuming the role of teacher to *Hydrocentral's* readers, and a degree of uncertainty about their level of education. The author-narrator's intrusions would not have seemed as out-of-place had she not all but banished her official mouthpiece, Arno, from the narrative by the time of the bridge collapse. In the previous chapter (Chapter Eleven), Shaginian exiled Arno to assist with a surveying expedition away from MizinGES. The reader does not see him again until he pops up briefly at the end of Chapter Thirteen to make a seemly and dignified

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<sup>28</sup> Shaginian, *Puteshestvie*, 107.

declaration of love to Mardzhana and then vanishes until the final Chapter (Chapter Sixteen), only to return belatedly as a silent observer to the Chief Engineer's presentation.

Why did she send him away and take on the role of “chief explainer” herself (or delegate it to the narrator)? Shaginian told the beginning worker-writers in her 1933 seminar that “[Arno] was no longer needed,” as the detective sub-plot involving his mysterious past as a hairdresser had been resolved by the time of the RKI visit.<sup>29</sup> Two pages earlier in the seminar transcript she noted that “[i]n many instances, of course, Red also spoke for the author wherever something needed to be dialectically explained to the reader.”<sup>30</sup> Among such “dialectical explanations” are Arno's explication of the “new [economic] principle” to the German writer (Chapter 4), the lessons of Chigdym (Chapter 6), and his criticisms of Lazutin's limited vision of geology that excludes people and their needs (Chapter 9); each has been examined in the discussion of previous episodes. In light of the author-narrator's intrusions here in Chapter Twelve, it is clear that Shaginian banished Arno prematurely, for there was still more dialectical explaining to be done. *Hydrocentral*'s multiple teachers, explainers, and interpreters – not only the author/narrator and Arno, but also the veteran schoolteacher, the dubious geologist, and others – are, like Arno's molecules, metaphorical jostlers who compete for the reader's attention. The fact that the reader, in turn, is guided to apprehend and evaluate their many lessons is, of course, one of the professed goals of socialist realist literature: “to ideologically remold and educate the working people in the spirit of socialism.” But in Shaginian's hands, this becomes a complicated task, since some of these teachers hold less than impeccable credentials. The blurred line separating the experts from the dilettantes is one of *Hydrocentral*'s oddities preventing it from to

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<sup>29</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

being an unequivocal portrayal of a materialist worldview. Like much else in the novel, the fraught relationship between amateurism and professionalism bears direct biographical parallels to Shaginian's own life and thought as well as those of her hero, Goethe.

As mentioned in the discussion of Lazutin, Shaginian broadly praised Goethe for his "spirit of limitation" (of establishing boundaries in his scientific investigations) which, she argued, was present in equal measure to his "[spirit of] intuition," or the ability to penetrate beyond those same boundaries. Yet in her own life, Shaginian seemed to have trouble imposing the same "spirit of limitation" she so generously attributed to Goethe on the many and varied fields of interest she herself so passionately pursued. Like her hero, "[Shaginian] was a true polymath," wrote Soviet journalist M. Dimov in 1986. "Her talent was a rare combination of many skills: she was novelist [sic], playwright, essayist, poet, philosopher, journalist, historian, translator, music critic, and literary scholar."<sup>31</sup> (She was also a polyglot – fluent in German, French, English, had a good command of Italian, Czech, Bulgarian, and Polish<sup>32</sup> and translated a famous poem written by the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Persian poet Nizami Giandzhevi.<sup>33</sup> In addition to having written a master's thesis on a German theologian and philosopher Jakob Frohschammer (1821-1893), Shaginian defended a doctoral dissertation on the Ukrainian writer Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) in 1946.<sup>34</sup> In 1932-33 she was a student of energetics at the Planning Academy. During her many journalistic travels around the USSR, Shaginian amassed daunting amounts of

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<sup>31</sup> M. Dimov, "Marietta the Flying Dutchman," *Soviet Literature* 2 (1986), 150. Others besides Dimov have expressed their astonishment at Shaginian's extraordinary level of energy and enthusiasm for learning and writing. See, for example: Yuri Idashkin, "Indomitable Spirit: For the Centenary of the Birth of Marietta Shaginyan," *Soviet Literature* 4 (1988): 155-157; "Marietta Shaginian. Vliublennaia molniia." Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMnqNva98b0>. Last accessed 11/17/16; K. Serebriakov, "O Mariette," 196-206.

<sup>32</sup> Dimov, "Marietta," 151.

<sup>33</sup> Shaginian, "Shaginian," 656.

<sup>34</sup> However, because she wrote it in the form of a novel, she had some difficulty and delay in getting it accepted.

scientific, economic, and agricultural technical data that filled her diary notebooks. Her published diaries from 1917-1931 contain the raw data that comprises much of the *byt* in *Hydrocentral* (especially in the Chigdym episode), such as detailed information on geology, cement production and testing, and hydroelectric plant design, among many others.<sup>35</sup>

Shaginian herself was aware of the fact that she spread herself thin: Describing her heavy workload during the late 1920s to early 1930s (during which time she wrote *Hydrocentral*, worked at DzoraGES, and as a journalist), she wrote: “Writing 20 to 25 quires (*pechatnykh listov*) a year for the newspaper, [work] which was always accompanied by physically demanding travel and the reading of multifarious materials – that alone is a creative drain on a professional, and if you add to this a considerable [amount] of community work, then it becomes impossible to produce a large-scale work and be totally devoted to it.”<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, Shaginian very frequently took an active role in the issues which she covered in her capacity as a journalist. In addition to covering the news, she on more than one occasion inserted herself into the operational decision making at the mines, collective farms and factories she wrote about. She sometimes second-guessed the directors of these enterprises – technical specialists – bitterly disagreed with them and went to great lengths to have her position validated by official institutions. With a measure of pride, she writes of one instance during the second World War in which she was covering a story on the construction of the South Siberian highway for the official transportation newspaper *The Siren (Gudok)*. She discovered an error in the planned direction of the road and pointed it out to the authorities:

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 659. In her 1958 autobiography, Shaginian laments that “Sometimes it is painful to think that the dozens of great themes and entire folders of prepared materials intended for the artistic canvas of a novel, in the end did not succeed in being used since the day *Hydrocentral* was published.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 655.

I had to confront a situation that demanded a thorough and comprehensive verification, and then – a lengthy and very difficult fight. ... I made a trip to consult with the first secretary of the Bashkir Regional [Party] Committee, to the Regional Committee in Chelyabinsk, and to Magnitogorsk. From those conversations, a huge number of selected materials was selected [showing that] the southern variant [of the highway] had been approved on the basis of incorrect information. When this became clear, I began the battle to have the decision reviewed. It lasted six months, and during that time I suffered the persecution on the part of interested bureaucratic parties, the distrust of my newspaper editors/directors who did not make up their minds to support me, as well as all sorts of other conflicts. But in the end, victory was achieved and the decision was reviewed .”<sup>37</sup>

Shaginian was hilariously skewered for this very tendency in an article by Soviet literary critic

Mikhail Lifshits published in January 1954 in the literary journal *New World (Novyi mir)*.

Lifshits was reviewing Shaginian’s second set of “working” diaries (*Diary of A Writer [Dnevnik pisatel’ia], 1950-1952*), published in 1953. In his review, entitled “Marietta Shaginian’s Diary” (*“Dnevnik Marietty Shaginian”*), Lifshits all but called Shaginian a dilettante, humorously calling into question her credentials as a journalist, lambasting her sloppy attention to detail, and correctly pointing out the many factual inaccuracies in articles on economic, technical and agricultural issues.

Lifshits cites a battle similar to the ones in Siberia and DzoraGES involving a tussle between Shaginian and the director of a shale mine in Estonia. She was able to override the director’s decision to close the mine (the shale deposit had been exhausted and the mine was no longer productive). The workers at the mine did not want to leave it, and Shaginian supported their position for reasons that resemble her description of the bore-hole drillers at MizinGES: “One can imagine it psychologically: the people had put down roots [at that mine], they had

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<sup>37</sup> Shaginian, “Shaginian,” 658. Shaginian was in conflict with the authorities at DzoraGES and was actually ejected from the construction site. She had to petition authorities in Moscow to be reinstated (Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 9).

‘refined their technique,’” they had everything arranged, they had developed energy – and then all of a sudden: ‘Pack everything up and leave.’ Yet they didn’t pack up and leave, but continued to mine the shale. And this means that they achieved a kind of revolution in the established technology and economics of the [mineral] exploitation of the mine.”<sup>38</sup> Lifshits makes a convincing argument that her involvement was misguided, the result of insufficient technical understanding combined with an idealist conviction that the miners’ passion for their labor at that particular mine represented a technical revolution in its exploitation. Several pages later, Lifshits insightfully observes that “Marietta Shaginian isn’t always able to clearly distinguish idealism from materialism.”<sup>39</sup>

Lifshits describes Shaginian’s dilettantish level of technical understanding in terms that resonate strongly with Shaginian’s conception of Goethe’s own cognitive method. He characterizes Shaginian’s creative *élan* (*tvorcheskii pod”em*) (the Goethean “intuition” or desire to penetrate beyond boundaries) as an impulsive urge to learn everything about a topic in the shortest possible time – her “hastiness” (*skoropalitel’nost’*) -- and adduces several humorous anecdotes to illustrate this tendency: her penchant for anthropomorphism, and her unstinting use of organic analogies to describe inorganic phenomena, both of which, as we have seen, are forms of vitalism-hylozoism that have their roots in Goethe’s idealist philosophy. Lifshits pokes fun at Shaginian’s musings about the possibility that trees can feel pain:

In a book on agricultural technology, Marietta Shaginian read that one must prune trees in good time, as the wounds caused by pruning have a painful effect on any plant. Immediately she begins to seek out a “philosophical approach” from thin air: “These would seem like simple words about the simplest activity – pruning fruit trees in an orchard--but how many thoughts arise from this: removing the

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<sup>38</sup> Mikhail Lifshits, “Dnevnik Marietty Shaginian,” in *Liberalizm i demokratiia. Filosofskie pamflety* (Moskva: Iskusstvo – XXI vek, 2007), 97-8.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

excess, because it interferes with the growth of the main part (just as true for trees as for an artistic work!); secondly, we think that a tree, a piece of wood, an insensible thing – doesn't suffer when you break off a branch or twig in any case - - yet it turns out that it does feel, that wounds [resulting from pruning] have a painful effect. And suddenly, as if affected by an artistic image, you begin to experience the pain on behalf of the tree.”<sup>40</sup>

Lifshits cites this passage as one more example of Shaginian's less than stellar grasp of yet another scientific discipline that captured her interest. This is certainly true. Yet the passage is also solid evidence that, like Goethe, Shaginian equates a natural phenomenon with artistic work; both are capable of eliciting powerful emotions, and they are equally capable of arousing an intuitive sympathy in the attentive observer or contemplator. As they were for Goethe, art and nature are, for Shaginian, incarnations of each other. This conviction of hers was as true in 1923 as it was in 1952. To return to Shaginian's diary entry on Goethe and dialectical materialism, she ends it with the following:

“If we wish to arrive at some living perception of nature we ourselves must remain as quick and flexible as nature and follow the example she gives.” *All dialectical materialism is here! **And also the practice, the strategy the performance, and the problem of form in art.*** <sup>41</sup>

She first makes a materialist connection to Goethe – which she does not elaborate on – and then an idealist one in which she equates the ideal (perfected) artistic act and perfected artistic performance as a reflection of nature's example. It is also another indication of her melding of idealism and materialism. For Lifshits, Shaginian's dilettantism – in addition to her hastiness – reflects her inability to distinguish between the two. But Shaginian's synthesis of materialist and idealist ideas (conscious or not), was the very source of that exultant “haste,” which she herself

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 129-30.

<sup>41</sup> Shaginian, *Dnevnik*, 72 [11 December 1923]. Emphasis in bold added – J.R.

referred to as Eros, pathos, and “creative *élan*.” It was the essential ingredient to productive labor.

Shaginian considered herself productive not only in her literary labors, but in her pedagogical ones as well. As we have seen, Shaginian worked as a teacher and mentor throughout her life: as a private tutor during her years at university, as a lecturer on aesthetics, as head of a political literacy circle while at DzoraGES, and as seminar leader for many beginning writers. Even at the age of 65 she continued her mentorship of new generations of essayists (*ocherkisty*). Her purpose in publishing *Diary of a Writer* was to pass on her considerable knowledge and experience in this genre.

*Hydrocentral*, then, was not only a paean to labor, but also served as an educational tool to inspire in its readers a creative attitude toward their labor. In addition to Anush Malkhazian, the Lazutin, Arno, and the author-narrator as teachers and explainers, there is also the Chief Engineer who is the subject of the final chapter of the dissertation. With the exception of the Chief Engineer, we have seen how all of these characters are dilettantes in varying degrees. Even though the highly-educated Arno is the “dialectical explainer” and author’s mouthpiece, he is a wandering jack-of-all-trades, having worked variously as a logger (probably as a convict before the Revolution), a roofer, galosh maker, and barber. The narrator implies that he has experience in other areas as well: in Chapter One at the Employment Office the reader learns that Arno comes daily to read job announcements for archivists, violinists, and club workers.<sup>42</sup> Anush Malkhazian, introduced to the reader in Chapter One as an experienced, a born (*prirozhdennyi*) pedagogue, has been educating herself on hydroelectric power during her period of unemployment. Even in the final chapters of the novel she travels to MizinGES with her

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<sup>42</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 12.

children, both as their teacher and as a student in search of a “lesson on electricity.” Lazutin’s strength as museum curator – the passion with which he amassed and organized his collections to be educational – testifies to his pedagogical abilities. Shaginian clearly assumed that her readership consisted mainly of dilettantes in need of expert explanations. Regardless of who does the explaining, Shaginian’s claim that *Hydrocentral* functions as a “hymn to creative labor” is only part of the story; *Hydrocentral* is just as much as a Goethean *Bildungsroman* in which the readers and characters are the apprentices, laypeople, and dilettantes.

**CHAPTER 8:**  
**THE CHIEF ENGINEER AND THE REDESIGN OF MIZINGES:**  
*NON-PLUS ULTRA ... IN PROCESS*

The bridge collapse in Chapter Twelve is not the true culminating moment of *Hydrocentral*, but only its dramatic crescendo; as we have seen, it is the Hegelian negation of the negation in a dialectical movement. The elements of the novel's grand synthesis – the achievement of the highest point in its phenomenological progression – reside in the Chief Engineer and in his redesign of MizinGES. As a character, the Chief Engineer represents the ideal combination of dilettantish pathos and professional analytical maturity, of intuition and intellect, of Eros and Education. His unsurpassed qualities as an inspired worker, creator, and teacher take center stage in the form of his oral presentation to a workers' assembly at MizinGES in Chapter Sixteen, the final chapter of the novel. The epistemological underpinnings of the Engineer's thinking are, like much else in Shaginian's opus, an unusual concatenation of idealist and materialist convictions that have their roots in the views of Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinskii (mentioned in Part I), the idealist romanticism of Hegel and Goethe, and the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx that resolve the issue of dilettante and expert in politically Leninist terms, but still contain the imprint of Shaginian's long-standing embrace of Goethe's idealist view of intuitive, impassioned creation.

The Chief Engineer's redesign of MizinGES, the second element of *Hydrocentral's* grand synthesis, represents the grand synthesis of the dialectic of Part and Whole. The spark of inspiration that lays the foundation of the project's redesign happens in Chapter Ten, late at night in a Moscow hotel room. This grand resolution, reenacting the dialectic of the Part and Whole, combines elements of a Marxist and Hegelian dialectical synthesis, but in Shaginian's hands, one

that is decidedly non-teleological. Process does not result in product. The “product,” plans for the redesign of MizinGES, is not an endpoint, but a new beginning. In this way, the definitive solution to the problem of MizinGES Shaginian’s final representation of objective reality is a non-teleological, unending process and in this respect most closely resembles a modernist conception of life’s *noumena* as well as Goethe’s apprehension of the Unity of Nature as unceasing creation.

As a character, the Chief Engineer is marked in two respects: Although he is the original architect of MizinGES, he remains oddly absent from the novel until its latter third, when at a meeting in Moscow, he is confronted with the disaster that MizinGES has become and is tasked with repairing it. The second incongruity of this all-important character is the fact that he is never given a proper name. Although he shares this distinction with two other characters in the novel (the foppish Party Cell Secretary and the thoroughly unremarkable ex-lover of women’s department delegate Mardzhana), the architect of MizinGES is the only character referred to in multiple terms – either as “Chief Engineer” (*glavnyi inzhener*) or as “builder” (*stroitel*). These multiple titles, in turn, signal two other things: first, the nameless engineer/builder represents “everyman,” but equally important, he is more than a professional title suggests. The moniker of “builder” is a purer, more universal term and, in Shaginian’s cosmology, is synonymous with “creator.” If “chief engineer” signals specialized knowledge and power, then “builder” signals a vocation. If “building” is a vocation, then the unnamed Chief Engineer is the embodiment of pathos as described by the nineteenth-century Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinskii, a figure who was instrumental in fostering a robust literary industry and one of the first critics to recognize the talent and significance of Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799 – 1837) and Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol (1809 – 1852).

Like most intellectuals living in Russia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Shaginian was very familiar with the writings of Belinskii. In 1911, on the centenary of Belinskii's birth, she wrote a newspaper article in which she expressed deep admiration for the purity of his philosophical and aesthetic convictions, the result of which she attributed to Belinskii's great love and passion for his profession and for the betterment of society.<sup>1</sup>

Belinskii makes the connection between the concepts "vocation" (*prizvanie*) and pathos (*paŋos*) in his "Fifth Article: (On the literary works of Alexander Pushkin)" ("Stat'ia piataia. [*O sochinenii Aleksandra Pushkina*], 1844). He begins by making an opposition between the poet<sup>2</sup> who engages in his occupation "from necessity, profit, or caprice" (*po nuzhde, po vygode ili po prikhoti*) and the poet by "nature and vocation" (*po nature i prizvaniu*). The work of the former is the sole result of intellect (*rassudok*), produced by "thinking up some idea or other and then stuffing it into a predetermined form" (*pridumat' kakuiu-nibud' mysl' da i ee vtiskat' v pridumannuiu zhe formu*). No matter how wonderful the initial concept, the work produced will be lifeless and disappointing to its audience. The true poet (by nature and vocation), however, is driven to create by "some powerful force, some unconquerable passion. This force, this passion, is *pathos*."<sup>3</sup>

Belinskiian pathos – in the form of a flash of inspiration – receives full billing in the Moscow hotel room where the Chief Engineer returns from his meeting. Unhappy with the prospect of finding a way to save MizinGES from oblivion, he engages in fevered deliberations,

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<sup>1</sup> M. Shaginian, "Chelovek ekstremy," *Priazovskii krai* №. 120, 8 maia 1911, 4. Source: <https://vivaldi.dspl.ru/pn0003849/view#page=4>. Last accessed 12/11/16.

<sup>2</sup> Belinskii's use of the term "poet" usually, but not always, includes authors of artistic prose in addition to poetry. Belinskii argues that Pushkin, for one, was a great poet, but a poor prose writer.

<sup>3</sup> Belinskii, "Stat'ia piataia," 231.

poring over MizinGES's schematics and various technical reports on how to overcome the project's economic isolation, but remains stymied. Finally, in terms that resonate with Belinskii's conception of pathos, he has his epiphany:

Flaring up like a struck match, the simplest solution dawned upon him. ... he had only to look away from the paper hypnosis, from all those report commentaries in which MizinGES's future energy flowed into the northern group [grid], it was enough for him to simply imagine [MizinGES] linked, not with the north, but first and foremost, with precisely the south..."<sup>4</sup>

Like Belinskii's poet by vocation, the Chief Engineer's moment of pathos results from his abandonment of the "paper hypnosis" and "report commentaries" – products of intellect (*rassudok*). Shaginian drives home the point by employing the imagery of the struck match – "the burning of phosphorus" – that she uses to characterize pathos in her descriptions of creative labor examined in earlier chapters.

In the final scene of the Chief Engineer's speech to the workers and visitors, the narrator explicitly characterizes his pathos as his intuitive awareness that, instead of his dry and technical report, "something 'civilian'" is needed in order to be understood by his audience of manual laborers, engineers, party functionaries, administrators, children, and their teacher:

As an echo of that "civilianness," pathos, which had never left him, still burned within [him]. ... He was filled with his own private thoughts, of broad syntheses hit upon in his work; he was filled with visions of the future, visions he told no one about ... [T]hese visions fermented inside him freely as simple ideas, devoid of numbers and specialized terminology. Suddenly the Chief Engineer felt himself a boy, and instead of presenting a compactly-worded report, he just wanted *to be understood*. [He wanted] for everyone there ... to experience what he knew and was experiencing deep in his own mind, what was igniting his own brain.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 303.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 452. Emphasis in the original. In the last sentence, the verbs "knew," "experienced," and "sparked" are in the present tense in the original Russian, thus emphasizing the immediacy of the Chief Engineer's desire to connect with his audience.

This Belinskian pathos, an intuitive, non-intellectual “civilian” sixth sense is coupled with echoes of the Hegelian “recollection” Shaginian discusses in her article on Hegel. The Chief Engineer’s experience of boyhood, in whom “visions of the future... floated around freely [inside him], devoid of numbers or specialized terminology,” recalls Shaginian’s treatment of Hegel’s embryo passage from *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It will be recalled that Shaginian describes the embryo as a living entity that lacks individual self-consciousness until the moment of its birth. During that period of gestation, the embryo has untrammelled “recollection of” the enormous store of knowledge and experience acquired by all of humanity over millennia. At the moment of birth, however, this connection/recollection begins to fade. “[T]he older he becomes,” writes Shaginian, “the more strongly his consciousness is transformed into a limited *self-consciousness* of a strengthened, isolated individuality, and the more faded and distant his recollection becomes...”<sup>6</sup> The Chief Engineer’s boyish, closely guarded, and inchoate “visions of the future” are a Marxist version of Shaginian’s treatment of Hegelian “visions of the past” as access to accumulated universal knowledge.

The Chief Engineer’s intuitive sense of the “civilian approach” needed in order to be understood by his audience unfolds in several important ways. First and foremost is his decision to relate the problematic history of MizinGES in the form of a chronological narrative. Because of this, the Chief Engineer’s report to the workers is the apotheosis of Shaginian’s trademark conventional device – repeated narrative. However, appearing as it does at the novel’s end, the Chief Engineer’s oral history of MizinGES works as a macro encapsulation of the novel’s entire plot line: in this final retelling, *Hydrocentral*’s disparate events and characters receive further condensation and are tied up into a neat package, finally and firmly contextualized as a

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<sup>6</sup> Shaginian, “O prirode,” 743.

meditation or lesson on the thorny path to more perfect knowledge, a lesson from which everyone present – including, ostensibly, the reader – benefits.

Secondly, in order to explain more technical concepts in a way that maximally serves his audience, Chief Engineer employs easily understood, everyday life analogies. In one aside, he provides his audience with the mathematical formula for calculating the energy in kilowatts (kW) that a hydroelectric station can generate. After explaining that the water's falling height (from the dam to the turbines) is directly proportional to the amount of energy produced, he instructs his listeners:

[C]ommit this to memory – here is the formula for any hydrostation: its power is equal to 10, multiplied by the river's capacity, multiplied by the river's falling height. ... I'm not just giving you this formula for no reason – it's the right formula for a good thinker in exactly the same way that a basket is the right tool for a housewife going to market: the formula holds all the ingredients for dinner, or all the basic parts of the thing. ... Have you understood everything? Maybe I'm explaining it too plainly?<sup>7</sup>

The Chief Engineer's decision not to explain the meaning of the number 10 (representing the acceleration of objects on Earth due to gravity and precisely calculated at 9.8 m/sec<sup>2</sup>) is another indication of his passionate desire to be understood. By rounding the number to the next, easily remembered whole number, he demonstrates his intuitive understanding of his audience's needs, in exactly the same way that the pathos-infused Anush Malkhazian intuitively adjusts the pacing of her "Lesson on the Sun" to meet the needs of her students as seen in an earlier chapter.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 454. 455.  $N = 10 \times Q \times H$ , where  $N$  = power in kilowatts (kW),  $Q$  = water flow/capacity [in cubic meters per second (m<sup>3</sup>/sec)],  $H$  = falling height in meters (m). The number 10 (rounded up from 9.8 m/sec<sup>2</sup>) represents the acceleration of gravity. In the text (page 454), the equation and explanation of its components are given as a footnote.

Like the analogy of the formula as a market basket, the Chief engineer describes a familiar activity – ditch digging – to demonstrate the importance of achieving the optimal falling force of the water in order to generate the maximum amount of electricity, and he does so in pathos-laden terms, first by characterizing an engineer’s “*first and most natural desire ... not even a thought, comrades, but an actual feeling ... will be the desire to erect the tallest possible dam.*”<sup>8</sup> He likens the engineer’s striving to discover this “optimal measure of effort” on the part of the falling water to the work of a ditch digger, and again, he does so in terms that resonate with Belinskii’s idea of pathos as intuitive passion-driven labor that separates the “true” digger (by vocation) from the digger who digs “from necessity, profit, or caprice”:

When he begins work, the first thing he does is make it his aim – *consciously or unconsciously* [emphasis added – J.R.] – to scoop up as much dirt as possible with his shovel, that is, to scoop up exactly as much as he has the strength to lift in one shovelful without hurting himself. Why does he strive to scoop up this quantity of dirt? So that he can conserve his strength, so that he is not lifting dirt more times than is absolutely necessary (...) If he begins his work with this goal in mind, I’ll tell you straight up: he is a true digger. The same principle holds in any type of job: a worker either shows himself to be a genuine worker because he immediately seeks *the optimal measure of effort* (emphasis in the original) or, if he doesn’t seek it, he shows that he is not cut out for the job.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator describes the Chief Engineer’s passion for his work and his struggle to justify MizinGES using words that recall the process of childbirth in ways that directly echo Belinskii’s description of the process of artistic creation. During the intervening years since he originally designed MizinGES, the Chief Engineer has developed an intense devotion to solving the water issue in the south of Armenia: “He nurtured (*vynosil*) and acutely felt (*prochuvstvoval*)

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 453. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the water problem in the south.”<sup>10</sup> Later in the evening following his epiphany, he sits down to begin to draw out his reconception of MizinGES. After several hours of impassioned sketching and creative thought, he finally gets up from his desk, “disheveled and satisfied, having created, just for himself, in embryo[nic form] (*v zarodyshe*), an idea of the whole.”<sup>11</sup> Belinskii describes the creative act of the pathos-inspired poet by vocation in a nearly identical way: “[The poet by vocation] carries (*nosit*) and nurtures (*vynashivaet*) within himself the germ of a poetic thought as a mother carries and brings forth a baby in her womb. The process of [artistic] creation is analogous to childbirth and is no stranger to the pain, albeit spiritual, of its physical act.”<sup>12</sup>

While it is Belinskii’s notion of pathos that drives the Chief Engineer to persevere and solve the thorny issue of MizinGES’s economic isolation, it is his elegant, yet simple solution that reenacts a Part-to-Whole dialectic. The Chief Engineer’s brainwave is, in addition to the dialectic of the class struggle examined in the bridge collapse episode, the other main instance of orthodox socialist overlay with idealist undercurrents in *Hydrocentral*. As with Shaginian’s use of the dialectical triad in both Marxist and Hegelian ways, her application of the Part-Whole dialectic is an intriguing mixture of materialism and idealism. Shaginian’s materialistic treatment inheres in the fact that Part-to-Whole relationship is a concretized, historically motivated moment with direct socioeconomic impact. But the theme of Part-Whole works at an aesthetic and epistemological level that resonates with Shaginian’s interpretation of Hegelian thought. In addition to her enduring interest in Hegel’s conception of the relationship of the part to the whole, Goethe’s own conception of “multiplicity in unity” had a formative influence on

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>12</sup> Belinskii, “Stat’ia piataia,” 232.

Shaginian's thinking. Over the course of her professional life, she again and again returned to one of Goethe's more well-known aphorisms when illustrating a dialectical relationship.

Shaginian, true to form, interpreted it variously, sometimes as a German idealist, and at others, as a Marxist-Leninist materialist.

--Was ist Allgemeine?	--What is the general?
--Der einzelne Fall.	--A single instance.
--Was ist das Besondere?	--And what is the particular?
--Mullionen [sic] Fälle.	--Millions of instances. <sup>13</sup>

In a 1934 article on educating beginning authors ("*Besedy s nachinaiushchim avtorom*"), she interprets Goethe's lines in Hegelian terms, using traditional, idealist definitions of concrete and abstract. Soviet logician N.I. Kondakov defines them thusly: "Concrete objects are those that reflect really existing definite objects or classes of objects. Abstract concepts are those that reflect a property or objects mentally abstracted from the objects themselves."<sup>14</sup> In the article, she cites the first two lines of Goethe's aphorism – "What is the General? – A single instance" to explain the power of teaching by analogy in Neoplatonic terms: "The universal is *already* included in each isolated instance, all the elements from which it is possible to derive a general law are *given*"<sup>15</sup>

But in her 1949 Stalinist biography of Goethe, Shaginian interpreted the poet's lines in Marxist materialist terms that define the concrete and the abstract in ways diametrically opposed

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<sup>13</sup> Shaginian, *Gete*, 132-33. English translation is my own (J.R.).

<sup>14</sup> As cited in Evald Ilyenkov, "Chapter One: Dialectical & Metaphysical Conception of the Concrete," *The dialectics of the Abstract & the Concrete in Marx's Capital*. Written: 1960; Source: *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*; Publisher: Progress Publishers, 1982; Translated: English translation 1982 by Sergei Kuzyakov; Transcribed: Andy Blunden; Source: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/abstract/abstract1a.htm>. Last accessed 12/11/16.

<sup>15</sup> Shaginian, "Besedy s nachinaiushchim avtorom," *Novyi mir* 1934 No. 3: 203.

to those she used in her 1934 article on beginning authors. In the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie, 1859)*, Marx defined the concrete as “the unity of diverse aspects.” The concrete was the organic result of contradictions, or as Soviet Marxist theorist Evald Ilyenkov puts it, as a unity “realised not through similarity of phenomena to each other but, on the contrary, through their difference and opposition.”<sup>16</sup> The abstract, for Marx, “assumes the meaning of the ‘simple,’ undeveloped, one-sided, fragmentary, pure (i.e. uncomplicated) by any deforming influences.”<sup>17</sup> Using these definitions of the concrete and the abstract, Shaginian makes the claim that Goethe adhered to dialectical materialist principles in his scientific work: “Goethe, by his insistent, invariably repeated demands to consider practice the sole litmus test of theory, to introduce practice into the very process of world cognition; that is, to make it a part of the cognitive process, of course was not speaking out as a poet, but as a materialist thinker and dialectician.”<sup>18</sup>

She goes on to cite Goethe’s aphorism as evidence of this by substituting Goethe’s own terms “the particular” (*chastnoe*) and “the general” (*obshchee*) to Marx’s “the concrete” (*konkretnoe*) and “the abstract” (*abstraktnoe*), respectively: “Goethe understands that only by being able to see the abstract (what he calls “the general”) in the concrete (what he calls “the particular instance”), is it possible to understand the particular instance in all its concreteness.”<sup>19</sup>

The novel’s final chapter is, fittingly, the most obvious manifestation of Shaginian’s straddling the materialist-idealist divide. The Chief Engineer is the grand synthesis of the true

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<sup>16</sup> Evald Ilyenkov, “Source: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/abstract/abstract.htm> Last accessed 12/11/16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Shaginian, *Gete*, 131-2.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 135.

Soviet hero; following Lenin's revolutionary precepts, he represents the optimal proportions of Eros and Education, of spontaneity and consciousness. And yet, his charisma, and personal appeal stems from the idealist pathos and creative *élan* he brings to his work, and for Shaginian, this seems to be enough. As the narrator points out, "[And] though people said of him, 'He's one of us' – and the Chief Engineer was, indeed, 'one of us,' – it was by no means because he was 'building socialism,' but because he *wanted* to build socialism..."<sup>20</sup> And yet, by the end of the novel, no tangible evidence results from this ideal combination of pathos and technical expertise. The narrator's sentiment echoes Shaginian's 1911 words on Belinskii: "The magnificence of the human soul is measured *not so much by [its] achievements as by its desire*. Belinskii was the complete incarnation of the desire for life. In his love for truth there was something romantic."<sup>21</sup>

In other words, for Shaginian, it is *desire* (the force that drives *process* and Becoming) – *not achievement* (its result) that is the essential element in a person's striving for absolute knowledge. In the cosmology of *Hydrocentral*, knowledge is its own reward. In spite of the Chief Engineer's triumphant linkage of Part and Whole, the end of the novel is really its beginning. The novel's final words, related by the concrete specialist Tseladze to engineering trainee Fokin, are its epistemological credo: "Well you see, Fokin, the correct beginning is essentially the first thing in any endeavor. But in actual fact the correct beginning is the last thing you arrive at; in actual fact it's the middle and even the end of the work that teaches you the correct beginning. ... That's how it is with our project. And that's how it is with everything in our life!"<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Shaginian, "Gidrotsentral'," 436.

<sup>21</sup> Shaginian, "Chelovek ekstremy," *Priazovskii krai*, No. 120, 8 maia 1911, 4. Source: <https://vivaldi.dspl.ru/pn0003849/view#page=4>. Emphasis added. Last accessed 12/11/16.

<sup>22</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral'*, 463.

In *Hydrocentral*, the most real reality is endless creative process as an end in itself rather than as a means to an ultimate, teleological Grand Synthesis.

## **CONCLUSION**

## CONCLUSION

### *Hydrocentral: A Unity in Heterogeneity*

Given that *Hydrocentral* is a novel with an abrupt ending that functions as a new beginning, it is only natural that the reader is left with some overarching questions. The first of these is to characterize the relationship between the forms of structural multiplicity described in Part I to the philosophical underpinnings elaborated in Part II. How does Shaginian's use of "conventional" and "real-life" multiplicity play out at the novel's phenomenological level?

The answer is that they become a demonstration of *Hydrocentral*'s materialist and idealist philosophical groundings. We have seen how Shaginian employs two types of multiplicity – "conventional" (*uslovnyi*) multiplicity that appears as repetition, and "real-life" (*bytovoi*) multiplicity that manifests as instances of typical every-day life (events, debates, images, odors, and lists of countless *realia*). She combines them to present her unique vision of objective reality (*bytie*) "in its revolutionary development." By "revolutionary development," Shaginian understood dialectical development, a dialectic that contains both idealist and materialist elements.

Structurally and epistemologically, *Hydrocentral* represents a striving to present and make sense of the whole of objective reality through an assemblage of its many parts, and in this regard, her vision of "unity in heterogeneity" is grounded in both the Goethe's idealist understanding of the Unity of Nature and in Marx's materialist concept of "concrete" reality. As we have seen, Marx defined "the concrete" as "the unity of diverse aspects." Where Marx understood this unity as being directly and fully knowable by the sensory perception of its material-physical properties, for Goethe, the Unity of Nature required "unveiling" via a sustained and intensive exercise of intuitive perception. For Marx, the evolution of this unity of diverse

aspects was moving toward an historical endpoint (communism), but for Goethe, such evolution was non-teleological. As Douglas Miller writes, “For Goethe,... the question is never ‘why is the form the way it is?’ but ‘how did the form arise out of the interaction between idea and matter?’ He was not concerned with teleological explanations... his gaze was focused on the process of development itself.”<sup>1</sup>

Shaginian’s structural uses of multiplicity – as repetition and as manifoldness – break down along idealist and materialist lines of thought, respectively. Conventional multiplicity, multiplicity as repetition is, as Shaginian described it on more than one occasion, a Neoplatonic means of revealing the eternal essence of a phenomenon. We recall her 1918 example of the drawing of the eight-legged horse whose multiple legs reveal its noumenal essence in motion, but who in no way resembles an actual, real-life animal.<sup>2</sup> In 1934, in her conversations with beginning authors, she described the effectiveness of a teaching method whereby the teacher offers the student multiple examples of a phenomenon to increase students’ understanding of a concept. In the process of sifting through each instance presented by the teacher and comparing one with another, she is able to identify those attributes that “repeat” – or are “eternal” – from one example to the next. Shaginian prefaces her description of this method by citing the first two lines of Goethe’s famous aphorism: “What is the general? – A single instance.”<sup>3</sup>

*Hydrocentral* contains many, many instances of conventional idealist multiplicity as repeated narrative that serve the same purpose, to “reveal” the inner essence of an event. We see it demonstrated by Arno’s multiple incarnations of Chigdym’s history; we see it in the form of

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, “Introduction,” xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Shaginian, “Vvedenie,” 696.

<sup>3</sup> Shaginian, “Besedy,” *Novyi Mir* 3 (1934): 203.

repeated views of the Lori countryside from a mountaintop during Lazutin's excursion; we see it as the many observations of onlookers during the bridge collapse. The novel also demonstrates real-life "materialist" multiplicity, often in its multiple (and often wearying) concrete descriptions of Eros-driven creative labor, as well as in its multiple (and occasionally revolting) concrete descriptions of erotic relationships between humans (and between humans and their work). And yet, the fact that all these erotic relationships span a continuum from the sordid and undialectical to the elevated and inspired foreground a Neoplatonic conception that underlies all the nitty-gritty, materialist detail. It would seem then, it is the idealist multiplicity as repetition that ultimately prevails in *Hydrocentral*. While the novel contains the requisite amount of concrete, heterogeneous *realia* – enough to satisfy the demand for a "truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality" – it is these *realia*, more often than not, that are coopted as instruments of an idealist "revelation" of objective reality as unending, non-teleological *process*.

The second issue to be addressed in this conclusion is all the binary relationships that resolve – or fail to – by the novel's end. In Chapter 8, I discussed the grand synthesis of many of these oppositions in the figure of the Chief Engineer; formal education/practical experience, subjectivity/objectivity, intuition/intellect, and spontaneity/consciousness are four such syntheses. The Chief Engineer contains ideal proportions of each quality. He has both the technical knowledge to reconceive the design of MizinGES *and* the practical expertise (one assumes) to see it through to completion. Like Shaginian's conception of Goethe, we learn that Chief Engineer has a passionate subjectivity, a "preference for one thing over the others," when the reader learns he would have preferred to continue working on the irrigation issues of southern Armenia rather than return to the mess that MizinGES had become in his absence. He also demonstrates his objectivity, when he decides to "soldier on" and find a way to join the

isolated and economically unjustified northern station to a linked region-wide network of hydroelectric plants. He is shown to be “politically conscious” when the narrator informs us that he is “our man,” “not because he was building socialism, but because he *wanted* to build socialism.”<sup>4</sup> But he possesses intuition and spontaneity in equal measure, demonstrated when he changes the tenor of his speech, on the spot, to “something civilian” in order to meet the needs of his audience. To top it all off, the Chief Engineer’s passion and intuitive feel for what is needed rival that of Anush Malkhazian, arguably making him the novel’s most effective teacher.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the binaries are harder to resolve – the dilettante/expert and part/whole relationships do not culminate in a grand synthesis and make a graceful exit, but linger in the reader’s mind. Shaginian, as we have seen, had a special place in her heart for the dilettantes of the world, and that this affection most likely stemmed from her admiration for Goethe’s scientific endeavors. Shaginian’s stubborn championing of dilettantism (both her own and that of her characters) is not about turning a blind eye to the importance of formal education, but rather, it is an affirmation and celebration of its motivating force: Eros. It is no coincidence that the other word Shaginian uses in addition to dilettante is *amateur*, from the Latin *amor* (and from which the Russian *liubitel’*) derives. Amateurs and dilettantes are people driven by a love for their subject that manifests as a passion for knowledge, the urge to create, or both, as is the case with Shaginian, her hero Goethe, and many of *Hydrocentral*’s characters. As mentioned in Part I,

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<sup>4</sup> Shaginian, *Gidrotsentral’*, 436.

<sup>5</sup> The near deification of the novel’s Chief Engineer most likely reflects the exalted admiration Shaginian had for the “real-life” Chief Engineer of DzoraGES, Iosif Andreevich Ter-Astvatsaturian (1886-1938), with whom she worked closely. According to her daughter Mirel’, Shaginian “fell in love” with him. Ter-Astvatsaturian was a broadly educated and highly decorated hydroelectric engineer and architect who was, until 1937, in charge of all hydroelectric projects in Armenia. He was arrested, charged with sabotage, and shot on July 19, 1938. Mirel’ relates a rumor that circulated at the time, that Shaginian got on her knees before People’s Commissar of Heavy Industry and crony of Stalin, Sergo Ordzhonikidze (1886-1937) and begged him to spare Ter-Astvatsaturian’s life. Mirel’ believed the story to be untrue as such an act would have been completely out of character for her mother. (“Vliublennaia molniia.”)

Shaginian equated the first stirrings of Eros in the human heart with the “theurgic desire to reproduce the universe.”<sup>6</sup> For Shaginian, it is Eros as, passion, enthusiasm, or creative élan – that is the essential ingredient in any endeavor. For Shaginian, as for Goethe, the dichotomy is not dilettante versus expert, but activity in which Eros is intrinsic (and comprises its very definition) versus activity in which the presence of passion, while possible (and certainly preferable), is *not* mandated. Seen in this light, it is no wonder that Shaginian has a soft spot for Lazutin – the successful museum creator-curator but failed professional geologist; and Arshak – the artist with politically retrograde aesthetic notions but overflowing with Eros of all varieties. Even Arno – the jack-of-all-trades and master of none; and Anush – who is as much as an impassioned student of hydroelectric technology as she is a teacher of it. All of them – warts and all – are heroes, because they have passion for what they do.

The idea that dilettantes, especially those pursuing scientific endeavors, are useful, even when they err, originates with Goethe:

[T]he amateur is in a position to produce something both pleasing and useful. Science is far more dependent on empirical observation than art, and many people are skilled at such observations. ... We owe much to accident, practical experience, or the observation of the moment. All sorts of people with good sensory skills – women, children [?!] – can offer lively and well-placed observations... Wherever inclination, chance, or opportunity may lead a person, whichever phenomena strike him, engage him, arrest him, occupy him – the results will always serve to advance science. For every new relationship that is discovered, every new technique – even the imperfect, *even error itself* – will prove useful and stimulating; it will not be wasted...<sup>7</sup>

Because *Hydrocentral* is first and foremost a lesson on creative labor, and one given at the dawn of a new economic and technological age, its emphasis is on *doing*, on *the acquisition of*

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<sup>6</sup> Shaginian, *Chelovek*, 62-3.

<sup>7</sup> Goethe, “Concluding Observation,” *Theory of Color*, in *Scientific Studies*, ed. and transl. by Douglas Miller (Goethe edition – vol. 12) (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988): 297-8. Indignation and emphasis added.

*practical experience through trial and error*. Technical mastery, the Plan fulfilled, the advent of Communism – these will come later. That the novel privileges process over result (and even process over the Hegelian process *plus* result) is only natural, being that it is an unmediated, concrete and historically truthful portrayal of real life in rural Soviet Armenia of the late 1920s-early 1930s. No one knew how to build a planned economy. There had never been an industrial revolution. The majority of the population came from the peasantry or were petty tradespeople who lacked rudimentary education. Shaginian saw all this and responded logically. As she saw it, inspired labor as a passion for knowledge and creation had to be the foundation for everything that would follow. And that became the purpose of *Hydrocentral*, to show what inspired (and uninspired) labor looks like, to demonstrate what proper socialist relations of production should ideally look like (and what they shouldn't look like), and, along the way, offer up factual geological, geographical, economic and technical information as a means of whetting the reader's appetite for more knowledge and instill in him the desire to participate wholeheartedly in the task of socialist construction.

The second major binary relationship, and one that also does not fully resolve into a tidy package by *Hydrocentral's* end, is that of part and whole. While the Chief Engineer's crowning achievement – his linkage of the isolated MizinGES to a greater whole – is the expected Marxist materialist resolution to the problem, the relationship between part and whole is, in this instance, synechdochic rather than dialectical. And, more importantly, this all-important linkage of part and whole is *posited*, never *realized* within the confines of the novel. However, if one looks more deeply, as Soviet critic Boris Iul'evich Aikhenval'd (1902-1938) did three years after *Hydrocentral's* publication, it is possible to see the novel is a reenactment of Goethe's Unity of Nature as endless dialectical interplay between part and whole. Of course, Aikhenval'd does not

characterize the novel in these terms; in fact, he goes out of his way to present his analysis as grounded in Leninism by using a passage from Lenin's "On the Question of Dialectics" (*K voprosu o dialektike*) as an epigraph to his article: "The particular (*otdel'noe*) exists only in a relationship that leads to the general (*obshchemu*). The general exists only in and through the particular. Every particular [phenomenon] is (in one way or another) the general. Every general [phenomenon] is (a part, a facet, or an essence) of the particular."<sup>8</sup> This declaration of Lenin's is, essentially, a prose version of Goethe's famous quatrain.<sup>9</sup>

Aikhenval'd makes a convincing case for this in his review of the novel. He points to *Hydrocentral*'s dialectical structure of part and whole as endlessly shifting "concentric circles" at every level in which plot lines and even grammatical structures are embedded in one another. As one example, he points out that the novel's overall purpose (*tsel'*) – to teach a "lesson on water" (the story of MizinGES's construction process) – is also, simultaneously, one of its many plot lines (Anush's unfolding lesson to her students). "The general (*obshchee*) appears simultaneously as the particular (*chastnoe*) and contains within itself (as the whole) its own self (as a part), organized concentrically in relation to the whole."<sup>10</sup>

He sums up the novel, claiming that Shaginian's "fundamental task [was] to take and present *the whole*, and the complex dialectical structure of that whole demands a dialectical complexity of content and form."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> V.I. Lenin, "K voprosu o dialektike," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1963), vol. 29: 318.

<sup>9</sup> --What is the general? – A single instance. –And what is the particular? --Millions of instances.

<sup>10</sup> B. Aikhenval'd, "Metod 'Gidrotsentrali,'" *Krasnaia nov'* 2 (1933): 196.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

The influence of Goethe's scientific method – and his hylozoist leanings – becomes most apparent in Aikhenval'd's language when he elaborates on *Hydrocentral's* organic complexity:

*Hydrocentral* is a difficult book. In order to understand and appreciate it, one needs to read it slowly and read it twice. Only [by] knowing the entire organism, [by] understanding the meaning of the whole, is it possible to apprehend the significance of its organs, the meaning and function of its parts. And Marietta Shaginian's novel is, to be exact, just that: an organism.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately for Aikhenval'd, these overt allusions to German romantic idealism did not go unnoticed by the editors at *Red Virgin Soil (Krasnaia nov')*, who appended the following note to his article: "The editorial board notes that Comrade Aikhenval'd's article, [while] giving an essentially correct analysis of *Hydrocentral* as regarding its method, shows, however, the danger of a formalistic application of the categories of dialectical materialism."<sup>13</sup>

As Aikhenval'd rightly points out, *Hydrocentral* is indeed a difficult novel; the verdicts are nearly unanimous on that score. Aikhenval'd further explained the book's difficulty as "not [resulting] from a deliberate pretentiousness of the [artistic] subject that usually conceals weakness, but from a profound and multidimensional coverage of life. [It is from] the difficulty of the [artistic] object. And therefore the book demands from the reader intense focus and the corresponding cultural qualification. In order to read *Hydrocentral*, one needs to know how to read and to love reading."<sup>14</sup> Shaginian herself admitted as much in her seminar with worker-writers:

I know both positive and negative opinions, and the latter come down to "It's boring. I don't have the strength to read it." Many of you cannot immediately get

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 208. Tragically, Aikhenval'd was arrested four years later (April 1937) and sentenced to five years in prison. He died the following year in a labor camp in the Far East. Source: "Aikhvenval'd Boris Iul'evich. Material iz Rossiiskaia Evreiskaia Entsiklopedii [sic]." Source: [https://www.rujen.ru/index.php?title=АЙХЕНВАЛЪД\\_Борис\\_Юльевич&oldid=23589](https://www.rujen.ru/index.php?title=АЙХЕНВАЛЪД_Борис_Юльевич&oldid=23589). Last accessed 12/31/16.

<sup>14</sup> B. Aikhenval'd, "Metod," 195.

through it, and there's nothing shameful in that for the author. A book that took four years to write cannot be read in four hours or even four days. It demands that it be read attentively and creatively (*tvorcheski*), and that is not the business of light reading.<sup>15</sup>

Much more recently, writer and journalist Dmitrii Bykov, a person educationally and culturally well-equipped to tackle the novel, preferred not to in a televised lecture on *Hydrocentral*. He prefaced his remarks by saying he would limit his discussion to the novel's historical context but not extend it to the novel itself," "[b]ecause," he declared, "it's impossible to talk about the novel – it's simply boring [to do so]. ... *Hydrocentral* is an excruciating attempt to write about labor so that it's interesting." However at the end of his lecture, he softened his remarks – although he never stated that *Hydrocentral* was worth reading for *any* reason – by emphasizing Shaginian's journalistic talent and the historical significance of her writing: "When we read the work of geniuses, we are reading the evolution of geniuses, but when we read Shaginian, [it is] through her [that] we grasp the evolution of time. And that isn't unimportant."<sup>16</sup>

So now that it has been established that reading *Hydrocentral* is an arduous task not for the faint-of-heart (or faint-of-education) and that it should be read slowly and attentively, the question still remains: Why read it at all?

For literary specialists, there are several reasons why *Hydrocentral*, to quote Cathy Popkin, "is worth the price of admission." For those with an interest in the evolution of socialist realism, *Hydrocentral* is a unique opportunity to read a work in which the German romantic idealism of Hegel and Goethe looms even larger than the usual Marxist materialism that is front and center in other Soviet literary works. For scholars interested in the ability of Soviet literature

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<sup>15</sup> Shaginian, *Kak ia rabotala*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> "Sto lektsii s Dmitriem Bykovym. Marietta Shaginian. «Gidrotsentral'» 1930 god." Telekanal Dozhd'. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkjOXllzW6I>. Last accessed 12/30/16.

to educate the broad masses in the spirit of socialism, *Hydrocentral* would make a meaty case-study: as one of the earliest tools created for this express purpose, the novel was a resounding failure and represents the bottom of a learning curve for Soviet prose writers seeking to fulfill the official requirements of socialist realism. What was the overall trajectory of this learning curve? What did succeeding Soviet writers do to make their works accessible to the average worker, soldier, and peasant? Such a vector of inquiry points to the related question of dilettantes and experts. I discussed the issue in relation to the novel's characters to each other, and in terms of Shaginian's own wrestling with the issue. But in that moment of history, "the end of the restoration period and the beginning of reconstruction" with the introduction of the first Five-Year Plan, the concern with dilettantes and experts was a country-wide phenomenon. The dilettante-expert dilemma in *Hydrocentral* would be an interesting chapter in a dissertation exploring the literary and/or artistic portrayal of novices and specialists in other works of the period.

For the general reader, *Hydrocentral*, in my opinion, presents an insurmountable challenge. Having issued this caveat, however, I do believe that undergraduate students interested in Soviet literature and culture could benefit from reading it. *Hydrocentral* could be taught as part of an upperclassmen survey class on Soviet literature or one focusing on Soviet production novels. In order to make this feasible, the novel needs to be translated into English to make it accessible to non-Russian speakers, and this is what I intend to do as my next project.

As Bykov rightly noted in his televised lecture, Shaginian is not a literary "genius" in the usual canonical sense, but she is very important as one of the most prolific documentarians of an epoch spanning eight decades. In that period, she produced poetry, drama, literary (fictional) prose, nonfictional biographical and historical works, as well as daunting quantities of

journalistic output covering nearly every aspect of Soviet science, economics, and art.

Shaginian's incredible prolixity and range – both temporal and generic – make her a “must-read” for the perspicacious student of Soviet cultural history. Like the hypothetical binocular-wielding amateur on the mountaintop, she will be rewarded with a simultaneously detailed and panoramic view of prerevolutionary and Soviet-era *byt* and *bytie*. It is my hope that this dissertation offers a firm toehold and engaging context in which to attack *Hydrocentral*, on this or any other front.

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