

Present Perfect: (Post)Humanism and the Search for the New Man  
in Soviet and Post-Soviet *Fantastika*

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## Abstract

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*Present Perfect* is part intellectual history of the discourse of humanism in twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Russian culture, and part cultural history of the New Man in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, looking primarily at works of Soviet and post-Soviet *fantastika* (science fiction and fantasy). The study employs a critical posthumanist methodology drawn from the work of Jean-François Lyotard, and his concept of “rewriting” modernity (here transformed into “rewriting humanism”), and the posthumanist theorization of scholars like Rosi Braidotti and Stefan Hebrechter.

The first chapter covers the pre- and post-revolutionary periods, the second chapter the post-Stalinist period, and the third the post-Soviet. The first chapter looks at critiques of humanism in the non-fictional works of religious philosophers and writers (Fedorov, Berdiaev, Ivanov, Merezhkovsky), Soviet ideologues and writers (Lunacharsky, Trotsky, Bukharin, Gorky), and some writers who fall between the two poles (Blok, Mandelshtam, Lezhnev), and covers texts published between 1906 and 1934. The second chapter deals with the works of the Strugatsky brothers’ Noon Universe series (1961-86) and the figure of the “Progressor” as the New Man. The third chapter looks at novels by three authors: Petrushevskaya’s *Nomer Odin* (2004), Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.* (2011), and Sorokin’s Ice trilogy (2002-05).

These works attest to the inextricable interpenetration of the posthuman with the human, of posthumanism with humanism, of the post-Soviet with the Soviet. The study demonstrates how humanism and posthumanism function dialectically: in the best-case scenario, they negate one another to come to a more whole understanding of the human; in the worst-case scenario, this dialectic creates an increasingly more exclusive humanism that reserves the title of ideal subject for fewer and fewer. Moreover, *Present Perfect* argues that the New Man (that “ideal subject”) in Soviet and post-Soviet fiction is best conceptualized as a field of competing discourses, which fall along three lines of development: the animal-man, the machine-man, and the god-man, each with their own critical orientation toward humanism. In both the Soviet and post-Soviet context, writers like the Strugatsky brothers, Petrushevskaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin employ a critical posthumanism to demonstrate, on the one hand, how the New Man is used as a tool for discursive domination that denies otherness, and on the other, how the New Man can be reconceptualized as a tool for a liberatory ethics that affirms it.

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One would have to assume that true enthusiasm lies only in the human heart—and such an assumption is worthless and empty, since the blackthorn is imbued with a scent, and the eyes of a tortoise with a thoughtfulness that signify the great inner worth of their existence, a dignity complete in itself and needing no supplement from the soul of a human being.  
– Andrei Platonov, *Dzhan*

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.  
– Matthew 5:48



## Introduction

This project's roots are found in the works of Andrei Platonov, who first introduced me to the Fedorovian line of thought in Russian and Soviet culture.<sup>1</sup> The crushed utopias of Platonov's *Chevengur* (1928) or *Kotlovan (The Foundation Pit)*, (1930) refract Nikolai Fedorov's immortalist-utopian impulse to suggest just the opposite, that human beings are weak and feeble creatures incapable of realizing our greatest aspirations. Once a believer in the human exceptionalism he had found in the pages of Fedorov's writings, Platonov came to understand that life is transient and that human life is no more special than that of animals and plants, as per the epigraph above. My interests, however, led me to those writers who *did* believe that humans could realize the seemingly impossible ideas suggested by Fedorov, the nineteenth-century religious philosopher who argued that, through techno-scientific means, humanity would one day be able to resurrect our dead and live an immortal life. The promise of the kingdom of heaven, Fedorov believed, would be realized not in the afterlife, but on our own Earth—and beyond, because we would come to master the cosmos, too, and spread humanity throughout the universe.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, I went in search of characters, peoples, civilizations depicted in

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit* (Cambridge, 1992), 20, notes that, according to Platonov's widow, Fedorov's *Filosofiiia obshchego dela* (1906/1913) was the writer's favorite book. For more on the connection between the two, see also Ayleen Teskey, *Platonov and Fyodorov: The Influence of Christian Philosophy on a Soviet Writer* (Amersham, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> For a good introduction to Fedorov, see George M. Young, *Nikolai F. Fedorov: An Introduction* (Belmont, 1979). Young points out that "Fedorov does not imply that God created an imperfect world, but rather, that God created the world so that it contained the *project of its own perfection*" (91; emphasis mine). This is Fedorov's "projectivism," a kind of approach to history and the individual that we see also in the Bolsheviks' project.

fiction that, in one way or another, realized the promise of perfection that Fedorov had suggested. My dissertation is dedicated to beings who are, whether earnestly or ironically, “better” versions of us, stronger, smarter, or even immortal (which inevitably leads to questions of who is *worse*).

Fedorov’s ideas found popularity in early-twentieth-century Russia, and through Proletkult ideologue Aleksandr Bogdanov, among others,<sup>3</sup> trickled their way into Bolshevik debates on the New Soviet Man, becoming secularized along the way. The Bolsheviks postulated that with the advent of socialism—and, eventually, communism—a new type of person would be born, an ideal social subject, a kind of “superman.” Trotsky, for example, uses that same word; he goes as far as to say that, in the transition from socialism to communism, the New Man “will try to master first the semi-conscious and then the subconscious processes in his own organism ... will once more enter into a state of radical transformation ... will make it his purpose to master his own feelings ... and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.”<sup>4</sup> Reading his words, I knew that I had found the subject of my study: the New Soviet Man, the “superman” who would conquer nature and build utopia on our very own Earth.

The texts that compose my study fall under the broad generic umbrella of what the Russians term *fantastika*, which includes science fiction (sf) among other related genres like fantasy. The term is a convenient shorthand for texts that “generally exhibit themselves as

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<sup>3</sup> Boris Groys, in “Introduction: Russian Cosmism and the Technology of Immortality,” *Russian Cosmism* (Cambridge, 2018), traces the lineage of Russian immortalist ideas from Fedorov to Soviet thinkers like the Biocosmist theoretician Aleksandr Sviatogor, the famous rocket scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, and Bogdanov, who in 1925 founded the Institute for Blood Transfusion, a practice which he hoped would stop, or at least slow, the human aging process.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago, 2005), 206-07.

generic: which is to say as inherently self-knowing.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the term refers both to sf as genre literature (think of the Strugatsky brothers), and to mainstream literature that self-reflexively employs science-fictional elements (think of Pelevin or Sorokin).<sup>6</sup> It is in *fantastika* that Soviet (and, eventually, post-Soviet) authors would find the freedom to imagine the New Man in his most radical formulations, unbound by the reality of present possibilities, whether socio-political, techno-scientific, or in a few cases, mystico-religious. In each of these texts there is present a “novum,” to use Darko Suvin’s term from sf criticism,<sup>7</sup> that makes it possible to envision the New Man as he will be in the future, closer to the utopian time of Trotsky’s “superman” than to our own. And it is for this reason that the subjects of my study can sometimes (though not always) take various science-fictional and fantastical forms: the half-alien boy of the Strugatskys’ *Malysh* (*The Kid*, 1971), the superhuman *liudeny* of their *Volny gasiat veter* (*Waves Extinguish the Wind*, 1985-86), the female android of Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.* (2011), among various others. They are often not direct representations of the New Man, but rather

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<sup>5</sup> “Fantastika,” *SFE: The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, last modified June 5, 2023, <https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/fantastika>.

<sup>6</sup> SF criticism distinguishes between sf and mainstream literature because “there is a useful distinction to be drawn between writers of Genre SF, who think of themselves as writing sf and whose books and stories are marketed as sf, and those writers of sf works who think of themselves (or are marketed) as simply writing fiction, without adopting either the protection or the stigma of a genre label.” “Mainstream SF,” *SFE: The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, last modified July 5, 2021, [https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/mainstream\\_writers\\_of\\_sf](https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/mainstream_writers_of_sf).

Though I recognize the usefulness of this segregation, particularly for a genre that has long been scorned by the general public and the academy, I want to make the argument that both sf and mainstream literature make use, in similar ways, of discourses of humanism, that those discourses hold one key to interpreting both genre literature and mainstream literature with genre elements—and that it is those very genre elements that are particularly ripe for a critical posthumanist analysis, because it is those elements that exaggerate and thereby lay bare the logic of humanism.

For this reason, my work takes place both inside and outside science fiction, and though it is not genre criticism, it also does not deny the genre context of, for example, the Strugatskys’ work, as does Yvonne Howell, in *Apocalyptic Realism: The Science Fiction of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky* (New York, 1994), when she suggests that we call the Strugatskys’ writing “apocalyptic realism” rather than science fiction.

<sup>7</sup> Suvin’s novum is, in the words of Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, “the central imaginary novelty in an sf text, the source of the most important distinctions between the world of the tale and the world of the reader.” Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, 2008), 47.

refractions that, much as Platonov does with Fedorovian thought, twist and distort the principles underlying the New Man ideology to criticize it or reveal its inner contradictions.

With the subject of my study in tow, it was not a long way to the theoretical lens that would help me understand it: the burgeoning practice of critical posthumanism. The figures of my study are “posthuman” in the broad, pop-cultural sense of the word; vampires, robots, werewolves, and other such semi-human beings from the popular imagination fall under this designation, a new word for creatures that have populated our fictions for a long time. More importantly, however, posthumanism is a critical tool that helps us, firstly, to detect the ubiquity of Enlightenment humanist principles in the discursive regimes that structure modern society and the modern subject; secondly, to understand both the productive and the insidious socio-political import of the attractive, supposedly self-evident “truths”—on the autonomy, rationality, and exceptionalism of the human subject—that a humanist ideology naturalizes (and pretty successfully, at that); and thirdly, to denaturalize and reconceptualize them toward a non-hierarchical, non-anthropocentric ethics of self and other.

Though born and elaborated in Western Europe, in the pages of Enlightenment-era *philosophes* like Rousseau and Voltaire, humanist thought made its way to Catherine’s Russia expeditiously (Catherine was, after all, an *enlightened* despot).<sup>8</sup> In the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment principles of reason and tolerance drove the thought of the Westernizers, who sought to model Russian society on European examples.<sup>9</sup> A debate over the place of humanism in Russian culture would continue well into the twentieth century and the Soviet period, in

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<sup>8</sup> Isabel de Madariaga, in *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven, 1981), sees the effects of Enlightenment humanism in eighteenth-century Russia in, for example, a new emphasis on the education of the nobility (81), the novel debate on serfdom (136), and of course Catherine’s correspondences with “some of the best minds of Europe,” “strengthening its ties with the intellectual life of Western Europe” (335).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler, “Case Study: Intelligentsia,” *A History of Russian Literature* (Oxford, 2018), 441.

philosophical treatises, works of fiction, and even the pages of *Pravda*. This debate took place at the same time as did the debate over the New Soviet Man, and the former would come to inform the latter to a great extent.

My thinking on this project was initially catalyzed by a set of three interrelated questions. Firstly, what role did humanist discourse play in the Soviet project to build a new society and the New Man? Secondly, to what extent did different fictional iterations of the New Soviet Man criticize, improve upon, or negate the humanist subject to create a posthumanist subject (the posthuman), and how did they imagine this subject? And lastly, what is the function of the New Man in the post-Soviet cultural landscape? It is part intellectual history of the discourse of humanism in twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Russian culture, and part cultural history of the New Man in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, looking primarily at works of Soviet and post-Soviet *fantastika*. My task is to track the discourse of humanism over this period of time, its permutations according to the reigning ideological bent of the period, focusing primarily on three periods of “post”: the post-Revolutionary, post-Stalinist, and post-Soviet, each of which produced works of fiction and non-fiction with a desire to “turn back the clock” and correct history. In the course of this process, I will demonstrate how the ideal socio-political subject is articulated, and against which *non*-ideal it is created. My interests lie primarily in the ontological and temporal hierarchies that structure the ideal (and non-ideal) subject, however he may be defined according to the fictional world of the work in question as it interacts with, and responds to, the evolving Soviet discourse on humanism. These structures become especially important in light of the humanist precept of perfectibility, one of the primary themes of my project, which the New Soviet Man took up, producing a posthuman subject rife with structural contradictions between humanity and inhumanity, history and ahistoricism.

## 0.1 A Critical Posthumanism

The term “posthumanism” was coined by literary scholar Ihab Hassan in 1977, and was popularized by scholars like Donna Haraway (“A Cyborg Manifesto,” from 1985) and N. Katherine Hayles (*How We Became Posthuman*, from 1999) over the next two decades.<sup>10</sup> These early texts of posthumanist theory take the recent fact of the human being’s intersection with cogno-, bio-, nano- and information technologies to argue that the human has become, in the contemporary era, an assemblage of the various technologies that augment his form. And there is liberatory potential in this fact, they suggest, because these technologies allow us to envision the human beyond the prescriptive parameters of Enlightenment humanism. Techno-scientific advancements that only distort our classical conception of the human body and mind—adding to, taking from, modifying and distorting that thing we call the human and thereby inspiring increasingly bolder visions of self-surpassing—are also the reason that the word “posthumanism” has gained popularity not only in the academy, but also in the mainstream. This is a popular posthumanism that has more in common with the techno-utopian fantasies of transhumanism, such as that of digitizing the human mind and uploading it to a computer.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the posthumanism that I practice in this project belongs to the tradition of critical posthumanism that has developed out of the works of Haraway, Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Rosi

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<sup>10</sup> Though Haraway did not use the word in her article, it is considered one of the ur-texts of posthumanist theory, “credited with critically embracing the ambiguous potential that ‘becoming posthuman’ might bring.” Stefan Herbrechter, review of *The Posthuman*, by Rosi Braidotti, *Culture Machine* (2013), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars of critical posthumanism are always quick to distinguish between the two, including in our own field. Anya Bernstein, in *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death in Contemporary Russia* (Princeton, 2019), 19-22, provides an excellent crash course on the distinction between post- and transhumanism. While posthumanism is a kind of “counter-Enlightenment,” a critique of the failures of humanism, transhumanism is a kind of “ultra-Enlightenment,” a “hyper-humanism” that aims to realize the promise of humanism that is human perfectibility. Whereas transhumanism subscribes to the teleological perspective that suggests a “better” human is possible—and inevitable—, posthumanism plays with that perspective to reveal its faults and dead ends.

In her definition, Bernstein quotes Steve Fuller and Veronica Lipinska, “Transhumanism,” *The Encyclopedia of Ethics, Science, Technology and Engineering* (Boston, 2015), 410-13, and Robert Ranish and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* (Frankfurt am Main, 2014).

Braidotti, and Stefan Herbrechter, among others. This critical posthumanism utilizes the antihumanism of poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard to investigate, criticize, and reimagine humanist discourse, and to affirm a new kind of subject, the posthuman, in his hybridity, alterity, and radical openness. The posthuman need not take a science-fictional form (though sf helps us envision alternatives to the classical human[ist] subject);<sup>12</sup> it is rather a kind of processual and relational subjectivity that rejects the idea of the human as a fixed state.<sup>13</sup> Braidotti writes that “the posthuman subject rests on the affirmation of ... multiplicity and the relational connection with an ‘outside’ that is cosmic and infinite.”<sup>14</sup> It is thus my task to track, in the body of Soviet and post-Soviet texts that comprise my study, not only the discourse of Enlightenment humanism and *negative* responses to it, but also *positive* alternatives in the form of a posthuman subject and a posthumanist ethics.

Before I dive into the specifics of my argument on the Soviet project and the New Man, allow me to first answer three preliminary questions. Firstly, how do we define and understand humanism? Secondly, what is the theoretical framework of my own critical posthumanism, and how is it applied? Thirdly, how does this relatively new Western critical practice pertain to Russian thought and culture?

Humanism is a slippery term. Common knowledge holds humanism to be a set of ideas about the intrinsic value, dignity, and exceptionality of the human being, in contrast to other

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<sup>12</sup> SF is, indeed, a genre of alternatives. For Csicsery-Ronay, in *Seven Beauties*, sf is a kind of critical tool (not unlike posthumanism), thanks specifically to its distancing effect, which forces the reader to compare the fictional world with the real one, to compare “the imaginary model with the ideological one” (50).

<sup>13</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, 2013), 49. Braidotti goes on to write that “the relational capacity of the posthuman subject is not confined within our species, but it includes all non-anthropomorphic elements” (60). It is exactly this kind of non-anthropocentric relationality that I find most affirming in the more optimistic works of my study, such as, for example, the Strugatskys’ *Malysh*, which I discuss in Chapter Three (though there are, indeed, plenty of pessimistic ones, too).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 138.

animals and the rest of the material world.<sup>15</sup> Present-day narratives suggest that these ideas have their seeds in the Renaissance, when, “supposedly, Europe awoke from its medieval slumber and rediscovered classical knowledge, in particular the Ancient Greeks, which again placed Man as a dynamic agent at the center of the universe.”<sup>16</sup> Their bloom then came during the Enlightenment, when *reason* became the word of the day. To the Renaissance belief in the freedom and agency of the secular human being, newly relieved of his chains to the Christian God, the Enlightenment (the so-called “Age of Reason”) added the belief that the human being acts in accordance with innate human reason and learned knowledge.<sup>17</sup> To this day, the idea that human reason must push back against superstition and religion remains the cornerstone of secular forms of humanism.<sup>18</sup>

Contemporary critical perspective demonstrates that Renaissance-*cum*-Enlightenment humanism was only identified and elaborated upon as an independent intellectual movement (as an “ism”) post factum. “Humanism” as such was created by nineteenth-century thinkers, primarily German pedagogues, philologists, and historians, and retroactively applied to the Renaissance and Enlightenment as an anachronism, something purported to have arisen in the

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<sup>15</sup> Can the layperson define humanism? This video on YouTube (“What Was Humanism? AP Euro Bit by Bit”) suggests, at the very least, that the term is part of AP European History curricula; it has over 300K views. It does a good job of summarizing some of the main tenets of humanism (individualism, secularism, the ontological hierarchy of life on earth) and their emergence in the works of select Renaissance thinkers. More importantly, it demonstrates how humanism is commonly taught at the high school level and, of course, simplified in the process; in other words, it shows the standard(ized) narrative on humanism. Paul Sargent, “What Was Humanism? AP Euro Bit by Bit #2,” AP Euro Bit by Bit with Paul Sargent, YouTube Video, 7:54, April 27, 2015, <https://youtu.be/w95Zmb3nB80>.

<sup>16</sup> J. Brent Crosson, “Humanism and Enlightenment,” *The Oxford Handbook on Humanism* (Oxford, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> In the preface to his 800-page tome on the Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel argues that it “marks the most dramatic step toward secularization and rationalization in Europe’s history.” Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford, 2001), vi.

<sup>18</sup> Crosson, “Humanism and Enlightenment.” Take, for example, the manifesto of the Russian Humanist Society, published in the year 2000, which decries the rise of a religious fundamentalism that “fights against the principles of humanism and secular culture and yearns for a return to an archaic religiosity.” In contrast, humanism is to provide “reasonable paths (razumnye puty) into the future.” “Preambula. Gumanisticheskii manifest 2000. Prizyv k novomu planetarnomu gumanizmu,” Manifest 2000, Rossiiskoe gumanisticheskoe obshchestvo, accessed July 10, 2023, <http://www.humanism.ru/manifest/55-manifest1.html>.



past to support present-day conclusions.<sup>19</sup> Nineteenth-century historians, like Jacob Burckhardt in his 1860 work *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, looked back to the Renaissance to elaborate their own nineteenth-century conceptions of individualism, envisioning a time when the human first learned to consider himself a free and unique being—an individual—with something that is “proper” and belonging to that individual alone. Tony Davies locates the origins of this abstract nineteenth-century humanism, with its “universalist and essentialist” conception of man, in the Enlightenment-era political discourse of rights.<sup>20</sup> Political works such as Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1792) elaborated a right-bearing subject whose rights, as a human being (as Man), are inalienable. The political discourse “on rights, coupled with emerging discourses in the natural sciences (Linnaean taxonomy and the *Homo sapien*) and philosophy (on human nature and human knowledge),<sup>21</sup> articulated what we now know as humanism—and the human(ist) subject, “rational, sovereign, and unconditional”—in all but name.<sup>22</sup>

Though, in its elaboration of the “rights of man,” humanism was a step toward much of what we cherish in contemporary civilization (democracy, human rights), it has gotten quite the bad rap since the word itself emerged in the nineteenth century. (The next chapter is proof enough; early-twentieth-century Russians really lambasted “*gumanizm*.”) Davies links the emergence of humanism as a coherent discourse to the rapid industrialization, secularization, and empire-building of the European nineteenth century, which demanded an idea “that could at once rationalize an explosive and unpredictable modernity (as the triumphant achievement of heroic human endeavor) and *justify its all-too-visible brutalities and inequalities*.”<sup>23</sup> Braidotti adds that

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<sup>19</sup> Tony Davies, *Humanism* (New York, 1997), 7-34. The word that the Germans came up with was “Humanismus,” used to describe a kind of high school curriculum that we would today refer to by a related word, the humanities.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Lynn Festa, *Fiction Without Humanity: Person, Animal, Thing in Early Enlightenment Literature and Culture* (Philadelphia, 2019), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Davies, *Humanism*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 17. Emphasis mine.

the Hegelian philosophy of history—which assigned to Europe the exclusive role of messiah among the nations of the world—made humanism, and its ideal subject, a hegemonic civilizational and cultural model to be exported and enforced beyond the borders of Europe.<sup>24</sup> According to Sylvia Wynter, European humanism goes hand in hand with the exploitation of other peoples because it makes foils of the Native American and African civilizations, who become “the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other . . . and, as such, the negation of the generic ‘normal humanness’, ostensibly expressed by and embodied in the peoples of the West.”<sup>25</sup> Scholars of humanism and posthumanism argue that, in this way, humanism became the normative, prescriptive, and exclusionary ideology that we know today. Thanks to its universalizing principle, European imperialism became not only justified, but even necessary: to make its colonial others into the same became a noble task that would help them to join history, join modernity, join the teleological narrative of progress.

As this narrative suggests, humanism does not exist as a single, stable category, but finds new articulations, towards new uses and abuses, in different mouths, places, and times. The ultimate value it assigns to the human stays constant, however, and it is based on the assumption that the human being is autonomous, rational, exceptional but universal, and—importantly, for my purposes—engaged in the (perpetual?) process of self-perfection. Albert William Levi put it nicely when he asked (and answered),

What is Humanism? The question is difficult. No connotative or “intensive” definition will ever do justice to the richness of meaning required. The answer can, therefore, be plausibly suggested only by an accretion of denotations. “Humanism” lies in Michel de Montaigne’s “Each man carries within himself the entire form of the human condition”; in Immanuel Kant’s third formulation of the categorical imperative: “So act as to treat human beings (yourself or any other) always as intrinsically valuable, never as a means only”; in Karl Marx’s “To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man

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<sup>24</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003), 266.

the root is man himself”; and in John Stuart Mill’s “Among the works of man which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself.”<sup>26</sup>

When I first began this project, I expected that my critical posthumanism would lead me to narratives that reject humanist principles in no uncertain terms. The word was so colored with disdain in early-twentieth-century texts like, for example, Berdiaev’s “Konets Renessansa” (“The End of the Renaissance,” discussed in detail, with many others, in the next chapter), where the philosopher blames the Enlightenment regime of reason for stripping humanism of its inner creative drive, leaving it spiritually inert and even dangerous. I expected to find the same kind of disdain in the post-Stalinist and post-Soviet fiction that composes the bulk of my study. What I found, instead, were narratives that investigate humanism, grapple with it—yes—but not merely to “throw it overboard from the ship of modernity,”<sup>27</sup> that is, to criticize it, negate it, and move on. From the Strugatskys to Petrushevskaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin, Soviet and post-Soviet authors alike demonstrate that humanism is indeed rife with contradictions that lead to the domination of the other, be he human or not. But there is no clear “beyond” humanism that these authors arrive at in their works; rather, they seem stuck on some of the fundamental categories of humanism, like dignity, personal sovereignty, and the pursuit of knowledge. Their work takes place at this very impasse. It attests to the inextricable interpenetration of the posthuman with the human, of posthumanism with humanism, of the post-Soviet with the Soviet. Their posthumanism is, then, better conceptualized as a discursive method, firstly, to envision a different kind of subjectivity that is processual and relative rather than fixed and absolute,<sup>28</sup> and,

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<sup>26</sup> Albert William Levi, *Humanism and Politics: Studies in the Relationship of Power and Value in the Western Tradition* (Bloomington, 1969), 400.

<sup>27</sup> Per the Futurist manifesto “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (1917). Thank you to Chris Caes both for this turn of phrase, and for the language to help me elucidate my point throughout this paragraph.

<sup>28</sup> Lynn Festa, in *Fiction Without Humanity*, makes the argument that the humanist subject was not always fixed and absolute. Her book looks at the early Enlightenment, at the time when that subject was being articulated and debated, to argue that, though the fixed model won out in the end, there are numerous contemporaneous narratives

secondly, to expand the productive elements of the humanist subject to those to whom it has hitherto been denied: for example, indigenous peoples, non-human animals, or simply the other as such, irreducible in his unknowability. This work takes place in a context in which Soviet ideology and the Soviet experience serve as both a productive force and a hindrance toward this goal. With this in mind, I want to introduce the idea of *rewriting humanism*.

Following Lyotard, it may be said that humanism continuously writes itself anew. It is Jean-François Lyotard's *The Inhuman* (1988) that provides me with the framework for my own critical posthumanism. Much as Lyotard suggests we think of postmodernity as *rewriting modernity* (insofar as "the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself"),<sup>29</sup> the exercise proves similarly useful when applied to posthumanism and humanism.<sup>30</sup> The point is to stop thinking of these categories as *states* that can be ordered linearly in time, but rather as *processes* that overlap. By ditching the term "postmodernism" and turning instead to the phrase "rewriting modernity," we perform a double displacement that upends the "post" to replace it with "re," and attaches this "re" to a process (writing), rather than a state (modernity). In this way, posthumanism also becomes *rewriting humanism*. According to Lyotard, the displacement at work in the phrase "rewriting modernity" makes explicit the pointlessness of the periodization implied in the "post," whether in postmodernity, per his argument, or posthumanism, per mine. A critical discourse

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and genres that demonstrate a processual subject, too (she focuses on what were then seen as "low" genres: the riddle, the fable, the still life, the novel, among others).

As she writes in her introduction, Festa's work questions the "presumed human monopoly on subjectivity, in part by reinstating the nonhuman elements or forces that reside within or behind the model of humanity to which the Enlightenment appeals" (4). Her fresh take on the Enlightenment subject further reinforces my own argument here: that posthumanism inhabits humanism deconstructively, that the two are inextricably interpenetrated.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford, 1991), 25.

<sup>30</sup> Stefan Herbrechter performs exactly this game of substitution with modern/postmodern and human/posthuman in "Postmodern," *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge, 2016), 54-68.

mired in periodization according to “pre” or “post” leaves unattended the present, from which perspective the work of criticism must take place.<sup>31</sup> And in the present, we encounter both the endurance of humanist principles and the emergence of posthumanist theory. For this reason, the critical posthumanism that I practice—and that I draw out from the texts that compose my study—is best conceptualized as a rewriting of humanism: a continued critical process that does not only deny humanist principles to relegate them to the past, but reconceptualizes them to create a new set of values for the present. A critical posthumanism does not come *after* humanism, but grapples with it. It is not a fixed and circumscribed historical entity that marks the end of humanism; after all, despite the growing popularity of posthumanist theory, humanist principles are alive and well in the twenty-first century, the rallying cry of the liberal democracies of our age. Rather, posthumanism is a critical process that has haunted humanism since at least the nineteenth century, when a Marxist or Nietzschean antihumanism was first elaborated (more on this in Chapter One). Thus, it is my task to demonstrate how posthumanism inhabits humanism deconstructively, how the logic of humanism leads to its own undoing and *redoing*.

Twentieth-century Russian, specifically Soviet, culture is ripe for a critical posthumanist approach because the Soviet writers, thinkers, and ideologues were themselves both *participating in a humanist discourse* and *practicing a critical posthumanism* in their response to it. Our field has only recently taken up the task of critical posthumanism to interrogate the reception of humanism in the Russian cultural sphere. The only book-length work on posthumanism and Russian cultural criticism is a welcome and necessary collection of articles titled *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia* (2018). The book’s introduction, by

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<sup>31</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 24.

editors and contributors Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt, sketches a history of posthumanist ideas in Russian culture—beginning (where else?) with Fedorov—and my project continues their work.

Firstly, my study fills out their intellectual history of the Russian reception of humanism in early-twentieth-century Russia and the early Soviet Union. How did the Russians understand and talk about humanism? Chapter One of my study demonstrates that, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, religious philosophers and poets (Fedorov, Berdiaev, Ivanov, and Merezhkovsky), Marxist ideologues and writers (Lunacharsky, Trotsky, Bukharin, Preobrazhensky, Gorky), and others (Blok, Mandelshtam, Lezhnev) address the question of humanism head on, naming it by name and arguing over its legacy and place in the construction of contemporary society. By the early 1930s, the Bolsheviks would appropriate the word “humanism” to promote a specifically socialist humanism; they would claim this to be the “true” humanism and one freed from the ethical pitfalls of European humanism, which was from its inception tied to capitalism. Chapter One is an intellectual history that spans from 1906 to 1934, from Fedorov’s *Filosofia obschego dela* (*Philosophy of the Common Task*) to Gorky’s “Proletarskii gumanizm” (“Proletarian Humanism”). It examines how these authors discuss humanism, what kind of critical language they use, where they locate its shortcomings, what alternatives they offer, and how, ultimately, they attempt to rehabilitate it.

Secondly, the remainder of my project documents the artistic response, over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, to both European and Soviet humanism through the lens of the New Soviet Man and fictional representations thereof. In the process, I demonstrate how both Soviet and post-Soviet authors develop their own practice of critical posthumanism, and how they fashion their New Men into posthuman subjects, with both positive

(affirming) and negative (negating) results. My analysis reveals that there are two kinds of posthuman subjects in Soviet and post-Soviet fiction: what I have termed the *positive* posthuman subject (a subject based on a processual form of identity that affirms multiplicity, affirms the interconnectedness of the subject with what is “outside” him, and affirms the unknowable alterity at his own core and the core of the other), and the *negative* posthuman subject (a subject by all accounts “better” than a human subject—more rational, more knowledgeable, more in control of his social and political existence in the world—yet one who denies humanist principles to other, “lesser” subjects). Chapter Two skips forward twenty-some years to the post-Stalinist period, when humanist principles again became a hot topic in the era of de-Stalinization. The Strugatsky brothers depict the New Men of their Noon Universe series (1962-85) as interstellar champions of humanism who attempt to spread humanistic ideals to humanoid alien races. In the process, they illustrate how humanistic discourses create the other as an object of knowledge, how the other can resist that objectification, and how that objectification leads to a dead end where the human(ist) subject becomes that same object of knowledge—and coercion.

Chapter Three then focuses on literature of the post-Soviet period: Petrushevskaya’s *Nomer Odin* (*Number One*, 2003), Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.* (2011), and Sorokin’s Ice trilogy (2002-05). Whereas the pre- and post-Revolutionary period witnessed a debate on humanistic ideals, and the post-Stalinist period witnessed their reemergence, the post-Soviet period witnesses their retreat in connection to the demise of the Soviet metanarrative that promised the emancipation of the human subject. Like the Strugatskys, these authors demonstrate the self-deconstructive logic of humanism by literalizing its principles, exaggerating its problematics, and dramatizing its breaks and ruptures. In each case, their texts reveal the othering structure of humanism, whose prescriptive logic of what the human *should* be only works to make the human *other to himself*,

in a dialectics without resolution, where self and other never coalesce but play an endless game of musical chairs over who gets to claim the “I.” Fashioning the other into a subhuman unworthy of life, only for the self to be made other—and expendable—in return (Sorokin); stripping the other of autonomy, only for one’s own autonomy to come into question (Pelevin); studying primitive civilizations, only to hold a mirror up to your own contemporary barbarian society (Petrushevskaya); consummating the teleological process of self-perfection, only for the human(ist) subject to be made other to itself (Strugatskys); these are all narratives of a humanism *rewritten* as a posthumanism.

## 0.2 The New Soviet Man

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault suggests that the human is not so much an ontological state as it is a taxonomic category, and that it is by first identifying categories of deviance that we can then delineate normative or exemplary humanity. He demonstrates how over time the human being became both the subject and object of knowledge and how this knowledge was used to create a “regulative ideal,” a norm that is “forcibly materialized” so as to produce the right kind of subject.<sup>32</sup> Taking a cue from Foucault in my methodology, I conceive of my project in part as an *archaeology* of the New Soviet Man, specifically through the lens of Russian *fantastika* and discourses of (post)humanism. Following Foucault, I argue that the New Soviet Man functioned as the “regulative ideal” of Soviet subjecthood, and my task is to determine on which terms this axiomatic category is constructed. Furthermore, I am just as interested in the

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York, 1993), 1, explains that the norm is a “productive power.” It creates the kind of subject that it wants to govern. In other words, it makes the subject governable as such.



various others that have been excluded by this regime of moral, cultural, and political hygiene, the others against which the normative ideal is defined.

The New Soviet Man is best regarded as a discursive field of competing concepts, at times tipped towards one, at times toward another. What are the threads with which this heterogenous subject is woven? Previous scholarship has identified the two main lines of the New Man's development in early Soviet culture: the machine and the superhuman.<sup>33</sup> The two stand at odds with one another in a number of ways, detailed below, which creates a tension in the New Man that is generative of the concept itself; the New Man is that very mess of contradictions born in a debate between dual concepts such as history/ahistoricism, individualism/collectivism, rationality/creativity, and ultimately, humanism/posthumanism. To these two main threads that, woven together, create the New Man, I want to add a third: the animal, the non-ideal *against* which the New Man is created.<sup>34</sup> My project tracks the

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<sup>33</sup> For more on the machine and superhuman models, see Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism* (University Park, 2002), 189-208, and Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, 1982), 68-80, 93-100. Both are discussed in detail below.

<sup>34</sup> While the machine and the superhuman are two sides of the same coin in the Soviet New-Man discourse, critical literature from beyond the Soviet sphere often opposes the machine and the animal. For this reason, it makes sense to bring this third category into the mix.

John Rieder, in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, 2008), 111, argues that the logic that binds together the animal and the machine is that of "evolutionary progress and degeneration." Artificial or altered human beings in early SF (the object of his study) diverge from standard human anatomy either towards the animal or the machine. Rieder sees in the animal the "racialized, degenerate, savage other of colonialist ideology," while the machine stands for the "civilized human insulated from the vicissitudes of natural selection."

Hal Foster, in *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, 2004), xi, makes a similar argument. Foster points to the simultaneous intensification in the modern era of, on the one hand, "cultural alterity," and on the other, "bodily instrumentality," giving rise to opposed but complementary representations of the primitive and the machine in twentieth-century visual art, to which he devotes much of his book.

My work extends their insights to Soviet and post-Soviet fiction. It is no coincidence that the animal, in the guise of the savage or the primitive, is presented as culturally other in the works of the Strugatskys, Petrushevskaya, and Pelevin. At the same time, Pelevin presents the machine as both the apotheosis of human culture (a kind of digital library of human knowledge) and a base instrument for human satisfaction (a sex robot, in fact). But I am not interested in how these authors stick to the script of the animal vs. the machine. Rather, I want to demonstrate how they play with that script, how they confuse these categories, and to what end: to humanize the racialized other? to "disgrace the machine" (in the words of Olesha's Ivan Babichev)? to denaturalize the idea of a linear evolution from animal to human to machine?

development, over twentieth- and into twenty-first-century fiction, of these three figures in hybrid human form: the animal (presented as the savage, the primitive; see the Strugatskys' humanoid aliens, Petrushevskaya's *Enttis and Chuchuns*), the machine (Pelevin's *Kaia*), and the superhuman (presented as the divine; see the Strugatskys' *Wanderers* and *liudeny*, Sorokin's *Brotherhood of the Light*). Each of these hybrids communicates a different concern over the ontological stability of humanity and its historical trajectory: the animal hybrid questions to what extent, and on what terms, humanity can be distinguished from non-human animals and the unconscious animal drives that power even the modern man; the machine hybrid questions to what extent is human rationality, intellect, and creativity a unique (or replicable?) natural phenomenon; and the superhuman hybrid questions who, exactly, holds the power to determine the political sovereignty and historical fate of a human civilization. The Soviet and post-Soviet authors in question cast each of these hybrids into posthuman subjects that either affirm a critical posthumanist ethics of openness and alterity (Pelevin), reveal the negative center of the humanist subject (Sorokin), or sometimes both (Strugatskys, Petrushevskaya).

Scholars such as Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck have identified the Enlightenment-humanist pretensions of the Soviet project and the New Man (Chapter One of my project demonstrates as much using primary sources). Halfin's *Terror in My Soul* interrogates the "moral" project of Bolshevism to create ethical citizens, which he argues was based on an emancipatory humanist ideology spun out of control. Hellbeck's *Revolution on My Mind* takes on the same topic, arguing that the Soviet project promised its participants that they would gain a new consciousness to become "exemplary members of humanity."<sup>35</sup> His phrasing here is crucial. What Halfin and Hellbeck both demonstrate in their analysis of the interconnectedness of

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<sup>35</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, 2006), 14.

personal biography and state ideology is that Bolshevism was in part born out of the humanist precept of perfectibility (recall John Stuart Mill's idea that man must be "rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying" *himself* above all), and that the Soviet subject was "a project, not a given."<sup>36</sup> To "internalize the revolution"<sup>37</sup> was to set oneself on this path of personal perfectibility. It is safe to say that, in this respect, the New Man was a humanist subject. My interest lies in those science-fictional representations of the New Man that take the logic of perfectibility to its conclusion to envision not only the New Man working toward his perfection, but in his achievement thereof: the New Man as a completed project, as an ideal subject that now becomes a regulative norm. How do these science-fictional representations of the perfected New Man parody, exaggerate, and distort the image of the ideal subject, and to what end?

In *New Myth, New World*, one of her authoritative studies on the history of Nietzsche in Russia, Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal argues that the Nietzschean discourse of the superman (*Übermensch*) provided one of the primary sources of the New Soviet Man. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche imagines the future superman as "a being that would regard man as man now regards the ape, a painful embarrassment and a laughingstock."<sup>38</sup> The Nietzschean superman glorifies freedom based upon strength, willfulness, and hardness; he despises weakness and the forms of commonplace bourgeois morality birthed by humanistic discourse. Nietzscheanism is, in this sense, one of the first antihumanisms to appear on the European stage, arguing against humanist anthropocentrism while fantasizing of the posthuman superman at the end of our evolutionary line. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes that "man is a bridge and not a

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<sup>36</sup> Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, 2003), 21.

<sup>37</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 9.

goal,”<sup>39</sup> and that “man is something that should be overcome.”<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, he valorizes the potentialities of human creativity to lead us along this path, envisioning the ideal human subject as the product of his own creation. For this reason, the Russian Symbolists, the first generation of Russians to interpret Nietzsche, saw in him the desire for a new word [*novoe slovo*] and a new art to adequately prepare humanity for its ambitious endeavors.<sup>41</sup>

Rosenthal suggests a direct genealogy between the Nietzschean superman and the two forms of the New Soviet Man competing for supremacy in the 1920s: the ultra-rational, ultra-efficient machine of the avant-garde, and the ultra-vital, larger-than-life superhuman of the (soon-to-be Socialist) realists.<sup>42</sup> Whereas the machine expressed the avant-gardist ideals of formal harmony and collective power, the superhuman sought to give the populace more “human” models to emulate.<sup>43</sup> Rosenthal also points to the incorruptible flesh of the machine as one of its primary and most attractive qualities, sparking in the minds of some Soviet thinkers utopian visions of the immortal body (as in the Trotsky excerpt above).<sup>44</sup>

Representations of both forms proliferated in various media of the post-Revolutionary period, and Rosenthal cites numerous cases from both camps. For example, Meyerholdian biomechanics, “a psycho-physiological method for training actors that eliminated random movements to make the body as expressive as possible,”<sup>45</sup> began to dictate dramatic practice in the early 1920s. Meyerhold’s lecture on Biomechanics at the Moscow Conservatory in 1922 made explicit the purpose of biomechanics: to discover “those movements in work which

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<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1961), 215.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 6-9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 189-190.

<sup>43</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 190.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 192.

facilitate the maximum use of work time.”<sup>46</sup> As a didactic tool, theatrical biomechanics presented the audience with the model of the ideal worker, calculated, purposeful, and disciplined. More than that, however, biomechanics did not only speed the body up, but also slowed it down, drawing out certain bodily movements, extending them in space and time. Darren Tunstall argues that this aspect of the practice was a defamiliarizing tactic that made the actor more aware of being in his own body, what Meyerhold called *samozerkalenie*, looking at oneself in the mirror with a new perspective, as if seeing oneself for the first time.<sup>47</sup>

It is also at this time that Vertov developed his theory of the *kino-glaz*, which likewise promoted a defamiliarized approach to the world. To quote Vertov, “I am the kino eye, I create a new man more perfect than Adam. ... Now and forever I free myself from human immobility. ... My path leads to the creation of a new perspective of the world. I decipher in a new way, a new world unknown to you.”<sup>48</sup> The *kino-glaz* was thus an epistemological tool that would reveal the world “without a mask, as a world of naked truth.”<sup>49</sup> Vertov’s camera captured reality in such a way that slowed it down for the viewer, allowing the eye to grasp what it would have otherwise missed.<sup>50</sup> Along these lines, the camera may be conceptualized as a technological prosthesis that upgrades an otherwise “incapacitated” body,<sup>51</sup> creating a new kind of hybrid subject that can see what others cannot. The concept of the cinematic montage is key to the post-Revolutionary machine consciousness, which emphasizes the capacity to work as one part of a larger whole; the

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<sup>46</sup> Meyerhold, quoted in Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (London, 1998), 197-98.

<sup>47</sup> Darren Tunstall, “Theatrical Biomechanics and Movements Science,” *The Routledge Companion to Vsevolod Meyerhold* (New York, 2023), 478.

<sup>48</sup> Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), 17-18.

<sup>49</sup> Vertov, “From the Notebooks of Dziga Vertov,” *Film Makers on Film Making: Statements on Their Art by Thirty Directors* (Bloomington, 1967), 91.

<sup>50</sup> Anne Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera*,” *October* 162 (2017), 116.

<sup>51</sup> Julia Vaingurt, “Poetry of Labor and Labor of Poetry: The Universal Language of Alexei Gastev's Biomechanics,” *The Russian Review* 67.2 (2008), 214.

whole is an assembly of parts put together by montage (“through montage I create a new, perfect man”).<sup>52</sup>

Yet another influence on the machine model was the thought of Aleksei Gastev, expressed both in his poetry and his articles on labor productivity. Hailed as one of the great proletarian poets of the 1910s, Gastev wrote poems by titles such as “We grow out of iron” (*My rastem iz zheleza*, 1914).<sup>53</sup> The poem emphasizes the collective (he stands with “hundreds of ... comrades”) and the more-than-human capabilities of the new, iron man (“suffocating from his inhuman efforts”).<sup>54</sup> In a poem titled “Gates,” Gastev writes that “we” (the workers) are “their lever, their breath, their plan,” in reference to the machines of labor.<sup>55</sup> By 1921, Gastev stopped writing poetry and focused exclusively on his work at the Central Institute of Labor, where he developed a kind of biomechanics not for the stage, but for the factory. (Gastev’s was likely a direct influence on Meyerhold’s biomechanics.)<sup>56</sup> His Taylorism was not an effort merely to increase productivity, but to harmonize labor, to give it beautiful form.<sup>57</sup> His labor manual *Kak nado rabotat’* (*How to Work*, 1924) argues that through interaction with machines, a new kind of human being is born (“special types of people”); machines have their own “moods” and “rhythms,” and rather than fighting against them, we should harmonize with them to perfect the labor process, and *ourselves*.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Vertov, “We,” 18.

<sup>53</sup> For more on the metal motif in early Soviet culture, see Rolf Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution* (Ithaca, 2003). On Gastev, see pp. 43-57. Hellebust points to the “union with the masses” as the most important of the flesh-to-metal motif in Gastev’s poetry.

<sup>54</sup> Aleksei Gastev, “My rastem iz zheleza (1914),” *Antologiya russkoi liriki pervoi chetverti XX veka* (Moscow, 1991), [http://az.lib.ru/g/gastew\\_a\\_k/text\\_0010.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/g/gastew_a_k/text_0010.shtml).

<sup>55</sup> Gastev, quoted in Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal*. 49.

<sup>56</sup> Tunstall, “Theatrical Biomechanics,” 476.

<sup>57</sup> Patricia Carden, “Utopia and Anti-Utopia: Aleksei Gastev and Evgeny Zamyatin,” *The Russian Review* 46.1 (1987), 6.

<sup>58</sup> Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat’* (Moscow, 1972), 27-28.

Julia Vaingurt points out that Gastev's biomechanical training first focuses on the body, then on the mind, "which can [must?] be disassociated from one's wants, likes, and dislikes."<sup>59</sup> The machine man must be able to do and see things in a different way, by inhabiting a kind of defamiliarized machine subjectivity. In this way, both Gastev's and Meyerhold's biomechanics were not only physical, but psychological, too. Vertov's *kino-glaz* also suggests that the capacity for defamiliarization ("a new perspective"; "a world of naked truth") is a key characteristic of the New Man. Drawn from these, and other, sources,<sup>60</sup> the machine model is characterized by order and creativity of form, collectivism, and—importantly—novelty, a freshness of approach and perspective; as the latest product of history, the machine exists within time and is marked by time.

Meanwhile, the realists (eventually, Socialist Realists) highlighted the heroic qualities of the New Man, casting him in the mold of the energetic superhuman warrior. There is no dearth of examples from canonical literature of the 1920s and 30s. Fedor Gladkov's *Tsement* (*Cement*, 1925) provides one of the primary prototypes of the future Socialist Realist positive hero in its protagonist, Gleb Chumalov, the no-nonsense, always forward-moving soldier of the Civil War. There is also the protagonist of Nikolai Ostrovsky's *Kak zakalialas' stal'* (*How the Steel Was Tempered*, 1932-34), Pavel Korchagin, who becomes almost fantastically deathless in the face of seemingly fatal injury through sheer willpower and his steadfast belief in socialism. Katerina Clark traces the realist variety of the New Man to a few different prototypes; for my purposes, I will deal, firstly, with the *bogatyr* of Slavic folklore, a warrior figure, and secondly, with the martyr of Old Russian hagiography. The *bogatyr*'s defining characteristic is his bravery, which

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<sup>59</sup> Vaingurt, "Poetry of Labor and Labor of Poetry," 223.

<sup>60</sup> Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 190-92, also points to Tatlin's and Lissitzky's work as examples of the machine model in avant-garde art, again reading them through the lens of Nietzsche.

grants him his penchant for remarkable feats. Clark argues that the *bogatyr*-like hero presages the Stalinist ideal in his focus on individual heroism and will.<sup>61</sup> The martyr, on the other hand, lives a teleological life of sacrifice whose meaning is found in the grace-giving act of martyrdom that crowns it in death.<sup>62</sup> Chumalov and Korchagin fit these two prototypes nicely: Chumalov the *bogatyr*, whose willfulness helps him achieve his goals, and Korchagin the martyr, whose perpetual self-sacrifice leaves him triplegic by the novel's end (in which he sits down to write his own auto/hagiography). In contrast to the machine, this model of the New Man is characterized by wilfulness, heroism, and ahistoricity, drawn, as he is, from folkloric and religious sources that pretend to eternal values in the figure of the epic hero. The SR superhuman model is marked by time in another way, however: the SR master plot from spontaneity to consciousness presents a Bildungsroman structure that sees the protagonist develop through time (numerous of the authors in my study go on to play with this structure).

I want to complicate previous scholarship on the New Man by introducing a third figure, the animal, the non-ideal against which the New Man is created (or, sometimes, unfavorably compared to, in a critical posthumanist transvaluation of values).<sup>63</sup> For Agamben, the binary opposition between the animal and the human is what constitutes the human(ist) subject. He writes that “the division of life into ... animal and human ... passes first of all as a *mobile border* within living man, and without this intimate caesura the very decision of what is human and what is not would probably not be possible.”<sup>64</sup> It is the job of a humanist discourse to reify that border

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<sup>61</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 73.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>63</sup> There is also at least one positive animal-man hybrid that I have come across in my research: Beliaev's *Chelovek-amfibiia* (1928), which sees an Argentine surgeon give shark gills to a boy with fatally weak lungs. Though the superhuman ability of breathing underwater prevents him from living on land among people (he has become *other than* human), Ikhtiandr remains a positive figure. The 1962 film adaptation by Vladimir Chebotarev and Gennady Kazansky presents him as a Christ-like figure.

<sup>64</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, 2004), 15. Emphasis mine.



and freeze it into place, making the human and the animal into stable categories that exclude one another. But the border is “mobile,” as Agamben says, and for this reason must be continually attended to, lest it fall in the face of interpretation. He continues to argue that the human(ist) subject is traditionally conceived as the combination of a living thing (a body) and a soul (a *logos*), but that humanist discourse separates the latter from the former to valorize it as the true locus of humanity, and vilify the former as an animality that must be denied. The human(ist) subject is thus created by a structure of exclusion. Agamben terms this exclusionary structure the “anthropological machine of humanism,”<sup>65</sup> which, ironically, confirms that the human is less than himself insofar as he requires constant articulation to exist as a category (again demonstrating that posthumanism inhabits humanism deconstructively).

Extending this concept to Soviet culture (let’s call it the anthropological machine of socialism), I demonstrate that the New Man is created by the same structure of exclusion; its fictional representations depend time and again (in the Strugatskys, Petrushevskaya, Pelevin, *and* Sorokin) on an animal (savage, primitive, often racialized) other that must be excluded in order to create the category of the New Man. In each case, however, the author in question refuses to stick to the script on the animal as the savage other; in their posthumanist transvaluations, we see an animal other whose narrative perspective is favored or whose subjectivity is rendered—in one way or another, most often through the value and practice of artistic creativity—better than a human(ist) subjectivity. The animal hybrid thus becomes one of the most productive posthuman subjects in Soviet and post-Soviet fiction, an affirmation of openness to alterity, hybridity, and creativity.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 37.

In his book on *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, John Rieder argues that the genre of science fiction first emerged at the same time as Europeans “discovered” the world, and developed concurrently with European colonialism. To his argument, I would add that discourses of European humanism *also* emerged and developed concurrently with science fiction and European colonialism, and that humanism is, too, an important historical context for science fiction. As Davies, Braidotti, and Wynter argue, humanism provided the ideological justification for colonialist expansion, making the European self into the ideal that must be imposed onto the colonial other. Just as “science fiction exposes something that colonialism imposes,”<sup>66</sup> so, too, does it expose *something that humanism imposes*. Though Rieder’s concern is Western SF, the same is certainly true of Soviet *fantastika*. The Soviet project of the New Man reverberates in the pages of Soviet and post-Soviet fiction as both a productive force toward a posthumanist subject, and an impediment toward that same subject.

“Colonialism made space into time,”<sup>67</sup> Rieder argues, locating in the “exotic” cultures of newly-discovered lands civilizations that, from the European perspective, seemed stuck in the past. The colonizer deemed the colonized to be lagging behind in terms of human (read: European) development. This space-as-time idea holds true in the Noon works of the Strugatskys, where distant alien planets become the locus of a past time in human development; in Petrushevskaya’s *Nomer Odin*, where the Arctic serves as that past place frozen in time (pardon the pun); and in Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.*, where the fictional Urkaina is the homeland of the “underdeveloped” colonial subject. The colonial other (the animalized savage, the figure of “an animal in human form”<sup>68</sup>) is crucial to the articulation of the New Man specifically because of

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<sup>66</sup> John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, 37.

the “new” in his name: the colonial other in Soviet *fantastika* becomes the “old man,” so to say, against which the novel regulative ideal, the New Man, is elaborated.

Appropriating Laura Mulvey’s concept of the cinematic gaze, Rieder comes up with the concept of the “colonial gaze,” a subject/object structure that gives power and knowledge to the one who looks, and takes it away from the one who is looked at. The colonial gaze pervades the works of the Strugatskys, Petrushevskaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin, which cast one set of characters (often, though not always, the New Man) as the anthropological onlookers, and another set as the racialized other that is made into an object of knowledge. The colonial gaze is fixed on the Strugatskys’ humanoid alien species, Petrushevskaya’s Enttis and Chuchuns, Pelevin’s Orks, and in Sorokin—in a final reversal—it is the humans who become an object of knowledge (the same reversal holds true, in one way or another, in the other works, too). Why is this feature of early Western sf so prevalent in Soviet and post-Soviet *fantastika*, and what does European colonialist discourse have to do with the Soviet project? I have a few ideas: we could read it literally, as an interrogation of Soviet colonialism, the colonization of the non-Russian peoples living on the peripheries of the “empire,” from a postcolonialist perspective; or more generally, as an articulation of the logic of humanism, which demands an other for the sake of constructing the self. The logic of internal and external enemies crucial to Soviet ideological practice also seems relevant here, and is replicated, in tandem with the colonial gaze, both by the Strugatskys and Sorokin. Finally, and most ambitiously, I would argue that *the Soviet people are themselves cast as the colonial other* in Soviet New-Man discourse and practice,<sup>69</sup> which was a top-down

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<sup>69</sup> Alexander Etkind, in *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, 2011), makes a similar argument about the imperial period in Russia, where the cultural elite and the masses were similarly, if not more, distant from one another than they were in the Soviet Union. This is what he calls “internal” colonization, though the coercive practices of imperial “internal” colonization and those of the Soviet variant were, I would argue, different both in scale and effect; one only has to look at the Soviet literacy campaign, which touched practically every Soviet citizen, as an example.

modernizing effort meant to drag the general population from the capitalist past into the socialist future, imbuing them with modern values, a modern subjectivity, in the process (as Hellbeck suggests).<sup>70</sup> In this argument, the Soviet Union is both the place of the past and the place of the future; it houses both the humanist self (the leaders and cultural workers tasked with modernizing the masses) and the colonial other (those very same masses). It is for this reason that these Soviet and post-Soviet New Men are also colonizers: the Strugatskys' Progressors, who study alien races; Petrushevskaya's anthropologists, who study ancient Arctic peoples; Pelevin's Big Byz drone pilot, who studies the Orks; and Sorokin's Brotherhood of the Light, who studies *humans themselves*. Ultimately, each of these authors destabilizes the colonial gaze by reversing its direction and thereby defamiliarizing it. As Rieder argues about early Western SF, these works, too, set "the hierarchical difference between observer and observed swinging between the poles of subject and object, with each swing potentially questioning and recoding the discursive framework of [ideological] truth, moral certitude, and cultural hegemony."<sup>71</sup>

The Soviet project of the New Man was a biopolitical one: by becoming New Men, Soviet citizens would begin to live the "good life," to quote Aristotle, that is, a "politically qualified life."<sup>72</sup> Socialism was to turn the long-oppressed masses, for the first time in history, "into *persons*."<sup>73</sup> In this sense, the Soviet project conforms to the standard Foucauldian definition of biopolitics.<sup>74</sup> "For millennia," Foucault writes, "man remained what he was for Aristotle: a

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<sup>70</sup> Hellbeck, *Terror in My Soul*, 5-7, 15-21.

<sup>71</sup> Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, 15.

<sup>72</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, 1998), 2

<sup>73</sup> Nikolai Bukharin, quoted in Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, 7. Emphasis mine.

<sup>74</sup> Sergei Prozorov, in *The Biopolitics of Stalinism: Ideology and Life in Soviet Socialism* (Edinburgh, 2016), notes that biopolitical theorization has traditionally shied away from socialism, focusing instead on liberalism, neo-liberalism, and fascism—despite the fact that the creation of the New Soviet Man was "arguably the most ambitious project of the *positive* transformation of human lives," and that it "at the same time unleashed the unprecedented *negativity* of terror against the very persons that were to be transformed" (38; emphasis in the original). Prozorov argues that the experience of Soviet socialism helps us explain the persistent transformation of biopolitics into thanatopolitics, and the potential for violence inherent in biopolitics itself.

living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, in choosing to subscribe to the Soviet call to become a socialist subject, the Soviet citizen comes into the care of the state, which affirms his life as worthwhile. The biopolitical state makes the fact that the human is a “living animal” its business; not only his social and political life, but his natural life (the physical fact of being alive in a human body) is also politicized. The healthy body of the subject becomes as important as his healthy (socio-politically conscious) mind. We see the biopolitical bent of the New Man from the earliest post-Revolutionary period, for example, in Meyerholdian biomechanics, which was supposed to create a disciplined, well-ordered body, much as the machine model of the New Man suggested. The superhuman model also suggested that the New Man was physically vital and energetic.

Agamben, however, wants to complicate Foucault’s thesis on modern biopolitics. He argues that Foucault’s conception of biopolitics applies to the classical world as much as it does to the modern one.<sup>76</sup> Agamben agrees with Foucault that, in the past, the human being’s natural life (*zoe*) and his social and political life (*bio*) were distinguished and kept separate, only the latter relevant to the state, whereas now they are both under its watchful eye. But what *is* novel about modern biopolitics, Agamben argues, is that the modern biopolitical state can strip the subject of his political life and relegate him to a purely natural life, an animal body, a *bare life*, that is without the protection of the state. In this way, modern biopolitics decides the use and value of bodies as such. Bare life, for Agamben, is many things: the link between violence and

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<sup>75</sup> Foucault, quoted in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3. A simple way to think of the distinction between sovereign power and biopower is in the distinction between the right “to take life or let live” (sovereign power) vs. the right “to *make* live or let die” (biopower). Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76* (New York, 2003), 241-47. Emphasis mine.

<sup>76</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9.

the law, the zone of indistinction between the two;<sup>77</sup> it is the life that may be killed without committing homicide.<sup>78</sup> Under twentieth-century biopolitics, any one of us may become bare life, just a physical body susceptible to state violence. That state violence is not illegal per se because the permanent structure of the modern political order—most evident in twentieth-century totalitarianisms, though prevalent in any system—is the state of exception: that state in which the juridical order’s own validity is suspended (an “exception” is made), in which the juridical order withdraws from the subject, now bare life, leaving it exposed and threatened. Agamben’s famous example is the concentration camp (“the pure, absolute ... biopolitical space [insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception]”),<sup>79</sup> where the exception (state violence as punishment for a perceived wrongdoing) becomes the norm and it is the subject’s very ontology that is that very perceived wrongdoing.

It is not difficult to extend the concept of the state of exception to the Soviet project. Agamben’s understanding of biopolitics helps us to articulate the logic of Stalinism itself, a logic with which both post-Stalinist (the Strugatsky brothers) and post-Soviet authors (Petrushevskaya, Pelevin, and especially Sorokin) try to come to terms with, elaborate, and lay bare. A state of exception (most famously, the Gulag) becomes a necessary tool for the New Man project, which takes the othering logic of humanism to its extreme to demonstrate what happens with those subjects who *cannot* be molded into the New Soviet Man: they become bare life.<sup>80</sup> Even more insidious, however, is the fact that the contours of the regulative ideal are always shifting. “One of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics ... is its constant need to redefine the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 31-35.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 71-74.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>80</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, 2014), notes that, although “bare life embodies a potential dimension of contemporary politics as such,” it is nevertheless important to ask why some subjects “are structurally more susceptible to personifying its actualization” than others.

threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside.”<sup>81</sup> Who gets to count himself a New Man is not a given. The concept, just like that of the human being, needs to be continually rearticulated so as to include the desirable and exclude the undesirable, two terms that themselves remain under constant ideological renegotiation. It is for this reason that, in the penultimate work of the Strugatskys’ Noon series, *Zhuk v muraveinike* (*Beetle in the Anthill*, 1979), a New Man kills another New Man, a Progressor kills another Progressor, that is, Sikorski kills Abalkin. No subject is safe under the state of exception, not even the New Man, who may become bare life—if the state wills it.

### **0.3 Excavating the Past, Enacting the Future**

Allow me to pick up again the topic of the “post,” which appears not only in the phrase that describes my theoretical framework (critical posthumanism), but also in the object of my study, the posthuman, and the literature of three periods of “post” (post-Revolution, post-Stalin, post-Soviet). This project of “posts” is undeniably bound up in problems of time.

I want to dwell further on the Lyotard excerpt from *The Inhuman* that I introduced above; his chapter on “Rewriting Modernity” is indeed one of the main catalysts for my thinking on this project. Lyotard writes, as you may recall, that “the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself ... to resolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability.”<sup>82</sup> Above I applied this same principle to the idea of a critical posthumanism; here I want to apply it to the idea of the humanist subject. What Lyotard suggests holds true of humanism and its conception of the human, which continuously seeks to better and thus exceed itself in a teleological process that

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<sup>81</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 131.

<sup>82</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 25.

will eventually resolve its inner tensions in a state of perfection. For Braidotti, humanism is “a doctrine that combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress.”<sup>83</sup> The human(ist) subject is working toward an ultimate end state (a “post,” the posthuman) in much the same way as modernity. This is the precept of perfectibility built into humanism, which leaves an aporia at its center regarding its own subject: when does the process of perfectibility end and how do we conceive of this end? What each of the works in question demonstrates is that this question cannot be answered, that the utopian subject not only does not exist, but cannot even be represented as such; rather—kind of like God in negative theology—it can only be guessed at via imperfect representations. Because this aporia extends to the New Man, there is an ontological and temporal confusion at the heart of the character: the temporal (“new”) is in tension with the ontological (“man”).<sup>84</sup> It is constitutive of both the humanist subject and the New Man, representations of which lay bare these contradictions. And it is for this reason that we can detect in the New Man both a humanist skeleton, and a posthumanist flesh.

Inasmuch as “modernity contains the promise of its overcoming,”<sup>85</sup> so does the human(ist) subject. In the promise of this “overcoming,” we can see the secularization of Christian teleology, by means of which the idea of human perfection is placed *within* time and by means of *human* effort, not only out of time and through God; not unimportantly, Halfin locates

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<sup>83</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 13.

<sup>84</sup> Elena Gomel, in “Our Posthuman Past: Subjectivity, History, and Utopia in Late-Soviet Science Fiction,” *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia* (Boston, 2018), points to this same contradiction between the two terms. She argues that to achieve the “new” in New Man, the subject must become both *unhuman* (radically other) and *inhuman* (ethically bad; he must commit acts that humanism would classify as evil). I want to look at it differently: it is not posthumanism that produces the inhuman, but humanism itself; and a posthuman subject can—and ideally should—open up various possibilities toward an ethical relation between self and other (examples include the Strugatskys’ *mal'ysh*, Petrushevskaya’s Enttis, and Pelevin’s Kaia).

<sup>85</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 25.



the same kind of secularized millenarianism in Bolshevism.<sup>86</sup> One of the key words of both modernity and humanism is progress, a modern conception of time that is linear wherein human achievements become cumulative. Reinhart Koselleck's analysis of progress as a deceptively modern temporality is relevant here, and helps explain some of the temporal contradictions in the New Man, both conceptually and as represented in fiction. Koselleck argues that, on the surface, progress created a novel kind of future characterized by its unknowability and the increasing speed with which it comes at us (hence the novelty of the New Soviet Man, his new forms, and his appearance seemingly overnight).<sup>87</sup> It was a temporality born of the secularizing push of the Enlightenment; the acceleration of time that had previously belonged to eschatology was now linked to a secular idea of progress. But just like eschatology, progress is fixed on an end state. Koselleck's argument here harmonizes beautifully with Lyotard's. Progress, the hallmark of a modern temporality, wants to effect that "overcoming" inherent in modernity; it wants to reach *the end*. Faster and faster it accelerates toward it, but in this push toward the future, it robs the present of materiality. Progress thus traps the present in a finger-wagging "*not yet*."<sup>88</sup> For this reason, the New Man appears as a half-realized creature, one foot in the present, another in the future—but forever trapped between the two. He is drawn between the poles of humanism and posthumanism, and often appears as a temporally arrested, or even atemporal, subject: the Strugatskys' *malysh*, Petrushevskaya's ancient Arctic peoples, and especially Sorokin's Brotherhood of the Light. He likewise inserts himself into times out of time: for example, the future-as-past setting of the Strugatsky brothers' *Trudno byt' bogom* (*Hard to Be a God*) or *Paren' iz preispodnei* (*The Guy from Hell*).

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<sup>86</sup> Halfin, *Terror in My Soul*, 1.

<sup>87</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York, 2004), 22.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

Lastly, I will extend Lyotard's arguments on modernity and progress to the problem of history, historical representation, and periodization according to "post." In my selection of texts, I wanted to choose works that responded to major historical reversals—the October Revolution, de-Stalinization, and the collapse of the Soviet Union—because I imagined that there I would find the most immediate and vivid representations of a utopian subject realized or crushed. My research led me to texts that sometimes stretch the limits of these periods: the post-Stalinist texts reach as far as 1986 (this is when the Strugatsky brothers published the last novel in the Noon Universe series, which I deal with almost in its entirety);<sup>89</sup> and the post-Soviet texts reach as far as 2011 (the publication of Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*). My reading list is composed of works that both respond to history and complicate the idea of historical representation. And it is again with Lyotard that I am able, if not to explain, then at least to imagine their relationship to history.

Again, we are on the topic of the "post": post-Revolution, post-Stalin, post-Soviet. Lyotard connects the "post" that marks historical periodization (a distinctly modern obsession) to the idea of revolution: modernity is "obliged to mark, to date, the end of one period and beginning of the next," enacting a small revolution every time it makes this mark.<sup>90</sup> When we say, *this* is the beginning of a new historical period, what we mean to say is, *this time it will be different*. Historical periodization more than anything marks our desire for rebirth and renewal, for a Year One that will wash away the sins of our past. It dreams of "a return to the starting point, to a beginning that is supposed to be exempt from any prejudice because it is imagined that prejudices result solely from the stocking up and tradition of judgements that were previously held to be true without having reconsidered them."<sup>91</sup> His words here quite elegantly

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<sup>89</sup> Howell, *Apocalyptic Realism*, 9, points out, however, that most of the Strugatskys' "late" works published in the 1980s thanks to glasnost were written in the early 70s.

<sup>90</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 25.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

testify to the hope for a tabula rasa that we see in each of the three periods of “post” in twentieth-century Russian history. Having reconsidered imperialism, we abandon it for socialism; having reconsidered Stalinism, we reconfigure socialism; and having reconsidered socialism itself, we abandon it.

The problem in this mode of thought is that the “post,” in its desire to start anew, forgets the past and compels itself to repetition, in the Freudian sense. The subject (individual, in the Freudian case, or collective, as I interpret Lyotard’s argument) repeats the traumatic event (in this case, history itself) even though he does not mean to—he does it unconsciously. Meanwhile, “rewriting” (our trusty friend) signifies the Freudian process of *working through*, which Lyotard here again extends to the collective subject and to history itself. The task of “rewriting” is not merely remembering, in which “one still *wants* too much. One wants to get hold of the past, grasp what has gone away, master, exhibit the initial crime.”<sup>92</sup> (That *initial crime* takes various historical guises in the texts of my study: tsarism, the Revolution, Stalinism, the Gulag, the Soviet collapse.) Working through, on the other hand, is work without end. It is not the work of analysis, but of art. It is small, patient work. In the end, it is the work of criticism that allows us the free play of our imagination.

How close do the works on my reading list get to this idealized task of *rewriting* and *working through*? To what extent do they merely remember the logic of the past only to repeat it? In the best moments, these texts exhibit an openness to multiplicity, to alterity, to sheer possibility that is nothing if not optimistic about art’s potential to cast away the shadows of historical trauma (I am thinking especially of the Strugatskys’ *Malysh*). At other times, they dramatize the logic of that same historical trauma’s source so cruelly that it makes for a

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 29. Emphasis in the original.

depressing read indeed (here I am thinking of Sorokin's Ice trilogy). In either case, these works do not merely reflect historical change, nor do they nullify it, but reframe and revalue it to help us understand how so much inhumanity could be done in the name of someone we all know well: the human himself.

#### **0.4 Techniques and Motifs**

What are some of the narrative techniques and motifs of a critical posthumanism? The machine model and the superhuman model provide me with two techniques that both structure, and are thematized in, each of these works in different but sometimes complementary ways: defamiliarization and the (most often failed) Bildungsroman.

The machine-model New Man emphasized the capacity for a new perspective on the world, an epistemological reorientation that would, according to Vertov, reveal reality "without a mask, as a world of naked truth"<sup>93</sup> Vertov's camera, for example, achieved this in multiple ways: by lingering on an object to slow down perception, by approaching it from angles unusual to the human eye, by suggesting association between seemingly dissimilar objects through montage. These are all cinematic methods of what Shklovsky calls defamiliarization, an artistic technique that can make any old object strange by increasing the duration and complexity of perception and thereby "deautomatizing" it, making it less automatic and more laborious.<sup>94</sup> Shklovsky's famous example is Tolstoy's narrative method of defamiliarization, which consists of describing an action as if seeing for the first time and divorced from any socio-cultural context. Tolstoy achieves this, for example, by narrating from the perspective of a horse (in "Kholstomer") who, as an animal, does not have all the same socio-cultural associations that the reader does; by

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<sup>93</sup> Vertov, "From the Notebooks of Dziga Vertov," 91.

<sup>94</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today* 36.3 (2015), 151-74.

“seeing things outside their context,” the horse narrator is able to make an ethical judgment on the practice of flogging, which in the world of the reader was an accepted means of human punishment but to the horse seems cruel and unjust.<sup>95</sup> The reader is, in this way, asked to reconsider his own perspective on the practice by seeing it “for the first time.”

I want to argue that narratives of critical posthumanism employ techniques of defamiliarization so as to ask the reader to reconsider familiar associations between human practices, categories, and evaluations. A critical posthumanism achieves this using different narrative techniques, including but not limited to Tolstoy’s technique of “seeing for the first time.” Defamiliarization often takes place via the narrative focalization of a New Man character who, like his machine model, has gained a novel perspective on the world thanks to a kind of epistemological upgrade: Pelevin’s Kaia is a robot capable of cognitive processing beyond the human brain; Pelevin’s Brotherhood of the Light is made up of divine beings who have a higher, extratemporal perspective on human history. In the Strugatskys’ *Malysh*, defamiliarization is a means toward a better ethics of self and other thanks to the posthuman subject at its center: a young human boy who has grown up far (very far) beyond the bounds of human society. What is interesting, however, is how a critical posthumanism also affords this defamiliarized perspective not only to the New Man, but likewise to the primitive, who can also see human society in a new light because he is new to it: both the Strugatskys’ Gag and Pelevin’s Grym are colonized subjects brought to the colonizers’ world, seeing it for the first time (and, of course, judging it, too). In this way, a critical posthumanist defamiliarization approaches the humanist subject from both directions: both from a “pre-human” perspective that affords narrative agency to the colonized “primitive” other, and from the “posthuman” perspective that calls into question the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 163-64.

humanist subject's rationality and universality. Finally, in Petrushevskaya's postmodernist *Nomer Odin*, defamiliarization takes place at the textual level: generic confusion, semantic nonsense, and often incomprehensible streams of consciousness leading to a discursive breakdown that mirrors the post-Soviet loss of a humanist metanarrative.

Bakhtin termed the Bildungsroman the novel of "human emergence,"<sup>96</sup> and Lukacs argued that "the inner form of the novel" may be understood "as the process of the problematic individual journeying toward himself."<sup>97</sup> The novel came into its own as a genre at the same time that humanism was elaborated as an "ism"; it only makes sense that there is a harmony between the two: the nineteenth-century realist novel takes as its protagonist the humanist subject who strives to elaborate himself, to cohere as a realized "I" and become self-identical. Socialist Realism, too, structures itself as a Bildungsroman, the Bildung being the positive hero's acculturation from spontaneity to consciousness, always in the form of an apprenticeship.<sup>98</sup> Critical posthumanist narratives, on the other hand, present themselves to a large extent as *failed* Bildungsromans, anti-Bildungsromans.<sup>99</sup> These texts invert that structure to create an aborted Bildung: the Strugatskys' titular *Paren' iz preispodnei* rejects the human (or, to him, alien) society that he has been brought to against his will, as does Pelevin's *Grym* by the end of *S.N.U.F.F.* The team of scientists on the planet Hope cannot educate the titular *malysh* in that Strugatsky novel toward humanness because he has already been socialized by another, alien

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<sup>96</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin, 1986), 23.

<sup>97</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (Cambridge, 1971), 196.

<sup>98</sup> In this case, the genre is similar to one of the very first Bildungsromans: Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Thomas Jeffers, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* (New York, 2005), 49. For more on the SR Bildungsroman, see N. Leiderman, M. Lipovetskii, and M. Litovskaia, "Sovetskii roman vospitania," *Russkaia literatura XX veka: 1930-e – seredina 1950-kh godov* (Moscow, 2014), 63-87.

<sup>99</sup> Not that nineteenth-century realism did not play with the genre and test its limits: Dostoevsky's *Idiot* is an excellent example of a failed Bildungsroman where the protagonist and the form of the novel do not come together but rather pull apart.

society. And in both *Zhuk* and *Volny*, the protagonist Maksim Kammerer writes a personal history of two subjects (Lev Abalkin and Toivo Glumov, respectively) who turn out to be *not human*, and who exit human society, whether willingly or unwillingly as the case may be. When the Bildungsroman does succeed, it is as parody: Sorokin's Ice trilogy creates a mini-Bildung for each of the members of the Brotherhood of the Light, but the catch is that they learn to reject human society and develop a parallel one. In their self-actualization, the Brotherhood understands that they are not human and that they will never fit in human society (nor would they want to).

# Chapter 1: The Crisis of Humanism: Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Intellectual History<sup>100</sup>

A debate on the legacy and future of humanistic values took place on the European stage in the early twentieth century. The so-called “crisis of humanism” had its roots both in intellectual developments that took place over the course of the previous century, and in material reality. The former was evidenced by the reach, popularity, and influence of such philosophies as, for example, those of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, and the latter by the continued progress of urban decay, inequality, and war, culminating in the novel horrors of the First World War. For the European intelligentsia, the war signaled the collapse of the nineteenth-century symbolic order built on the cult of human reason and predicated on the idea that humanity was perpetually making progress toward the common good.<sup>101</sup> Russian intellectuals also identified this crisis and took part in this debate, as is readily obvious in articles by titles such as Blok’s “Krushenie gumanizma” (“The Fall of Humanism”) or Ivanov’s “O krizise gumanizma” (“On the Crisis of Humanism”). This chapter is devoted to the Russian and, later, Soviet response to the “crisis of humanism.” My inquiry into the Russian response to humanism is motivated by the relative dearth of information on Russian *humanism* in the critical literature on Russian

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<sup>100</sup> Translations of primary texts in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>101</sup> For a more in-depth intellectual history on the topic through the lens of critical posthumanism, see Rosi Braidotti, “Post-Humanism: Life Beyond the Self,” in *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, 2013); and Stefan Herbrechter, “A genealogy of posthumanism,” in *Posthumanism* (London, 2013). For a Russian-specific gloss on the topic, see Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt, “Introduction,” in *Posthumanism in Russia* (Boston, 2018).



*post*humanism. To elaborate the latter, we must first understand the former. I will first outline an admittedly cursory genealogy of the crisis, before moving on to a typology of the Russian response, which falls along three main lines: a religious critique of humanism, a socialist critique, and a synthetic approach that attempts to bridge the gap between the two. In so doing, I will provide the necessary context for a debate that would continue to rage in Soviet and even post-Soviet literature over the next century.

### 1.1 A (Very) Brief Intellectual Genealogy

Though the genealogy of the “crisis” of humanism could deservedly occupy hundreds of pages, here I will keep it brief and focus only on the two actors most relevant to my discussion of the Russian response, namely Marx and Nietzsche. Marx addressed the topic of humanism in various of his works. In *The Holy Family* (1844), for example, he refers to his materialist philosophy as the “real humanism,” in contrast to the idealist humanism of the bourgeois of his time.<sup>102</sup> As he writes in the 1844 manuscripts, communism will be the most realized form of humanism. “*Communism* as ... the real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e. human) being. ... This communism ... equals humanism.”<sup>103</sup> This short excerpt packs quite the punch, distilling the whole of Marxism for us through the lens of humanism. As things stand, the human being is alienated from his labor and therefore alienated from himself; his “human essence” is misappropriated from him and he is therefore dehumanized, less than human. And thus, the “real

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<sup>102</sup> Althusser has written at length on the topic of Marx’s “real humanism” as opposed to an abstract humanism that only existed in theory but not in practice. See Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” *For Marx* (London, 1969).

<sup>103</sup> Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism,” *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>.

humanism” that is communism is a reversal, a return to the original wholeness of the human subject prior to the misappropriation of his humanity-cum-subjectivity by the socio-economic structures of modern civilization. Only when humanism equals communism will the human coincide with himself, that is, will the human equal the human. (We will see the claim that humanism under capitalism is in fact a false humanism reiterated by the Soviets time and again in the following century.)

Despite Marx’s claim that “communism equals humanism,” and his sustained engagement with the humanist ideal of autonomy and personal sovereignty, Marxism is widely interpreted as one of the first antihumanisms on the European stage—and thus, one of the first shots to herald the crisis of humanism. As is obvious from the crash course on Marxism in the short excerpt above, Marxism is a critique of humanism’s pretense to the autonomy and rationality of the human subject. While humanism argued that the human subject was a free and rational agent, Marxism countered to suggest that he is instead subject to economic conditions and social relations beyond the control of any one individual. It attacked the idea of human exceptionalism and decentred the human subject, demonstrating instead that the subject is a small cog in the machine of capital. At the same time, contemporary scholars have also pointed to Marxism’s humanist leanings, because it did, after all, seek to rectify the antihumanistic ills of capitalism. Braidotti, for example, argues that Marxism attempts to restore an essential humanity to the objectified subject,<sup>104</sup> while McQuillen and Vaingurt suggest that Marxism offers a humanist conception of history in which society is progressing linearly towards an equitable social order for all.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 106.

<sup>105</sup> McQuillen and Vaingurt, “Introduction,” 5.

In this way, Marxism exemplifies one half of a double-sided pattern that will emerge throughout this chapter and beyond, a pair of opposing trends. On the one hand, critiques of humanism (even antihumanist theoretical movements, such as Marxism) tend to collapse into humanism, offering not an alternative to humanism, but a better version thereof, and thus demonstrating the hold that humanism has on modern discourse at large. On the other, humanism writes itself anew to make the category of the human more capacious in response to the critiques aimed at it; with each successive theoretical turn, humanism turns into posthumanism. The two are inextricably interpenetrated, and in the best-case scenario, function dialectically, negating one another to come to a more whole understanding of the human. In the worst-case scenario, on the other hand, this dialectic creates an increasingly more exclusive humanism that reserves the title of ideal subject for fewer and fewer.

The next relevant landmark in my genealogy of the crisis of humanism is the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Critical scholarship has cast Nietzsche as the main villain in the crisis of humanism (or the main hero, depending on your perspective), thanks to his sustained attack on humanistic values throughout his oeuvre.<sup>106</sup> With his *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche spat on all forms of commonplace bourgeois morality birthed by humanistic discourse, such as pity, meekness, and altruism. In *The Gay Science* (1882), he argued against the anthropocentrism and universalism so crucial to humanism, against the idea of “man as the measure of the value of things.” But it is not only humanistic values that Nietzsche condemned; he condemned the very idea of Man as it had thus far been constructed by humanistic thought. Foucault points to Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) as a “turning point” that affirmed “the end of man,” who, in the

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<sup>106</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 6, and Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, 38-40.

absence of God, becomes a finite creature lacking in an essential or universal nature.<sup>107</sup> Braidotti highlights this same moment as the reason that the so-called “crisis of Man” became a *leitmotif* in European philosophy in the twentieth century.<sup>108</sup> Though Renaissance humanism had first divorced the human from God centuries before, the divine continued to act as the ideal model for the human subject: supremely rational, all-creative, autonomous, and omnipotent. Instead, Nietzscheanism revealed the limitedness of the human subject once stripped of its divine origins. The human being as Nietzsche saw him in his present form was the opposite: weak, irrational, and restricted. In *The Gay Science* and again in *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche introduced the *Übermensch* as a negative posthuman figure that stands in direct contrast to this conception of the human. In a transvaluation of values, the Nietzschean Superman is no champion of meekness and selflessness, but of vitality, wilfulness, and power.

As with Marxism, the idea of Nietzscheanism as a staunchly antihumanist philosophy is more complicated than it first appears. Although Nietzsche’s reputation as the *enfant terrible* of continental philosophy is not undeserved, there is a case to be made that his thought is indeed the logical conclusion of the Enlightenment cult of reason and autonomy. Herbrechter identifies two Nietzsches, though the two are, of course, intertwined: the critical Nietzsche who is unwilling to accept supposedly self-evident truths (a good outcome of the Enlightenment), and the prophetic Nietzsche who craves the birth of the Superman (a bad outcome of the Enlightenment).<sup>109</sup> Herbrechter argues that Enlightenment philosophy is the direct precursor to Nietzsche’s “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which is uncontent to accept a hackneyed anthropocentrism as universal truth, and aims instead to rescue Man from “his *self-imposed* immaturity” by

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<sup>107</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London, 2005), 420.

<sup>108</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 6.

<sup>109</sup> Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, 32.

revitalizing the now-stale category of the human precisely by questioning long-accepted truth and reconceptualizing the human subject.<sup>110</sup> Though Nietzsche calls into question the self-evident status of the metaphysical stability and universal validity of the humanistic subject,<sup>111</sup> he nevertheless aims to bestow upon the human subject exactly the qualities that humanism has promised, and failed, to deliver him. Thus, it is not that Nietzsche vilifies Man as such, but Man as he exists under the discursive regime of bourgeois Christian-cum-humanistic morality. The Nietzschean Superman is the humanistic promise *par excellence*, a being who has mastered all human obstacles and achieved the highest human potential possible, and a goal for humanity to meet in the here and now. Nietzscheanism thus exemplifies the dialectic of humanism that we saw, to some extent, at play in Marxism, too. His philosophy is an antihumanism that displays all the same aims as humanism, and the *Übermensch* a posthumanist construction that functions as the ideal humanist subject.

Though I have somewhat complicated the antihumanistic tendencies of Marx and Nietzsche, the fact remains that their intellectual output over the course of the nineteenth century catalyzed a revolution in our conception of the human(ist) subject. They are joined in this accomplishment by other well-known thinkers like Darwin and Freud, who also questioned the supposedly self-evident nature of human exceptionalism and rationality, respectively.<sup>112</sup> It is Marx and Nietzsche, however, who are most directly addressed by the Russian and Soviet *litterateurs*, philosophers, and ideologues whose thoughts on the “crisis of humanism” compose the rest of this chapter. The authors presented here take different attitudes to the supposed collapse of humanism, some celebratory, others mournful, though they all acknowledge that

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 31, and Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, 55.

Russia, much like Europe, must address the lacuna of values resulting from its collapse. They present alternatives, each fashioned out of the scraps of humanism that they find most useful for their respective projects, whether Soviet or anti-Soviet, atheistic or religious. Their works demonstrate that humanism was indeed the word on everyone's lips in the first decades of the twentieth century, sometimes hued negatively, other times positively. I have divided them according to the ideological sensibilities of their critiques, primarily either religious and Marxist, though the chapter ends with a small handful of thinkers who fall into neither category, and instead attempt to synthesize the two into a greater whole.

## 1.2 The Religious Critique

I would be remiss not to begin my survey of the Russian response to the crisis of humanism with the grandfather of Russian posthumanist thought, the difficult-to-define religious philosopher Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903), despite the fact that he does not neatly fit into the timeframe I have set for the chapter. A contemporary of the nineteenth-century greats like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky (with whom he was indeed well acquainted), Fedorov was little published in his own lifetime, and his works were collected only for posthumous publication by his acolytes. Two extensive volumes of essays collectively entitled *Filosofia obshchego dela* (*The Philosophy of the Common Task*) were published in 1906, three years after his death.<sup>113</sup> Fedorov's thought anticipated the coming crisis of humanism, decades before Nietzscheanism

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<sup>113</sup> For a good introduction to Fedorov's ideas, see George M. Young, *Nikolai F. Fedorov: An Introduction* (Belmont, 1979). Fedorov's *Filosofia*, which was compiled by his students posthumously and is composed of various fragments, spans over 2000 pages in the collected edition from 1995-99 (this four-volume collected works is available in pristine PDF at <http://nffedorov.ru/wiki/>). For a good English-language abridgment, see Nikolai Fedorov, *What Was Man Created For? The philosophy of the Common Task: Selected Works*, trans. Elisabeth Koutaissoff and Marilyn Minto (London, 1990). For more context on Fedorov and the reach of his influence in Russian and Soviet culture, see Irene Masing-Delic, *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature* (Stanford, 1992).

took hold in Russia, as a problem of the collective and the individual. His sustained engagement with a collective mode of being—his is, after all, a philosophy of the *common* task—presents a direct challenge to humanism’s cult of individualism. Fedorov is above all a collectivist, and it is in his steadfast belief in collectivism that he grounds his religious critique of humanism. (Many others would follow suit, as I demonstrate below.)

Fedorov’s collectivism is bound in the primary “task” of his far-reaching philosophy, that of the literal resurrection of all forefathers via ever-progressing techno-scientific means. Fedorov interprets the Christian doctrine of the resurrection literally as a model to be imitated by humanity. In an enterprise of radical collectivity, those of us alive on this earth must lay aside all notions of self-benefit for the sake of our long-dead ancestors. In this Fedorov sees the highest realization of human potential. And indeed, should humankind resurrect our dead, and in the process regulate the natural world for maximum human benefit, an immortalist utopia will reign on earth (and throughout the universe) as the Kingdom of God. Until the “common task” is completed, humanity is stuck, to quote Solov’ev, whose thought owes much to Fedorov, in the “evil infinity of reproduction”<sup>114</sup> and death. Quixotic to say the least, Fedorov’s philosophy is nevertheless an expression of the humanist belief in human potentiality: it is not by divine means that we will effect resurrection, but by man-made tools, by our own science and technology. It is with these tools that we will subjugate nature at large and animate it with human reason, that we will achieve the “rational management” (*ratsional’noe upravlenie*) and “spiritualization” (*dukhovizatsiia*) of the cosmos at large. (Fedorov goes into significant technical detail on more practical—and from a twenty-first century perspective, very necessary—projects such as climate

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<sup>114</sup> Vladimir Solov’ev, “Smysl liubvi,” *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1988), 547.

control.)<sup>115</sup> At the same time, Fedorov is critical of humanism for its emphasis on the individual, first and foremost, and its overemphasized faith only in humanity over the divine.

Critical of individualism to the extreme, Fedorov roots his philosophy in the idea of kinship (*rodstvo*), an essential relatedness of one and all that dissolves the boundary between self and other. At the same time, he sees kinship denied at every turn by modern society, which is designed to make each preceding generation expendable, an endless factory line of human material. The nineteenth-century (humanist) idea of progress is predicated on “the triumph of the younger generation over the older ... the most immoral ousting of the fathers by the sons.”<sup>116</sup> This idea of progress is only an “acceleration toward death and destruction” because it does not address the primary evil plaguing humanity, death itself, and remains passive to it. The Fedorovian utopian body is an immortal body; on the other hand, the mortal body is an expression of individualism, in that it dies alone and is left to die alone. Even Christianity fails to escape Fedorov’s condemnation on this front. For him, “Christianity has become individualism, that is, only personal salvation, salvation separately instead of common salvation.”<sup>117</sup> In contrast, “*kinship (rodstvo) is us; in it there are no others in the sense of strangers: in it all are the same I, their own, relatives, natural, organic relatives (rodnye), and not artificially, mechanically, outwardly related (srodnivshiesia).*”<sup>118</sup> Fedorov’s “projectivism” (*proektivizm*) is a radical decoupling of the self and selfhood toward an understanding of oneself not as a discrete subject, but as an inextricable element of an unfragmentable totality of being. (For this reason, the task to resurrect our ancestors is indeed a resurrection of the self.) The Fedorovian subject stands apart

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<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Fedorov, “Stat’i o reguliatsii prirody,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1995), 237-264.

<sup>116</sup> Fedorov, “Vopros o bratstve, ili rodstve, o prichinakh nebratskogo, nerodstvennogo, t.e. nemirnogo, sostoianiiia mira i o sredstvakh k vosstanovleniiu rodstva,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1995), 51.

<sup>117</sup> Fedorov, “Proekt soedineniia tserkvei,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, 379.

<sup>118</sup> Fedorov, “Ni egoizm, ni altruizm, a rodstvo!,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 199. Emphasis in the original.



from humanism in its radical universality: whereas the humanist subject finds the universal in the particular (humanist Man is said to stand for one and all), the Fedorovian subject attests to the particular in the universal (the individual subject is affirmed only when it, in turn, affirms the other).

Fedorov criticizes European humanism by name throughout the *Filosofia*. He calls it “beardless” (*bezborodyi*), “youthful” (*molodiashchiisia*), “immature” (*nesovershennoletnii*), in that it ignores old age in favor of a spiritual sort of adolescence.<sup>119</sup> For Fedorov, the past is a sacred category, but humanism is for the present, a regressive worldview that does not account for the importance of age-old (old-age) wisdom and tradition. The primary faultline here is humanism’s godlessness, a point of attack for any of its religious critics. “Humanism, having replaced the divine with the human, made us forget both the past and the future, and called for *memento vivere*, i.e., the present.”<sup>120</sup> Humanism has effected a temporal break in the consciousness of the subject that has arrested his development—hence, also, the youth metaphor—a deceptively regressive progress. Fedorov goes so far as to say that, “having separated man from God, humanism brings him closer to, and finally identifies him altogether with, the animal.”<sup>121</sup> In this ultimate regression, human becomes animal because, for Fedorov, our humanity is essentially bound to our relationship with our predecessors. He names this a “zoanthropic morality”; much as humanism, the “anthropic morality,” attempts to negate it, it continuously slips back into it.<sup>122</sup> Fedorov finds hope, however, in the reemergence of a “teoanthropic morality”:

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<sup>119</sup> Fedorov, “Smysl i tsel’ zhizni, ili chto mozhnet dat’ zhizni naivysshuiu tsennost’,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1997), 311.

<sup>120</sup> Fedorov, “Samoderzhavie,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 19.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Fedorov, “Vopros o zaglavii,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 291.

Every religious doctrine, even the crudest pagan one, is a representation of the superhuman. The emergence of the doctrine of the superhuman shows that the four-century period of the “domination” of humanism is coming to an end. The superhuman is the theanthropic, the rational-natural, which is higher than the blind-natural (*slepoestesvennogo*).<sup>123</sup>

Fedorov identifies the posthuman impulse of religious thought and contrasts it to humanism, which lacks the “theanthropic” dimension necessary to envision a higher form of human (as he indeed does in his conception of the immortal body). Humanism, on the other hand, negates the very subject that it claims to worship: the human, making an animal of him. And this superhuman that religion champions is a natural construct, according to Fedorov: it is simply nature infused with rationality, which is inherent in nature itself; a nature without it is a “blind” one, per his words.

Despite his insistence on the religious nature of his “projectivism,” a secularized form of it can be detected throughout the Soviet twentieth century; Fedorov’s scientism lends itself well to secularization. His vision and ambition is evident in multiple projects of Soviet Prometheanism, not least of all the Soviet space program.<sup>124</sup>

The religious philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev (1874-1948), who once called Fedorov “a man of innate genius,”<sup>125</sup> picks up on many of Fedorov’s ideas in his own sustained criticism of humanism (and socialism). His “Konets Rennessansa. K sovremennomu krizisu kultury” (“The End of the Renaissance: Regarding the Contemporary Crisis of Culture”), written in 1919, begins on a pessimistic, even apocalyptic note, and remains sharply critical of humanism throughout.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> For more on the application of Fedorov’s ideas in Soviet science programs, see George M. Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>125</sup> Nikolai Berdiaev, “The Religion of Resuscitative Resurrection: ‘The Philosophy of the Common Task’ of N. F. Fedorov,” trans. Fr. S. Janos, accessed March 24, 2021, [http://www.berdyayev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1915\\_186.html](http://www.berdyayev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1915_186.html).

<sup>126</sup> Julia Vaingurt, in “Grotesque Fictions: Posthumanism and the Novel,” forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of the Russian Novel*, points out that, in *The Russian Idea*, Berdiaev contrasts the Enlightenment conception of humanism (*gumanizm*) with a Dostoevskian Christian humanism, which he calls *gumanitarizm*. This chapter is

Berdiaev states that modern history, born during the Renaissance, is at its end. The idea of progress so crucial to the nineteenth century has turned out to be a ruse, much as Fedorov also suggested. And humanism, the spiritual basis of the Renaissance, has only ended in its own negation despite its promising roots in the spiritually and artistically creative flourishing of the Renaissance. Berdiaev finds within humanism “destructive contradictions,” the seeds of its own destruction, and the current “crisis” (to use his own word) was unavoidable.

The free roving of man, knowing no sort of higher power, not only have not reinforced his faith in himself, but ultimately have weakened this faith and have shaken the awareness of the human image. Humanism has not reinforced, but has rather debilitated man—such is the paradoxical result of modern history. In his self-assertion man has lost, and not found himself.<sup>127</sup>

Among the promises humanism has failed to keep is the capacity to “create and order life” without the help of God. This task is impossible for earthly man, who does not possess an “infinite wellspring of creative powers” if his creativity is directed only towards the earthly realm. For Berdiaev, as for others to follow in this chapter, the issue is one of creativity. Whereas the Renaissance was full of the spiritual creativity that Berdiaev deems necessary to the thriving of humankind, the Enlightenment tore away this creativity from the humanistic tradition, leaving it dead and dry in its rationalism and positivism. Berdiaev here opposes creativity to rationality, a pair that is not always opposed, but appears as such in both fiction and philosophical thought from this period and beyond (as in, for example, Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.*). Humanism is lacking in the creativity to guide humanity as religion is able to, and for this reason, it is self-limiting—and we have indeed reached its utmost limits. “The powers of natural man are finite,” due to the

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dedicated to the previous concept, though her remark reiterates one of my main points: that even the most critical writers are hesitant to throw away some of the main tenets of humanism.

<sup>127</sup> Nikolai Berdiaev, “The End of the Renaissance: Regarding the Contemporary Crisis of Culture,” trans. Fr. S. Janos, accessed September 20, 2020, [http://www.berdyaeu.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1922\\_17\\_060\\_1.html](http://www.berdyaeu.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1922_17_060_1.html).

individualism of humanism, which has plunged the human being into an era of “abject loneliness.”<sup>128</sup>

Along with extreme individualism, there is yet another outcome of humanism, a counter-reaction of sorts—and this is extreme socialism. Berdiaev pinpoints Nietzsche and Marx as the dominant figures of modern thought (the former being the apotheosis of individualism, and the latter of socialism). Both have tried, and failed, to create a new image of the human being, creating instead mere substitutes for the loss of God. In His stead, Nietzsche offers the supra-human Superman, and Marx offers the supra-human collective. Both, however, negate the true image of the human being in Berdiaev’s view. And both likewise negate humanism; they are both *antihumanisms*, as critical scholarship would later argue. “With Nietzsche humanism negates and destroys itself in individualistic a form, with Marx—in collective a form.”<sup>129</sup>

Berdiaev locates something “inhuman” and “contrahuman” in Marxism, with its hyper-focus on the collective, which does not allow for the full individual expression of the human personality. Nevertheless, he sees Marx as a “legitimate child of modern history,” a logical reaction to the bourgeois individualism born of the Renaissance. The same goes for Nietzsche. Berdiaev calls Nietzsche “the child of humanism ... and also its victim; he is a retribution for its sins.”<sup>130</sup> It is not difficult to understand his point here: Nietzsche denies God to affirm the human being, but in the process reveals the limitedness of the human without God; he emphasizes the potentiality of purely human faculties while demonstrating their unfulfillment in their current state. Indeed, Nietzscheanism supports Berdiaev’s view, albeit from the opposite perspective: without God, the human is weak. For this reason, Nietzsche does not “acknowledge the value of the human

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. His language here really recalls the kind of critical posthumanist analysis that Herbrechter performs, referenced above.

person” and his thought collapses into not merely antihumanism, but inhumanity. In another piece of ten years prior entitled “Velikii Inkvizitor” (“The Grand Inquisitor”), he deems Nietzscheanism a “demonism” and argues that the deification of the self, whether of the humanist or Nietzscheanist variety, is an a false, ersatz freedom, an unfreedom.<sup>131</sup> The deified personality is non-being (“*nebytie*”), it is vacated of content and becomes an empty space (“deprives itself of any content, smolders [*tleet*], turns into emptiness”).<sup>132</sup> He ends the piece with a sweeping condemnation of humanism and any human-centered philosophy: to make the self a goal, as humanism has indeed done, is to destroy the self (“to recognize yourself as your final goal is to destroy yourself.”).<sup>133</sup>

The image of man that Berdiaev offers instead of the Nietzschean Superman or the Marxist collective is drawn from nature. To imitate the forms of nature, to seek in them the forms of perfection, this is how to live a creative and harmonious life, according to Berdiaev. In other words, his vision is one of a return to nature (a common theme in the crisis of humanism). At the beginning of the Renaissance, at the height of his creativity, man “had a sense of nature as alive and inspiring,” but once stripped of his spirituality, natural man floundered. The true natural man is spiritual, and vice versa.

Berdiaev ends “Konets Renessansa” with a note specific to Russia. He argues that Russia has adopted the very worst of humanistic culture, the deadened destructive humanism of the Enlightenment, not the spiritually creative humanism of the Renaissance. And it is because of this that he sees the October Revolution as a distinctly Russian reaction to humanism: “no other people has gone to such extremes and destructions of the human visage, of human rights, of

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<sup>131</sup> Nikolai Berdiaev, “Velikii Inkvizitor,” accessed March 3, 2021, [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Великий\\_Инквизитор\\_\(Бердяев\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Великий_Инквизитор_(Бердяев)).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

human freedom.”<sup>134</sup> Given the fact that he saw the Revolution as the epitome of this “bad humanism,” it comes as no surprise that he was soon after the writing of “Konets Rennessansa” expelled from Soviet Russia, in 1922—a trend among the twentieth-century religious philosophers in this chapter, all of whom were exiled in the years after the Revolution.

The Russian Symbolist Viacheslav Ivanov wrote “Kruchi. O krizise gumanizma” (“Steep Slopes: On the Crisis of Humanism”) in 1919, while the poet was still in the Soviet Union (he would later emigrate in 1924).<sup>135</sup> His perspective is partly one of lament over the undoing of humanism, which he deems a necessary component of a positive ethics of self and other, and partly one of celebration over the reconfiguration of a new and better humanism for the future. Ivanov sees humanism as an attitude toward the world that recognizes the intrinsic value and dignity of the human being. Humanism is an “ethical and aesthetic norm” that determines one’s relationship to the entirety of life around him. He does not—as do so many others, whether from a religious or socialist perspective—equate humanism with individualism.<sup>136</sup> Humanism is rather “based entirely on the elimination of individuation, separateness, and isolation of people.”<sup>137</sup> And yet, humanity has rarely, if ever, lived up to this ideal throughout the course of its history. This ever-increasing commotion in the external order of things—war, revolution, and so on—in fact corresponds to an internal shift of recent years, which has deadened our perception of the world and of our own humanity. Ivanov suggests that the crisis of humanism is in our relationship to the surrounding world, and most importantly, to ourselves. He writes that our

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<sup>134</sup> Berdiaev, “Konets Rennessansa.”

<sup>135</sup> For more on Ivanov’s humanist thought developed afterwards, during his emigré period in Italy, see Emily Wang, “Viacheslav Ivanov in the 1930s: The Russian Poet as Italian Humanist,” *Slavic Review* 75.4 (2016), 896-918.

<sup>136</sup> Wang, “Ivanov in the 1930s,” 899, notes that Silver Age writers generally used ‘humanism’ as a synonym for ‘individualism,’ a claim that the material in this chapter both backs and pushes back on.

<sup>137</sup> Viacheslav Ivanov, “Kruchi. O krizise gumanizma,” accessed January 18, 2021, [https://rvb.ru/ivanov/1\\_critical/1\\_brussels/vol3/01text/02papers/3\\_151.htm](https://rvb.ru/ivanov/1_critical/1_brussels/vol3/01text/02papers/3_151.htm).

perception of “the inner form of things has become dilapidated and dead.”<sup>138</sup> This is most true when it comes to our own self-consciousness, our understanding of the human personality. His concern here seems to be related to Berdiaev’s concerns for creativity, which will pop up again in following texts; what Ivanov is suggesting is indeed the need for a more creative, defamiliarized view of the world and of ourselves.

Ivanov blames humanism for being “too *constrained* in its vision of the human” (fresh take!), as it “predetermines the measure of the human” by turning away from God.<sup>139</sup> Rather than give the human freedom, it has only limited the human personality, as Berdiaev also argued. Humanism is antithetical to the “maximalism” of otherworldly hopes for the human being; it turns away from Christian promises of perfection in the afterlife and wastes its energy on the construction of the here and now. On the other hand, with a sense of God’s presence, humanity could expand the boundaries of its consciousness to such an extent that the new self will be unrecognizable:

A new sense of God’s presence, God’s fulfillment, and the all-living (*vseozhivleniia*) will create a different worldview, which I am not afraid to call newly mythological. But for this new begetting (*zachatiiia*), man must so extend the boundaries of his consciousness into the whole (*v tseloe*) that the former measure of the human will seem to him a cramped cocoon, like a butterfly that has flown out of its cradle-like prison.

That is why what we now call humanism, which predetermines the measure of the human, must die... And humanism is dying.<sup>140</sup>

His language here recalls Fedorov’s: humanism has made man immature, adolescent; he must still emerge as an adult from his “cocoon.” The problem rests in the secularization and temporalization of an inherently religious and atemporal category: the perfect(ed) human being. Whereas Christianity “deepened, complicated, pushed the human task, the desired image of a

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

transformed person, into an infinite distance,”<sup>141</sup> while humanism attempted to realize this infinite task on earth. Under the guise of such documents as the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” a product of the French Revolution, human civilization has pretended to an ideal that, for Ivanov, exists only in God. In the end, his is a thoroughly Christian humanism that affirms the intrinsic value of the human being—but only in its relation to the divine. His thought possesses some posthumanist dimensions in its conjecture of the ideal subject, which the human imagination, as it stands, cannot yet fathom in its entirety. A new myth for a new age is what the Symbolist hopes to achieve, though it would, of course, be the Bolsheviks who pick up on this task.

In his short article “O gumanizme” (“On Humanism”) from 1934, Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, another religiously-oriented Symbolist, takes an antagonistic stance on the Soviet project and its potential claims to humanism. Writing from Paris in exile, he agrees that humanism has been in a state of crisis following the destruction of the First World War. The strength of the human spirit has been in sharp decline since that time, and it is because what we call humanism has proven too weak an armor to protect against the “beast” that lives within the human being:

During and after the war, what people considered an impenetrable armor against the beast in themselves, and what the second half of the last Christian millennium denoted by the word “humanism,” turned out to be too thin a film, a gilding that easily falls off the beast's skin.<sup>142</sup>

Again, we see here dimensions of a critical posthumanism popularized more than half a century later. Merezhkovsky suggests, not unlike Freud did with his notion of the unconscious mind, that an unknown nonhuman element resides in the depths of the human subject. “Humanity” is not a

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, “O gumanizme,” *Kritika i esseistika*, accessed January 20, 2021, [http://az.lib.ru/m/merezhkowskij\\_d\\_s/text\\_0230.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/m/merezhkowskij_d_s/text_0230.shtml).



given characteristic of the human—it can be removed like a mask, and with it, so can such values as civilization, progress, human rights. Merezhkovsky condemns the Soviets and the Nazis alike for doing just this, arguing that both have thrown off the human face as an unnecessary mask for their respective projects. The two groups are united in their disregard for the value of the human being, seeing in him merely an ant in an anthill, one part of a larger whole that is by definition more important than the individual.

The communists and the fascists have turned the human being into an “Anthropoid” (*Antropoid*), something resembling the human—but not quite.<sup>143</sup> Merezhkovsky fears that the Anthropoid will triumph over the human being (*chelovek*) and the human race will be replaced by this new inhuman form. Discussing the Anthropoid, his words in “O gumanizme” sometimes read as if ripped from a paranoid work of science fiction: *The Invasion of the Anthropoids!*

Worst of all is that the invasion of this Humanoid (*Chelovekoobraznykh*) is taking place, perhaps, not only after the first war, yesterday's war, but also before the second war, tomorrow's war; judging from the experience of the first one, it is more than probably that, if we do not avoid the second one, then the Anthropoid will triumph over Man (*Chelovekom*) and the human race will be replaced by a new, non-human one.<sup>144</sup>

The Anthropoid may look and sound like a human being, but it is missing an essential element that would humanize it. What this element is exactly should not be all that surprising. For Merezhkovsky, as for Berdiaev, the “original sin” of humanism is atheism, and it is, perhaps paradoxically, the divine element in the human being that makes him human. Much like Berdiaev, Merezhkovsky sees the birth of humanism in the Renaissance as a sufficiently spiritual practice, but by the time of Voltaire, he finds the movement to have been sapped of its spirituality. The previous two centuries have demonstrated the ill fate of a humanism paired with

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<sup>143</sup> This is one of a number of words for a half-human creature that pop up throughout the texts of my study: see also the Strugatskys' pseudo-homo, and Petrushevskaya's relict hominoids.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

atheism; a “true” humanism is, on the other hand, indissolubly bound with Christianity. If the human being is not considered in the likeness of the divine, he becomes nothing but a beast resembling a human being. Merezhkovsky goes even further, noting that to call this other creature a “beast” is an offense to animals at large (the seriousness of his tone here is up for debate). Instead, he demands that we call the Anthropoid, that human without humanity, for what it really is—the devil. In his view, the human being is not a stable category but rather, “the most unstable of all equilibria between God and the devil.”<sup>145</sup> The human exists in the tension between the two, and if he does not actively choose the one, he will passively fall to the other. The only certain measure of humanity is the image of the perfect man: Jesus Christ, whom Merezhkovsky deems the “founder” of humanism. Much like Ivanov, Merezhkovsky finds the solution to the crisis in a Christian humanism.

The posthumanist dimension of his thought is, however, not insignificant. Merezhkovsky denies the stability of the human subject so crucial to humanism and argues instead (*à la* Agamben) that the human is a construction that demands endless elaboration, albeit an essentially religious construction with a religious answer. While, for Agamben, it is the job of humanism to reify the border between the animal and the human and squarely oppose the two,<sup>146</sup> for Merezhkovsky, it is the job of faith to do so. In this way, faith stabilizes the category of the human. For Merezhkovsky, this is, of course, a good thing; for a critical posthumanist, on the other hand, this is the kind of process of reification and naturalization that we want to unlearn and undo.

Merezhkovsky’s Anthropoid is the kind of negative posthuman that we will see again in the Strugatskys’ *liudeny* and Sorokin’s Brotherhood of the Light: figures who resemble humans

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, 2004), 15.

but are missing the attendant values, who choose to separate themselves from humanity because they deem themselves “better” and humanity “worse.” The religious critique of humanism has, however, also produced some positive posthuman figures. First and foremost, Fedorov’s interstellar and immortal man is a positive posthuman *par excellence*: he affirms the other in a relation of kinship that attempts to make a family of the entire of humankind, dead and alive. The Fedorovian posthuman embodies both the critical bent of posthumanism (in that he attests to the multiplicity and relationality of the subject) and its science-fictional dimension (in that he is an immortal space traveler). The relational quality of the subject is tantamount here, because it is only through an affirmative relation with the other that the Fedorovian subject comes into being. Though less ambitious in his contours, the ideal subject as Ivanov and Berdiaev envision him also has elements of the positive posthuman: Ivanov also stresses the relational dimension of subjectivity, which is lost in the modern age, prohibiting us from relating to each other and even to ourselves. According to Ivanov, we cannot relate to one another because we cannot *see* one another with clear eyes, with a fresh perspective, leading to an automatized conception of the human being that lacks in creativity. And thus, for Ivanov, the posthuman cannot even be conceived yet because he has yet to emerge from his cocoon, because human creativity has become stifled and cannot envision what comes next in human development. Berdiaev suggests that creativity is the key to a critical posthumanism, though his ideal subject is, unlike Fedorov’s or Ivanov’s, not drawn from the future, but from the past: natural man, who is creative because he is spiritual. The “return to nature” motif as an escape from a modernity perverted by false humanist or antihumanist principles will pop up again, in Petrushevskaya’s *Nomer Odin*, Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.*, and Sorokin’s Ice trilogy, though in each case its semantic shades will be different.

### 1.3 The Socialist Critique

Anatoly Lunacharsky's two-volume *Religiia i sotsializm* (*Religion and Socialism*, 1908-11) languished in relative obscurity in the thinker's own lifetime due to Lenin's cold reception to its ideas.<sup>147</sup> The text is credited as one of the key works of *bogostroitel'stvo* (God-building), Marxism's *other* answer to Christianity (other than atheism, that is), an idea that seeks to answer to the needs of the religiously-oriented mind in an increasingly secular world, rather than rejecting and condemning religion altogether. The first volume of *Religiia i sotsializm* was published in a collection of articles titled *Ocherki filosofii kollektivizma* (*Essays on the Philosophy of Collectivism*), which featured contributions from Aleksandr Bogdanov, another proponent of *bogostroitel'stvo*, and Maxim Gorky, whose piece I also discuss below. This collection proved fertile ground for a discussion on the crisis of humanism as related to the Marxist vision of the human being and the role of socialism in the history of humanism. Lunacharsky attempts to elaborate a socialism that functions as the highest synthesis of the various world religions that preceded it, and may therefore substitute said religions in the lives of the twentieth-century subject. In the process, he also elaborates a socialism that is the realization of a higher humanism thanks to its basis not in individualism, but collectivism.

Lunacharsky defines religion broadly as an epistemological system for understanding the world, thus creating a capacious category capable of accommodating a broad range of worldviews, not only the strictly religious, but also the mythological, as well as the philosophical. His Marxist analysis of religious thought moves from the archaic myth-based religions of pre-historical humankind, through the Judeo-Christian and Eastern religions, and includes, in its final sections, European philosophy of the modern era, which is, in his broad

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<sup>147</sup> See Roland Boer, "Religion and Socialism: A. V. Lunacharskii and the God-builders," *Political Theology* 15.2 (2014), 188-209, for a detailed history of its publication and reception.

framework, also a form of religion. The purpose of any such system is to connect human reality to its ideal, whatever that may be in any given socio-historical context, creating a map of sorts via which this ideal may be attained. As the human being grows more developed in his mental acuity and human civilization grows more sophisticated in its forms of labor and technology, the ideal, too, grows greater. More is thus demanded of the religious “system” that humanity uses to understand the world. Lunacharsky sees in humanity, as per humanism, a compulsion to exceed itself toward an ideal that ends only in perfection. “That greed, that dream of conquest ... we consider the best in man, we proudly speak of our eternal dissatisfaction.”<sup>148</sup> He sees this compulsion to exceed any limit imposed by nature in human labor above all. In refining our forms of labor, humanity is refining its own inner nature. “By acting ... on external nature and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops the forces dormant in him and makes himself subject to the work of these forces.”<sup>149</sup> As the teleology of human history unfolds, as “the sense of human freedom becomes more and more vivid ... and our dependence on nature gradually diminishes,”<sup>150</sup> humanity comes closer to its ideal, which in the Marxist religious “system” is, of course, a classless society free of class oppression.

Lunacharsky’s critique of humanism is two-pronged. As does practically every thinker discussed in this chapter, whether pro- or anti-socialist, he condemns its individualistic ethos. Labor is an essentially collective task, and therefore, socio-historical progress via labor cannot take place at the level of the individual. The humanist thirst for the subject’s autonomy can only realize itself in the ideal subject formation that is the collective, “in the ideal of perfect

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<sup>148</sup> Anatolii Lunacharskii, “Religiia i sotsializm, tom I,” accessed March 23, 2021, <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/11/05/анатолій-луначарський-релігія-і-соціалізм-1/>.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Lunacharskii, “Religiia i sotsializm, tom II,” accessed March 23, 2021, <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/11/06/анатолій-луначарський-релігія-і-соціалізм-2/>.

wholeness and inner unity of the real subject of social existence: the collective.”<sup>151</sup> The Enlightenment, which Lunacharsky sees as the beginning of this process of self-determination, was nevertheless a bourgeois phenomenon, and could not achieve its aims—“to proclaim the rights of the free individual”<sup>152</sup>—in its original conception. We have seen such a critique of humanism before, and we will see it again. On the other hand, what is unique about Lunacharsky’s decidedly socialist critique of humanism is his argument that humanism did not offer an alternative to religion in its anti-religiosity, leading to its decline. Though religious thinkers like the preceding three advanced similar claims against humanism, such an argument is idiosyncratic for a socialist critique of humanism.

The “practical wisdom” of humanism places only the “I” at its center, rather than offer any form of religious “system” that might make possible our understanding of the world and lead us toward an ideal. Its anti-religiosity is thus its downfall, because as Lunacharsky makes clear throughout the many hundreds of pages of both volumes of *Religiia and sotsializm*, the human mind craves the kind of systematic structure that religion and its various branches of knowledge, including philosophy, have to offer. The collectivism of socialism is, however, the direct antidote to humanism’s anti-religiosity, because it offers another kind of religion, or religious “system.” Lunacharsky drives this point home time and again. “Scientific socialism is a new and the highest form of religion ... not the religion of the popes, but the religion of humanity ... and without god and without guarantees—masks of that same god—it remains a religion.”<sup>153</sup> Socialism is the highest social ideal currently available, and for this reason, the highest possible form of religion. This new religion is likewise a new form of anthropocentrism that is not based

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Lunacharskii, “Religiia i sotsializm, tom II.”

in the individual, but again, in the collective. The anthropocentrism of humanism fetishized the individual “I” in an act of iconoclasm, understanding the world only through the lens of this “I.” For Lunacharsky, as well as for the majority of the writers discussed in this chapter, the individual is neither a productive ideal nor episteme for the realization of an ideal. The new anthropocentrism places the collective over the individual in the realization of the ideal.

And Lunacharsky does not shy away from vocalizing this ideal. “The criterion of the maximum of life, when it penetrates into the biological and social essence of this ideal (for it is both criterion and ideal) is a highly social principle and coincides with the principle of the *perfection of the species* (a principle that Marx also openly proclaimed).”<sup>154</sup> Lunacharsky understands as the end goal of socialism, the destination of this ideal, the perfection of the species (not only of the individual), which may be realized only via “the principle of unity in diversity, or the fullest possible unity with the greatest possible richness of elements.”<sup>155</sup>

Lunacharsky thus resolves the aporia of perfection at the heart of humanism, stating that—yes!—the perfection of the human species is indeed the logical conclusion to the religious “system” of socialism and that it is possible within the scope of human history.

Trotsky would later pick up this same theme in his *Revoliutsiia i literatura (Literature and Revolution)* of 1924, and further elaborate on what exactly the perfection of the species entails. In the process of transition from socialism to communism,

man will at last begin to harmonize himself in earnest. ... He will try to master first the semi-conscious and then the subconscious processes in his own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of blood, digestion, reproduction, and, within necessary limits, he will try to subordinate them to the control of reason and will. Even purely physiologic life will become subject to collective experiments. The human species, the coagulated *Homo sapiens*, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psychophysical training. This is entirely in accord with evolution. ... Emancipated man

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<sup>154</sup> Lunacharskii, “Religiia i sotsializm, tom I.” Emphasis mine.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

will want to attain a greater equilibrium in the work of his organs and a more proportional developing and wearing out of his tissues, in order to reduce the fear of death to a rational reaction of the organism towards danger. ... Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.<sup>156</sup>

Trotsky here takes further the question of creativity that was raised by Berdiaev and Ivanov. It is not only a matter of a creative interaction between ourselves and the world. Now, the human being himself becomes the site of his own creativity. He is led, on the one hand, by human reason, and on the other, by the very processes of evolution that are immanent within the human being. Although this new figure appears to be a Nietzschean superman of sorts, in a communist society, Trotsky suggests that all will be supermen—not a question of the few versus the many, as Nietzsche had intended. This is indeed the creation of a new social and even biologic type, as he says—a new race.

For Lunacharsky, as for Trotsky, the new human being, born of the new religion and the new anthropocentrism, is both a new biologic *and* social type. The socialist ideal encompasses both the biological and the social, transforming both the human body and human society. In his rebuttal to humanism, Lunacharsky envisions the end of a teleology that humanism had in fact instated, but failed to deliver upon in its singular focus on the individual.

Nikolai Bukharin and Evgeny Preobrazhensky's *Azbuka kommunizma* (*The ABCs of Communism*) from 1919, an eminently readable and popular text of the post-Revolutionary period, provides a simpler vision of the Marxist subject than Lunacharsky. According to the authors, a Communist society will erase distinctions between people and make humanity a truly universal category, as humanism had always contended. In their words, “there will be simply

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<sup>156</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago, 2005), 206-07.



human beings.”<sup>157</sup> The true humanism is thus not one of individuation and division, but of unification and equalization. Bukharin and Preobrazhensky take aim at culture, arguing that the societal stratification under a capitalist regime creates merely class culture, in other words, culture for the few. A truly “human culture” can be only the product of a communist society, and thus culture will reach “new heights.”<sup>158</sup> Their words here harmonize with what Lunacharsky said and what Blok (discussed later) will also say in his piece: that humanism has all along been an aristocratic and exclusionary culture. As did Berdiaev and Ivanov, Bukharin and Preobrazhensky stress the importance of a productive creativity in their conception of the human being. As it stands, an immense amount of human energy is sorely wasted on the day-to-day of class struggle. Under communism, however, this energy will be set free to pursue more productive endeavors. labor itself is a form of creativity that will no longer be squandered. The new Soviet humanism is thus a creative task that expands the bounds of human possibility.

Gorky tackled the question of humanism, its decline and relevance for the Soviet project throughout his long career. I will here focus on two of his works, one from the 1900s and the other from the 1930s—two distinct periods, the former a time when socialists distanced themselves from the term, and the latter when the Soviet Union had begun to appropriate the term under a new name: “proletarian humanism.” The first piece, “Razrushenie lichnosti” (“The Destruction of the Individual”) was written in 1908 and published in *Ocherki filosofii kollektivizma* alongside the first volume of Lunacharsky’s *Religiia i sotsializm*. Again, the focus is on the creative potential of the collective as opposed to the individual. Looking to the distant past—a mythological and mythologized past—Gorky argues that the social conditions of early

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<sup>157</sup> Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii, *A.B.C. of Communism*, trans. P. Lavin (Detroit, 1921), 59.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

human civilization were such that the individual subject existed only in the context of the collective:

A small group of people, surrounded on all sides by the incomprehensible and often hostile phenomena of nature, lives close together, in constant communication with each other; the inner life of each of its members is open to the observations of all, his feelings, thoughts, conjectures become the property of the whole group. Each member of the group instinctively strove to speak up about himself to the end—this was instilled in him by the feeling of the insignificance of his powers in the face of the formidable forces of the beast and the forest, the sea and the sky, the night and the sun; it was caused by visions in dreams, and by the strange life of daytime and nighttime shadows. In this way, personal experience was immediately incorporated into the stock of collective experience; the experience of the whole became the property of each member of the group.<sup>159</sup>

Much like Lunacharsky, Gorky maintains that the collective is the most productive episteme through which the human experience may be investigated, processed, and collected. In his case, the question is entirely artistic. He traces evolution of art from its ancient and collective to modern and individualistic modes, from the birth of folk art, “the highest images of artistic creation,”<sup>160</sup> to the development of the individual “I” and the art of individual creation.

According to Gorky, the so-called jewels of world culture, from Shakespeare to Goethe, are mere imitations of ancient artistic forms found in folk art. To put it simply, individual “genius” did not create anything that had not already been created by folk art of the collective imagination. Such is the case because individualism is by itself inert, and leads to a loss of energy and creativity.

Gorky’s preoccupation with an idealized past of collective existence makes clear that he, much like Berdiaev and others to come, envisions the solution to the crisis of the individual personality—and of humanism at large—in a return to nature, to the social and artistic forms of the ancient world of myth. It is in this pre-modern context that the human being is indeed most “human.” Gorky sees in the modern subject a degeneration of humanity that is obvious even on

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<sup>159</sup> Maksim Gorkii, “Razrushenie lichnosti,” accessed March 22, 2021, [http://az.lib.ru/g/gorxkij\\_m/text\\_0420.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/g/gorxkij_m/text_0420.shtml).

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

the physical level: “where is the human in this half-dead body with a ruined nervous system, with a powerless brain, in this little receptacle of diseases of the spirit, diseases of the will, only diseases?”<sup>161</sup> Ironically, it is the modernization of the subject that has made him more animal-like. Gorky claims that the individual “I” is unhuman in its degradation of the intellect and the senses, driven only by “the depths of instinct of an animal's atavistic tendencies.”<sup>162</sup>

Nevertheless, he sees hope for the future. While the individual is transient despite his “thirst for eternal existence,”<sup>163</sup> the collective is immortal in its capacity for endless regeneration into the future. Individualism (a word that is here a metonym for humanism) pushed the masses to recognize their own individual “I” as God-like and immortal without any means to actualize such a promise. Gorky allows himself to fantasize about a more concrete immortality, too. He ends his piece on a utopian note, harkening the end of the crisis of individualism qua humanism thanks to the emergence of the “people of the future”:

Thanks to the wisdom of nature: there is no personal immortality and all of us will inevitably disappear to give place on earth to people stronger, more beautiful, more honest than us, people who will create a new, beautiful, bright life and, perhaps, by the miraculous power of their united will, will defeat death. Joyful greetings to the people of the future!<sup>164</sup>

The utopian bent of his posthumanism, *à la* Fedorov, Lunacharsky, and Trotsky, is clear from the immortalist aspirations evident here. But his singular focus on the un-humanity of the individual personality that exists apart from the collective must be likewise seen as a direct attack on humanism and a transvaluation of its values.

Finally, Gorky’s 1934 article “Proletarskii gumanizm” (“Proletarian Humanism”) comes from the pages of *Pravda*, at a time when such a phrase as “sotsialisticheskii gumanizm”

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

(socialist humanism) began to appear quite frequently in *Pravda* and other widely-read publications like *Izvestiia* and *Literaturnaia gazeta*. The proliferation of the phrase suggests that, within two decades of the Soviet Union's existence, the idea of a socialist humanism had become commonplace. By the second decade of the Soviet Union's existence, Soviet ideologues and litterateurs appear to have appropriated humanism and refashioned it. Gorky's article, published more than a quarter century after "Razrushenie lichnosti," gives us an insight into exactly how they accomplished this task.

Gorky announces that the humanism expounded by the Europeans over the centuries is a false humanism because it does not live up to its own values. Rather, humanism and its associated humanitarian values (compassion, kindness, mercy, generosity) have been used as a camouflage (another mask) for the savageries of capitalism. As capitalism evolves into fascism, this camouflage has faded to reveal the grotesque face underneath. In reality, such values are "difficult to turn into a product," i.e., monetize, and thus cannot be successfully incorporated into a capitalist society. Gorky writes:

There is no need to prove the falsity and hypocrisy of bourgeois "humanism" nowadays, when the bourgeoisie is organizing fascism, when it throws off its humanism itself, like a worn-out mask that no longer covers the face of a predatory beast—it throws it off because it understands humanism as one of the reasons for its own division and decay.<sup>165</sup>

In contrast, the true humanism of the day is the "historically and scientifically grounded ... proletarian humanism of Marx-Lenin-Stalin."<sup>166</sup> It is this humanism that is organizing genuine philanthropy as a "creative force" (note again the use of the word creative). He picks up on his

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<sup>165</sup> Maksim Gorkii, "Proletarian Humanism (1934)," trans. Adrian Chan-Wyles, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://thesanghakommune.org/2018/10/29/the-ussr-and-homosexuality-part-v-maxim-gorky-proletarian-humanism-1934/>.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

previous theme of artistic creation and demands that the proletariat be recognized for its “social creativity” in contrast to the supposed masters of culture, the humanists of days gone by.

Much as in “Razrushenie lichnosti,” Gorky again appears preoccupied with the health of the individual body as indication of the health of the social or collective body and vice versa. He points out that “rickety, scrofulous, consumptive youth” characterize the German fascists, “thousands of gray, skinny people.”<sup>167</sup> The “simple, moral, and hygienic” conclusion for Gorky is that living in a healthy environment, i.e. under socialism, is healthy for the individual body, whereas living in an environment “mortally infected with social illnesses” is conducive to physical decay. This preoccupation is yet another symptom of Gorky’s return to nature, to the ideal natural body of pre-modernity (and pre-capitalism), free from modern social and physical illnesses.

This new Soviet attitude toward humanism suggests that the root of the crisis of humanism was, indeed, capitalism, the long history of the exploitation of the working class, and that its excision has created a humanism of the working class. This is not a particularly exciting conclusion to come to, but it is still important to see how, over the first two decades of its existence, the Soviet Union exorcized humanism of its ills, appropriated the word for its own ideological purpose, and began to use it against its enemies (specifically the Nazis). The new Soviet humanism that Gorky expounds is not merely a theory, an intellectual movement as was the humanism of the past, dependent on the so-called great men of history—Gorky deems it a “practice” that has transformed the formerly bourgeois, peasant, and barbaric Russia.

The socialist critique of humanism presents numerous positive posthuman figures—and they are not so different from the ones that Fedorov, Berdiaev, and Ivanov offered; what they

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

lack in religious spirituality, they make up for in the creative spirituality of the collective. Lunacharsky's and Trotsky's ideal subjects are creatures of their own creative intervention: through labor, their posthumans refine their inner nature and external form. Their focus is on a relational subjectivity where there is unity in diversity. Gorky's posthuman in "Razrushenie lichnosti" is, like Berdiaev's, drawn from a kind of prelapsarian past where, again, collective existence takes precedence over the individual "I." Gorky's "people of the future" are, in this way, the people of the past, as we will see again in Petrushevskaya's *Nomer Odin*, for example. They draw their strength from the creative potential of the collective, where every creative act takes place in a unison.

#### 1.4 The Synthetic Critique

The following three selections attempt some sort of synthesis between a religious and socialistic critique of humanism and remain cautiously optimistic about the potential for a renewed humanism under the Soviets.

Aleksandr Blok's "Krushenie gumanizma" ("The Fall of Humanism," 1919) presents his vision for a world full of revolutionary potential. Blok defines humanism as an intellectual movement that affirms the freedom of the human personality. Thus, the first and fundamental characteristic and symptom of humanism is individualism. Blok argues that humanism could only flourish as long as the individual personality was the "main engine" of European culture.<sup>168</sup> The new century, however, has seen a shift in this regard: it is no longer the individual, but the crowd that determines the course of European history. Blok finds the seeds of this shift in the

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<sup>168</sup> Aleksandr Blok, "Krushenie gumanizma," accessed May 20, 2020, [https://web.stanford.edu/class/slavic272/materials/blok\\_krushenie19R.pdf](https://web.stanford.edu/class/slavic272/materials/blok_krushenie19R.pdf).

French Revolution, the spirit of which has spread throughout the continent, and the nineteenth century thereafter becomes one of transition away from the individual as and toward the masses.

For Blok, as for Gorky and others, the question of humanism comes down to artistic creativity. With the passing of time, the culture of humanism has lost its creativity, as “creative work [has been] replaced by joyless work.”<sup>169</sup> Humanism is a movement exclusively of “great” individuals, such as Goethe or Kant, and these agents of humanism have over time become spiritually exhausted. Blok argues that the fatal mistake of the heirs of Renaissance humanism was to believe blindly in historical time, therefore abandoning the “spirit of music” (*dukh muzyki*), a reference to Nietzsche’s same concept in his *Birth of Tragedy*. In this context, the spirit of music is a category outside of human history, ancient and pre-civilizational, and higher than rational knowledge. In contrast, living only in calendar time is an “unnecessary expenditure of creativity” that reduces us to mere inhabitants of the world, not active participants in it, and breaks the balance between body and spirit. According to Blok, it is not the humanists, the “great men,” but the “barbarian masses” who are the real “protectors of culture.”<sup>170</sup> It is they who carry the spirit of music through the ages and into the twentieth century. According to Blok, the masses were never included in the movement of humanism, as a movement of great individuals, not of the people. And thus, with the Bolshevik revolution, the masses have left humanism behind them. Humanistic civilization was mistaken to assume that the masses could, or even wanted, to join it.

Instead of humanism, Blok offers two main pillars upon which the new culture of the masses will stand: on the one hand, artistic creativity, and on the other, a return to nature. For Blok, the new type of human birthed—or, more accurately, re-birthed—by the Revolution, who

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

stands in sharp contrast to the humanist conception of the human, is the artist, “*chelovek-artist*.” And the Revolution will bring back the *chelovek-artist* back to nature: according to Blok, a return to nature is one of the primary motifs of any revolution. He argues for an approach to the world beyond humanistic rationalism, putting his faith instead in the spirit of music, outside of history and higher than rational knowledge. And the *chelovek-artist* is, for him, a capacious category. He ends his article on a note that is half-Nietzsche, half-Donna Haraway: “The human (*chelovek*) is an animal; the human is a plant, a flower; features of extreme cruelty appear in him, animal rather than human; features of a primitive tenderness, too, vegetative rather than human. All these are temporary guises, masks, endless twinkling masks.”<sup>171</sup> In this way, Blok’s ideal subject does not deny the multifacetedness of the human, who is both cruel like an animal but tender like a plant. The human is thus born in the unity between the animal, the plant, and those features that we call “human,” like creativity.

In the end, Blok offers a synthesis of the spirituality of the religious critique with the collectivity of the socialist critique. The posthuman (as Blok calls him, the *chelovek-artist*), has access to a higher-order spirituality through creativity, and he is necessarily one of many, because it is in the masses that this true creativity-as-spirituality is found. Like Berdiaev, he imbues his posthumanism with a creative spirituality, and like the Bolsheviks, with a sense of a collective subjectivity. We will see a parody of the kind of posthuman that Blok offers here, ancient, spiritual, extra-rational, creative, and collective, in Sorokin’s Ice trilogy and his figure of the Brotherhood of the Light, an inverted posthuman collective who, despite these positive qualities, represents a negative posthuman subjectivity that seeks the extermination of the other.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.



Osip Mandelshtam wrote his “Gumanizm i sovremennost’” (“Humanism and Modernity”) in 1922, with a cautiously optimistic attitude about the goals of the nascent Soviet state. His attempt at synthesis is here between the individual and the collective; his ideal subjectivity is found in the perfect harmony of the two, neither one submitting to the other. Rather than defining humanism, the poet speaks of it via the sometimes-idiosyncratic metaphor of social architecture. There are two kinds of social architectures: those that treat the human being as mere material, “to be used like a brick,” an indistinguishable part from the collective whole; and then there are those that are built not from, but for a person.<sup>172</sup> The ideal social architecture is one in which every individual part is granted its individuality while still being purposeful and contributing to the harmony of the whole: “a free play of gravities and forces, human society conceived as a complex and dense architectural forest, where everything is expedient and individual, and every detail resonates with the whole.”<sup>173</sup> It is unsurprising that, once again, a primary concern here is the harmony between the individual and the collective. Mandelshtam appears to occupy a middle ground, affirming neither individualism or collectivism, but the right balance between the two.

According to Mandelshtam, the nineteenth century was preoccupied with fortifying its social architecture by means of laws and government, what he calls “flat dwellings.” Such flat dwellings are the product of the French Revolution, which shocked the Western Europeans into a conservatism of social architecture. On the other hand, the humanist task is one of monumental proportions (to further extend the metaphor), and Mandelshtam sees in the impending social architecture the monumentality necessary to give humankind a proper home in the world.

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<sup>172</sup> Osip Mandelshtam, “Gumanizm i sovremennost’,” accessed January 21, 2021, [https://rvb.ru/20vek/mandelstam/01text/vol\\_2/03prose/2\\_192.htm](https://rvb.ru/20vek/mandelstam/01text/vol_2/03prose/2_192.htm).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

The monumentality of the impending social architecture is conditioned by its calling to organize the world economy on the principle of universal domesticity for the needs of man, expanding the circle of his domestic freedom to the limits of the world, fanning the flame of his individual hearth to the size of the universal flame.<sup>174</sup>

The correct social architecture is international in its aims, suggesting the universality of humanist principles. The individual is found in the universal and vice versa, a Fedorovian kind of unity of all humankind. And again, the concern here is one of creativity: a monumental social architecture should not be “mechanical,” but should rather be a free play of form that is the “best ornament” of human creation.

Mandelstam comes closest to addressing the crisis of humanism when he states that it merely appears that humanistic values have retreated from public consciousness. Nevertheless, they are still a currency in circulation, he further metaphorizes. Humanistic culture is like a gold currency reserve—it provides the means for the circulation of ideas throughout Europe. The time will soon come, he asserts, when the “gold coinage of humanistic heritage ... will [again] pass from hand to hand.”<sup>175</sup> All in all, his is the most optimistic purview of humanism in this batch of selected articles. Like Ivanov, Mandelstam had an artistic interest in the Italian humanists of the Renaissance (especially Petrarch and Dante).<sup>176</sup> The emerging trend seems to be that, when humanism is linked to the Renaissance, it is positively valued, as happens in Blok, Ivanov, and now Mandelstam, their focus being on the spirituality and creativity inherent to the Renaissance (as opposed to the rationalistic individualism of the Enlightenment).

Lastly, I have included a writer from the Soviet literary group Pereval, active primarily in the 1920s, which championed a “new humanism” as one of the cornerstones of their ideology.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> For more, see Tom Dolack, “Mandelstam's Petrarch Translations and his Humanist Archaeology,” *Annali d'Italianistica* 26 (2008), 187-201.

Abram Lezhnev wrote “Levoe isskustvo i ego sotsialnyi smysl” (“Left Art and Its Social Meaning,” 1922/28) in response to the publication of Ilya Ehrenburg’s *A vse-taki ona vertitsia* (*And Yet It Rotates*, 1922), an overwhelmingly negative review that touches upon the problem of the New Soviet Man. Six years later, Lezhnev wrote an addendum, which clarified his attitude toward humanism, to the Ehrenburg review in the form of a dialogue between Lezhnev himself (“Avtor”) and the “Lefovets,” a representative of the LEF group and the 1920s avant-gardist mode of literature. “The old art is dead,” he begins his piece.<sup>177</sup> The art of the pre-revolutionary era was saturated with a dying romanticism, mysticism, and—of course—individualism, whereas the art of the new era must be imbued with a clear-eyedness, optimism, and collectivism. He finds, however, the art of the LEF and the avant-garde, taking aim at Ehrenburg specifically, to be lacking in the desired qualities. The crux of the problem for Lezhnev is in the avant-gardist cult of the machine. The machine, he argues, is the harbinger of an only-illusory collectivism, of an individualism in disguise. Lezhnev identifies the machine with a bourgeois Taylorism that seeks only to extract profit from the worker, not seeing him “as a living, feeling, thinking being.”<sup>178</sup> The worker as mere appendage to the machine is not a higher but a “lower race” of human being, Lezhnev claims, in direct response to the kind of thinking that we see in Gastev’s work on biomechanics. Two of the motifs present in Blok’s “Krushenie gumanizma” appear again in this piece: a return to nature coupled with a productive creativity. Lezhnev longs for the natural man of pre-modernity in his shunning of the machine, which he blames for sapping the creativity from the modern worker. The machinistic New Man is “primitive” and lacks a complex psychology because, like the machine, he is streamlined for ultimate utility. He is, in

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<sup>177</sup> Abram Lezhnev, “Levoe isskustvo i ego sotsialnyi smysl,” accessed March 10, 2021, [https://scepis.net/library/id\\_3052.html](https://scepis.net/library/id_3052.html).

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

the end, “the perfect meat for the machines, and the most convenient object for capitalist exploitation.”<sup>179</sup>

Instead of the machine-worker, Lezhnev argues for the “well-rounded person” (*vsestoronne razvitoi chelovek*), who is possible only under socialism.<sup>180</sup> His socialism, however, is not one without sentimentality built by supremely rational and cold machine-people, as the avant-gardists envisioned it. It is, rather, one born of a new humanism. Lezhnev agrees that the old humanism deserved its reproaches, but much as Gorky would argue a decade later, socialism has corrected the exploitative backbone of humanism and replaced it with the opportunity “to demonstrate all your abilities, to straighten out your personality to the fullest.”<sup>181</sup> This is indeed the new humanism, one that Lezhnev believes to be genetically closer to Marx’s vision of emancipation than the idealistic pathos of Schiller and other notable humanists of the Enlightenment. The new humanism *à la* Lezhnev is at once a repudiation of one of the dominant motifs structuring the new Soviet subjectivity (the machine), and at the same time, an embrace of more traditional humanistic values, newly refreshed by a socialist frame. He treads the line between the individualism of the past and the collectivism of the present to affirm the usefulness of this concept-in-crisis for the Soviet era. As Gorky’s 1934 article makes clear, Lezhnev was not alone in this belief.

Over the course of the present chapter, I have outlined the various posthuman figures born of pre- and post-Revolutionary critiques of humanism, from Fedorov’s immortal space traveler, to Ivanov’s butterfly, yet unhatched from its cocoon prison, Lunachasky’s subject born

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

of the fullest unity of the richest diversity, Trotsky's higher social-biologic "superman," Gorky's "people of the future," and Blok's "*artist-chelovek*." Chapter Two will put to the test these various rewritings of humanism and their posthuman figures: to what extent does the New Soviet Man live up to the ideal put forth by Soviet ideologues like Lunacharsky, Trotsky, and Gorky, their religious counterparts, or their fellow travelers? It is instructive to analyze how—and why—the Strugatskys' Progressor, though he purports to the title of New Man, one who has, per Lunacharsky and Trotsky, taken his internal state and his external form into his own hands, fails to become a positive posthuman figure; instead, he affirms a static and universal subjectivity, rather than a processual and relational one. Where, if not in the figure of the Progressor, do we find a positive posthuman in the Strugatskys' work? I argue that it is not the figure of the Progressor, but that of the *malysh* who offers the reader a glimpse at a posthumanist ethics of self and other that achieves, at once, Lunacharsky's precept of "unity in diversity" and Fedorov's precept of universal *rodstvo*.

## Chapter 2: Post-Stalinist Remorse: The Strugatskys' Noon Universe and Socialism with a “Human” Face<sup>182</sup>

The Strugatsky brothers' Noon Universe works chronicle the length of the twenty-second century on Earth and beyond, a reality in which humanity has achieved full communism on Earth: there is no want, little to no physical suffering thanks to breakthroughs in science and medicine, and the average human lifespan extends well beyond one, sometimes two hundred years. The series is composed of nine novels and one book of short stories, *Polden': XXII vek* (*Noon: 22nd Century*, 1961), the first work in the series and its namesake. Each work takes place in the same fictional universe, with the same set of characters, the same interstellar geography, and the same history. The Earth of the twenty-second-century Noon Universe has long made contact with various alien civilizations, humanoid and non-humanoid alike, though humanity appears to be at the very highest level of development among all the known alien races. With the Soviet promise of communism now fulfilled, life on Earth has blossomed into a near-perfect civilization of like-minded *intelligent*y occupied with the accumulation of knowledge in all

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<sup>182</sup> Translations of primary texts in this chapter belong to their authors, though I have edited them for accuracy where necessary; page numbers refer to the English translations included in the bibliography. (*Zhuk v muraveinike* and *Volny gasiat veter* both have 2023 translations, which I have cross-referenced, though the page numbers refer to the older ones.)

This chapter deals exclusively with the Noon Universe series, and for this reason, excludes some more popular Strugatsky brothers works, like *Piknik na obochine* (*Roadside Picnic*, 1972). The reason for this is simple: my study of the New Man leads me to the figure of the Progressor, who appears exclusively in this series, as the figurehead of a realized communism on Earth.

spheres of life. With socio-cultural differences among the various peoples of the world now negligible if not entirely non-existent, the narrative gaze is focused outward, on encounters with the alien civilizations of other planets, where there is still potential for narrative conflict.

The large majority of the Noon Universe works, and each one discussed in this chapter, deals with the interstellar activity of the Progressors, the field agents of Earth's Institute for Experimental History. The Institute's Progressors travel to far-away planets with humanoid inhabitants, whose socio-historical development has yet to catch up to the level of Earth in the twenty-second century. The Strugatskys show these other(ed) civilizations to be stuck in an all-too-familiar past: feudal backwardness, perpetual war, the oppression of the weak by the strong, the moneyed, and the privileged.<sup>183</sup> It is up to the Progressors to spread the "good word" of peaceful, equitable, and above all rational civilization.

In the decade that followed Stalin's death, the Soviet intelligentsia returned to the debate on humanism, ignoring its post-revolutionary socialist formulations *à la* Lunacharsky or Gorky,<sup>184</sup> instead turning to classical humanist thought in deliberate defiance of the legacy of Stalinism.<sup>185</sup> The Strugatskys' Noon Universe works are part of this continued debate. The series represents yet another chapter of the Soviet response to humanism, and the figure of the Progressor typifies the New Soviet Man of the post-Stalinist period. He is the New Soviet Man "with a human face," his rough revolutionary edges smoothed out in favor of a civilized warmth, gracefulness, and intellectualism. Elana Gomel argues that the utopias of the 1960s, written after the disclosure of Stalinism's violence, oppose the *Übermensch*-style New Man of the past to a

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<sup>183</sup> John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, 2008), 6, argues that colonialism "made space into time," giving the Earth a geography of stages of human development; here, that logic is extended to the entire galaxy, where other planets hold populations that seem to be lagging behind humanity on Earth in terms of their development.

<sup>184</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>185</sup> See Ilya Kukulkin, "In a Muddy Land, Wearing a Historical Costume: Posttraumatic Humanism in Post-Stalinist Soviet Culture," *Partial Answers* 15.2 (2017), 341-68.

more classically humanist iteration.<sup>186</sup> Gone are the violent Nietzschean underpinnings of the New Man so prevalent in the post-revolutionary decade (in Gastev, for example). Nor is the Strugatskys' New Man hewn from the jagged stone of Gorky's proletarian humanism, with its aggressive call to raze the old world and liquidate the enemies of socialism.<sup>187</sup> It appears, at least at first, that the man of the future does not look much different from you and me; he is "a modest, dedicated intellectual, indifferent to gain and willing to sacrifice himself for the common good."<sup>188</sup> By the brothers' own admission, the focus of their future history series was not futuristic technology, but a realistic human ideal for the present.<sup>189</sup> (In this sense, their New Man continues in the tradition of Socialist Realism, which was to give readers more recognizably "human" models to emulate, in contrast to the machinist avant-garde models of the 1920s.)<sup>190</sup> Why, then, does a series that follows the intellectual pursuits of a well-meaning group of self-proclaimed humanists end in violence (Progressor against Progressor), political scandal and secrecy, and social schism?

Gomel has made the argument that the Strugatskys' humanist New Man and the cold and cruel *Übermensch*-style New Man are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.<sup>191</sup> She has argued that this paradox is born of the contradiction between history and utopia,<sup>192</sup> between the "New" and the "Man" that at once suggests a creature ontologically *better than* but ethically *different from*

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<sup>186</sup> Elana Gomel, "Gods like Men: Soviet Science Fiction and the Utopian Self," *Science Fiction Studies* 31.3 (2004), 372.

<sup>187</sup> Maxim Gorky, "Proletarian Humanism (1934)," <https://thesanghakkommune.org/2018/10/29/the-ussr-and-homosexuality-part-v-maxim-gorky-proletarian-humanism-1934/>.

<sup>188</sup> Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule* (Basingstoke, 2014), 81. Gomel points to an interview with Arkady Strugatsky in which he discusses his appreciation of Ivan Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula* (1957), though one thing was lacking: "we missed people! We thought that people of tomorrow will be like us" (quoted in Gomel, 80).

<sup>189</sup> R. Iu. Fofanov, "'Model' 'razotchuzhdennogo cheloveka' A. i B. Strugatskikh i rol' 'vysokoi teorii vospitaniia' v ee prakticheskoi realizatsii,'" *Alma Mater* 10 (2016), 75.

<sup>190</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, 1982), 118.

<sup>191</sup> Gomel, "Gods Like Men," 372.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*



the human.<sup>193</sup> Her writing has helped me to elucidate my own work on humanism and the New Man, which demonstrates, like hers, the self-deconstructive logic of humanism, its symbolic (and sometimes literal) violence that works to make the subject other to himself instead of self-identical. But my study also complicates her findings, firstly, by expanding the scope of analysis to include oft-neglected Noon Universe works (*Paren' iz preispodnei* [*The Guy from Hell*, 1973], *Malysh* [*The Kid*, 1971]) and integrate them into the larger Noon narrative; secondly, by introducing the figure of the colonial other (the animalized savage) as both a negative anti-ideal, but also a positive site of narrative resistance against discursive objectification and dehumanization; and lastly, by offering an alternative to the humanist New Man made in/posthuman: a posthumanist identity that affirms alterity rather than denies it. Ultimately, my argument challenges the prevailing narrative in Strugatsky brothers criticism that claims that the Noon series is a decline from optimism to pessimism about the productivity of a humanist ideology and about the New Man as the bearer of that ideology,<sup>194</sup> which critics tend to assign to the cultural shift from the Krushchev to the Brezhnev eras.<sup>195</sup> Rather, that disillusionment was built into the series from nearly the beginning, which is why the brothers' humanism is one that criticizes ("rewrites") itself as early as the early 1960s. I argue that, throughout the Noon series, the Strugatskys engage in a posthumanist critique of classically humanist discourse. In the process of writing the Noon series and rewriting humanism, the Strugatskys elaborate the development not only a negative humanist (the Progressor) and posthumanist subject that denies the other (the Wanderers, the *liudeny*), but likewise a positive posthumanist subject that affirms

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<sup>193</sup> Gomel, "Our Posthuman Past: Subjectivity, History, and Utopia in Late-Soviet Science Fiction," *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia* (Boston, 2018).

<sup>194</sup> For example, see *Apocalyptic Realism: The Science Fiction of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky* (New York, 1994), 27, 117, or Iuliia Cherniakhovskaia, "Obshchestvenno-politicheskie vozzreniia A.i B. Strugatskikh v kontekste sovetskoi politicheskoi istorii 1960-kh-1980-kh gg" *Vlast' 3* (2012), 113.

<sup>195</sup> Aleksandr Neklessa, "Politologiya budushchego. Strugatskie: futur-tekst i rossiiskii kontekst," *Novyi mir 7* (2014): 122.

him (the *malysh*, the aborigines of the planet Hope, and even the everyday woman, Maia Glumova). My task is to elaborate the self-deconstructive logic of the former, and to shine light on those pockets of possibility found in the latter.

The human subject typical of this twenty-second century Earth utopia owes the large majority of its content to the humanist subject that emerged from Enlightenment discourses on rights: autonomous, rational, and universal.<sup>196</sup> Nowhere is this more evident than in the figure of the Progressor. To quote Mark Lipovetsky, “Progressorism [*progressorstvo*] consists of a pronounced agency [that] rests on two basic principles: rationalism (with the power of science behind it) and humanism (hence their often futile attempts to avoid violence).”<sup>197</sup> The very practice of Progressorism suggests the universalist bent of European humanism, which saw its subject as the universal ideal toward which others should conform, hence its imperialist-colonialist underpinnings. These are sf fables of colonialist expansion and biopolitics that see the Earth’s Progressors impose a certain subjectivity and standard of living on alien races. The task of Progressorism, in other words, is to impart the characteristics of the self onto the other. Much as humanism becomes a hegemonic cultural model over the course of the nineteenth century,<sup>198</sup> so, too, does Progressorism in the Noon Universe over the course of the twenty-second.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault suggests that the human is not so much an ontological state as it is a taxonomic category, and that it is by first identifying categories of deviance that we can then delineate normative or exemplary humanity. He demonstrates how over time the human being became both the subject and object of knowledge and how this knowledge was used to create a “regulative ideal,” a norm that is “forcibly materialized” so as to produce the

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<sup>196</sup> See Tony Davies, *Humanism* (New York, 1997), 121.

<sup>197</sup> Mark Lipovetskii, “Eshche raz o komplekse progressora,” *Neprikosnovennii zapas* 99.1 (2015).

<sup>198</sup> See Introduction.

right kind of subject.<sup>199</sup> The Strugatskys' Progressors also work to identify deviance and the means by which to eliminate it in favor of the regulative ideal that is the human subject of the Noon series. The intellectuals of planet Earth—and that designation includes every twenty-second-century citizen of our planet—have exhausted their study of the human being as an object of knowledge: the biopolitical project on Earth is, indeed, complete. The human body is disciplined, and the human population is regulated. Now, humanity has turned its gaze outward, studying alien civilizations in much the same way and using the same formulations and criteria to construct a taxonomy-cum-axiology that reifies an ontological hierarchy with itself at the top. The worry eventually becomes, however, that another, superior alien civilization may be doing the same to humanity.

In the early and mid-period Noon Universe works (what I term the “colonizer” works, two of which I discuss here: *Trudno byt' bogom* [*Hard to be a God*, 1964] and *Paren' iz preispodnei*), our protagonists present the cultural colonization of alien races on other planets as the just thing to do, despite various setbacks. Sometimes these aliens come in the form of the noble savage, a common trope of Romantic humanism, and sometimes in the form of the ignoble savage, irredeemable without human intervention. The task of Progressorism is in either case justified. Nevertheless, from the first novel, the series presents doubts about the stability of the human subject, the universality of human goodness, and our capacity to bring alien civilizations to the same developmental level as our own. In the latter works (what I term the “colonized” works: *Zhuk v muraveinike* [*Beetle in the Anthill*, 1979] and *Volny gasiat veter* [*Waves Extinguish the Wind*, 1985-86]), the colonial gaze is reversed when the hunter becomes the

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<sup>199</sup> Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, 1993), 1, explains that the norm is a “productive power.” It creates the kind of subject that it wants to govern. In other words, it makes the subject governable as such.

hunted, when humanity becomes the *colonized* rather than the colonizer. In this way, the Strugatskys test the limits of human exceptionalism and universalism, while demonstrating the self-deconstructive logic of a humanist ideology built on difference.

The Strugatskys' work has more often than not been interpreted as political allegories of their contemporary society and twentieth-century totalitarianism at large. Gomel has dedicated a whole article to the different types of allegory and how they line up with various Strugatsky works, arguing, creatively though somewhat uncharitably, that the one-to-one interpretive framework of allegory at large, and the Strugatskys' allegories specifically, constricts the reader just as censorship constricts literature.<sup>200</sup> Erik Simon's article in *Science Fiction Studies* walks the reader through the brothers' bibliography, addressing the evolving political context in which their body of work was created and how it was shaped by the censors' evolving reception to it.<sup>201</sup> To get by the censors, critics agree that the brothers often resorted to an Aesopian language.<sup>202</sup> Aleksandr Neklessa suggests that their relationship with the censor was even productive in some way: when it came time to publish uncensored editions of some of their works, the Strugatskys kept a number of the changes made to the text.<sup>203</sup> And though by now it is a truism that the brothers addressed their own contemporary political reality in their works, they still resonate past the dissolution of that reality: discussing their respective film adaptations of Strugatsky novels, Aleksei German (*Trudno byt' bogom* [2013]) and Fedor Bondarchuk (*Obitaemyi ostrov* [*The Inhabited Island*, 2008-09]) stated that they saw in them reflections of the cultural and economic devastation of the 1990s (German) and the reemergence of government propaganda media in the

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<sup>200</sup> Elana Gomel, "The Poetics of Censorship: Allegory as Form and Ideology in the Novels of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky," *Science Fiction Studies* 22.1 (1995), 87-105.

<sup>201</sup> Erik Simon, "The Strugatskys in Political Context," *Science Fiction Studies* 31.3 (2004), 378-406.

<sup>202</sup> Gomel, "The Poetics of Censorship," 90; Iulii Burkin, "Strugatskie (A). Neosoznannoe (B)," *Kritika*, accessed July 2, 2023, <http://www.rusf.ru/abs/rec/rec11.htm>;

<sup>203</sup> Neklessa, "Politologiiia budushchego," 121.

2000s (Bondarchuk). My work builds on this political interpretation of the brothers' work, though my reading is not a one-to-one allegorical one. Much as the Strugatskys rewrite humanism over their Noon series, they, too, rewrite the Stalinist terror and the optimistic humanism of post-Stalinism to apprehend both the one and the other, elaborate their logic, and effect their discursive undoing.

Ilya Kukulín identifies a trend in Thaw-era culture that he calls *posttraumatic humanism*.<sup>204</sup> He argues that Thaw-era *intelligenty* including the Strugatskys responded to the historical disasters of the recent past with a renewed interest in European humanist values as a trauma response to mass violence. Kukulín highlights works of poetry and prose that draw on medieval settings, the grotesque, and the work of visual artists like Peter Bruegel the Elder and Hieronymus Bosch, in order to condemn state violence and totalitarianism. (Among them he includes the Strugatskys' *Trudno byt' bogom*.) These works are the distinct product of the intellectual atmosphere of the Thaw period, grappling with the "post" of post-Stalinism, questioning how to move forward and begin anew. My work complicates Kukulín's concept of posttraumatic humanism to demonstrate that the Strugatskys, at least, do not simply embrace classically humanist values in the face of Stalinist violence, but question their role in that violence itself.

The series returns us time and again to our own human past, both recent and not so recent, represented by alien planets stuck in a history that resembles our own, albeit in a defamiliarized form: the wartorn feudalism of the European Middle Ages, mixed with the hallmarks of twentieth-century totalitarianism. In placing works like *Popytka k begstvu* (*Escape Attempt*, 1962), *Trudno byt' bogom*, and *Paren' iz preispodnei* in fictionalized future settings that

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<sup>204</sup> Kukulín, "Posttraumatic Humanism in Post-Stalinist Soviet Culture."

resemble the European past, from the Inquisition to Holocaust, the Strugatskys avoided censorship of their critique of Soviet violence. The time-traveler from the past in *Popytka k begstvu* was to have escaped from a Soviet labor camp in the original text, but the editors of *Molodaia gvardiia* required the Strugatskys to change it to a Nazi concentration camp.<sup>205</sup> The parallels to Stalinism in *Trudno byt' bogom*, the next work in the series, are nevertheless numerous, from a secret police, to show trials, and a mass violent purge of the intelligentsia, all cloaked under the mask of an Inquisition-style society. Though Soviet state violence is never directly named, the persistence of its discursive forms in this imagined future/defamiliarized past forms a thread throughout the series. Jameson suggests that, in depicting speculative future worlds, science fiction only really addresses the actual present and its historical past. It defamiliarizes the present moment and transforms it into the past of an imagined future as a means of working through “History itself,” asking “how to fix the intolerable present of history with the naked eye?”<sup>206</sup> There is an interesting double meaning to the word “fix” here: fix as in grasp, arrest so as to apprehend, materializing time to better understand it; and fix as in repair, set right and correct. The Strugatskys attempt to fix—to “rewrite”—the history of the Soviet project, lay bare the ghosts of its still-recent past, and ask: what can be redeemed, and what cannot? And just how can we move beyond repetition to a future that breaks with the present-as-past/past-as-present?

The first part of this chapter deals with *Trudno byt' bogom* and *Paren' iz preispodnei*, in which the Progressors make contact with alien civilizations whose subjects are presented as noble and ignoble savages, humanoids who have yet to evolve into humanist subjects that are

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<sup>205</sup> Boris Strugatskii, “1961–1963 gg. ‘Popytka k begstvu,’” *Kommentarii k proidennomu* (St. Petersburg, 2003), <http://www.rusf.ru/abs/books/bns-03.htm>.

<sup>206</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future? (Progrès contre Utopie, ou: Pouvons-nous imaginer l'avenir),” *Science Fiction Studies* 9.2 (1982), 152.

rational, autonomous, and universal like the human Progressors. In this sense, these races are pre-humanist, even pre-human, presented as animal-like creatures. At the same time, the colonized other becomes a productive site of resistance against objectification by human knowledge. Moreover, the at-first easy distinction between human and pre-human is disturbed in both works with the introduction of the alien intellectual, who is somewhere between the two thanks to his openness to new perspectives and pedagogical oversight.

The second part of the chapter addresses the two last works in the Noon Universe series: *Zhuk v muraveinike* and *Volny gasiat veter*. The conclusion to the series sees the Progressors debate the possibility of humanity's colonization and supersession by yet a superior race: posthumanist superhuman figures who take on the figure of the divine in their perfection—and judgment. In this way, the series thus traces the evolution of the human subject from *animal*, to *human*, to *superhuman*, a temporally linear ontological hierarchy, albeit one that is productively unsettled with figures that don't quite fit. I argue that the Strugatskys engage in a posthumanist critique of classically humanist discourse and the universalism and exceptionalism crucial to the humanist paradigm of the subject. What was once considered the ultimate positive (the human capacity for unlimited improvement) is here turned into the ultimate danger, a tool used to separate the chosen ones from the backward masses (not only the animal from the human, but the human from the superhuman). The Strugatskys thus demonstrate how humanism itself can become an ideological totalitarianism, and what starts as a posttraumatic humanism ends as a posttraumatic *posthumanism*.

Finally, the epilogue to the chapter looks at the novella *Malysh* (1971), which dramatizes an encounter with the wholly other that escapes human(ist) categorization and reveals its futility, the futility of approaching the other with the intent to make it the same on the grounds of

humanist universalism. This mid-period work disturbs the easy linear narrative of the brothers' disillusionment, as well as that of the pre-human to human to posthuman trajectory; rather, it confuses the three categories to create a positive, generative posthumanism, in contrast to the negative posthumanism of *Zhuk* and *Volny*. It is in *Malysh* that the Strugatskys develop a positive posthuman identity to counter the Nietzschean superhuman figures of *Volny gasiat veter*. The novel is a lesson in epistemological and ethical possibilities and in not just rewriting history, but *moving on*.

## **2.1 The Enemy Without: *Trudno byt' bogom* (1964) and *Paren' iz preispodnei* (1973)**

*Trudno byt' bogom* is one of the earliest Noon Universe works and one of the most popular, too, with a well-received 2013 art-house film adaptation by Soviet and Russian director Aleksei German. The action takes place almost exclusively on an unnamed alien planet populated by a humanoid civilization indistinguishable in physiognomy or psychology from humans themselves. The only difference between human beings and this alien civilization is in their societal development: while humanity lives as one integrated society under full communism on Earth, the various kingdoms of this unnamed planet live in a violent medieval squalor reminiscent of the worst corners of Europe in the centuries preceding the Renaissance. The novel takes as its protagonist the Progressor Anton, living in the Kingdom of Arkanar under the alias Don Rumata, a wealthy nobleman close to the crown. His task is to observe. The role of the Progressor evolves over the course of the twenty-second century, as evidenced over the ten works of the Noon series, from an observational one to an interventionist one: while the most that Anton is asked to do here is rescue intellectuals from certain death at the hands of the crown, in later works like *Paren' iz preispodnei*, Progressors are tasked with overthrowing alien



governments and brokering peace between nations in an effort to accelerate their socio-political development. In both instances, the alien subject is something less than the human(ist) subject from the Progressorist perspective. Axiologically inferior, the alien subject requires human intervention to “make it” human, that is, to bestow on it the values of the human subject, peaceful rationalism, and make it valuable.<sup>207</sup>

Besides the benevolence of their desire to lift alien civilizations out of violence and oppression, why do the Progressors want to make alien races “human”? The answer to this question is never made explicit. The goal, perhaps, is to turn alien races into viable biopolitical subjects, ones who can participate in the upkeep of the state writ large, in its proliferation, being that the only goal of the biopolitical-colonialist state is to expand and replicate itself, to bring under its dominion and care as many political subjects as possible and thereby ensure its continued existence. Death, Foucault argues, is the limit of power, and for this reason, power has a vested interest in keeping its subject alive.<sup>208</sup> Progressorism as a practice has all the hallmarks of the Foucauldian biopolitical state: it is “a power bent on *generating* forces, making them *grow*, and ordering them.”<sup>209</sup> It seeks to pull its pre-modern alien subjects from the realm of sovereign power into the modern realm of *biopower* (crossing what Foucault calls the “threshold of modernity”), crafting them into political subjects rather than bare life. As it stands, the alien civilizations of *Trudno byt' bogom* or *Paren' iz preispodnei* are subject to a sovereign power that exercises its right by killing at will. What the Strugatskys demonstrate over the Noon series is the violence of biopower as distinct from, yet complementary to, sovereign power.

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<sup>207</sup> In the 1960s, the Soviet historian Nikolai Konrad argued that we can define a given society's level of development according to its level of humanism. His thought is not out of place in the post-Stalinist reorientation toward humanist discourse, and elucidates the Progressorist thinking that humanist values equal social development. See Nikolai Konrad, *Zapad i Vostok: stat'i* (Moscow, 1966).

<sup>208</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York, 1990), 138.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid*, 136. Emphasis mine.

*Trudno byt' bogom* sets up a neat dichotomy that is only sometimes, though significantly, disturbed between the human Progressor and the animalistic savages that surround him in the Kingdom of Arkanar. The novel is populated primarily by the nobles, political functionaries, and henchmen of the kingdom, all of them ignoble savages equally despised by Don Rumata for their intellectual backwardness, violence, and oppression of the helpless masses. “Animals” (37, 38, 95), Rumata calls them, “not yet humans” (145), their faces betraying an “animal terror” (77) at every turn. They are a “sick and ignorant race,” an “inept race, which is still cowed by ancient superstitions” (27), and in this sense, savages with a pre-modern worldview. Rumata himself fears “turning into a savage” (71); “a little longer and I’ll go insane and become just like them” (174). His fears here point to the ontological precarity of the human(ist) subject, a category that requires constant discursive articulation lest its borders fall to the non-human, to the animal within.<sup>210</sup> Rumata has not forgotten that, “after all, I’m human, and humans are still animals” (71), though Progressorist ideology attempts to conceal this fact at every turn. The novel thus becomes a test for him, to reiterate his humanity as distinct from the animality that is housed within, despite his constant desire to commit violence against his foes like an animal and become “like them.”

The Strugatskys employ a literary device that I have termed *refamiliarization* to demonstrate the backwardness of this pre-human civilization. If defamiliarization is a narrative technique of posthumanist discourse, as I argue in the next chapter,<sup>211</sup> *refamiliarization* is a technique that belongs to the representation of a pre-humanist society. Where defamiliarization aims to make language strange, force a new perspective, and remove familiar associations, all in

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<sup>210</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, 2004).

<sup>211</sup> See the final third of Chapter Three, on Sorokin’s Ice trilogy, where the 23,000 speak in defamiliarized speech, and the narrative presents human society, culture, and history from a defamiliarized perspective.

an effort to demonstrate the arbitrariness of the linguistic (and political) sign, refamiliarization automatizes language, forces only one association between signifier and signified, and hides its ideological underpinnings. Arkanarian royal decree has renamed the various backwaters of the kingdom using designations meant to force positive associations: Beloved (*Zhelannye*), Blessed (*Blagodatnye*), Angelic (*Angel'skie*), Plenitude (*Blagorastvorenje*). Insisting on the semantic link, refamiliarization does not allow another interpretation (in this sense, it recalls Orwell's "Newspeak" in *1984*). Unlike defamiliarization, refamiliarization aims to hide rather than reveal the semantic incongruence between a place and its name and insists that the one is identical to the other: a poverty-stricken town is no longer poverty-stricken because it is named Plenitude. It is a political way of looking at the world that conceals its device, rather than lay it bare. The name of the Gray Joy Inn forces an association between two disparate words to strip the former of its negative associations ("gray" in the novel characterizes the secret police forces, the Gray Stormtroopers). Nowhere, however, is this technique of refamiliarization more evident than in the name of the prison, the Merry Tower (*Veselaia bashnia*), where political prisoners are routinely tortured and executed. Indeed, the prison is not even in the tower itself, which stands empty, but in its catacombs. The Merry Tower is an empty political symbol whose real utility is both hidden by refamiliarization, and reified into something positive: prison is merry, subjugation is happiness. The Strugatskys employ this device in the speech of their characters, too. In the aftermath of a bloody coup, when the streets are lined with decaying bodies, Don Tameo, an obsequious and dimwitted nobleman like any other, announces "how sweet and easy it is to breathe in the reborn Arkanar" (187). When Rumata remarks on the "horrible stench," Tameo reiterates that, "Yes, it's awful ... but how easy it is to breathe in the reborn Arkanar" (187). Stench is sweet and enslavement is freedom: such is the backwardness of the Arkanarian

Kingdom. As the kingdom falls into an anti-intellectual fascism, its literary-cum-political technique of refamiliarization exemplifies, in Rumata's words, "the rules of the herd ... freeing one from the necessity of thinking and wondering" (85). Where defamiliarization forces one to think harder, refamiliarization frees one from thinking at all. For the reader, on the other hand, these moments of refamiliarization act as defamiliarization: the reader, with his extra-textual perspective on the fictional world on the page, is able to distinguish the mismatch.<sup>212</sup>

The non-interventionist approach of the Institute for Experimental History's Progressors at this point in the Noon series is called the Problem of Nonviolent Impact, its goal to study alien civilizations and interfere in their historical development only minimally. "We're historians ... and our work isn't even sowing, it's preparing the ground for sowing" (40), another Progressor under the alias Don Condor reminds Rumata, who desperately wants to get involved in a more meaningful way. Their work is based on the laws of what Rumata calls "historical objectivity": the inevitable creep of social progress, no matter how slow, toward an equitable and just society as seen on twenty-second-century Earth. Progressorist historicism argues that the moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends toward justice. This kind of historical thinking mimics the Hegelian approach to history, which sees the World Spirit unfold in a dialectical structure toward freedom and the rational good, or in Marx's interpretation, toward communism. And the World Spirit, for the Progressors, is humanism and intellectualism, knowledge itself struggling but succeeding to become actualized through human(oid) actors in culture and the arts, science and technology. Trying to believe, like a good Progressor, in the inevitability of historical progress,

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<sup>212</sup> The concept as I have described it here is somewhat similar to Olga Meerson's concept of *neostranenie* in the works of Andrei Platonov: "non-estrangement" works by lulling the reader into a false sense of security, presenting the strange as the familiar through the eyes of a character who accepts this strange reality as it is; the reader must work to find the mismatch. See Ol'ga Meerson, "*Svobodnaia veshch'*": *Poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova* (Berkeley, 1997).

Rumata thinks to himself that “no country can develop without science—it will be destroyed by its neighbors. ... Despising and fearing knowledge, they will nonetheless inevitably decide to promote it in order to survive” (146). In turn, “people with a completely different psychology” will be born in and thanks to this pursuit of knowledge, and eventually, “grayness” will forever disappear as an active force in a society (147).

Theirs is a modern historicism based on the idea of progress (hence, of course, their name), on the capacity for limitless development, as was promised by humanism. However, Koselleck argues that the concept of progress traps the longed-for future in an eternal “not yet,”<sup>213</sup> a discourse that *Trudno byt' bogom* dramatizes in its past-as-present setting that appears, for Rumata at least, to be inescapable. This experience of time mirrors what Koselleck calls the “evil endlessness” of modern time. For Koselleck, the concept of progress seeks to actualize an ideal end-state that never comes; though born of the distinctly modern experience of time’s acceleration, it merely secularizes Christian millenarianism.<sup>214</sup> The Progressors in Arkanar are stuck in time in this same way, waiting for a better tomorrow that seems yet out of reach.

Rumata’s faith in historical objectivity and its understanding of progress is tested time and again as he comes up against the savagery of the Arkanarians. One question haunts him: “Is it possible that they are capable of becoming humans, even with time?” (45) Indeed, their development seems not only to be stuck, but regressing, as a feudal fascism takes hold in the kingdom. The Progressors’ steadfast belief in historical objectivity is thereby tested, and the

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<sup>213</sup> Reinart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York, 2004), 23. Koselleck argues that during the Enlightenment, the acceleration of time that had once belonged to religious eschatology attached itself instead to the concept of progress. Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge, 1991), makes a similar argument about progress’s twin concept—development, which he deems the ideology of modernity, and which likewise has no end.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, 22-23. Tellingly, in *The House of Government*, Yuri Slezkine identifies the Christian millenarian bent of Bolshevism. More on this in Chapter Three, on Sorokin’s Ice trilogy.

question, at this point in the Noon series, remains: is historical progress guaranteed?

Consequently, the novel is a contemplation on how to best effect historical change.

Rather than study them coolly and scientifically, Rumata longs to intervene in the historical development of the Arkanarians and push them further along in their progress. There are, however, numerous examples of Progressors who went rogue to do just that in other kingdoms of the planet and failed in their efforts: one attempted to stop the practice of public torture, another incited a peasant revolt, and yet a third usurped power to force a golden age, all unsuccessfully. Rumata knows better, but the question of violent engagement still weighs on him.<sup>215</sup> In his head rages an argument between two opposing voices: “*They used poison, they threw pipe bombs. And nothing changed.* No, things did change. That’s how the strategy for the revolution was created. *You don’t need to create a strategy for the revolution. You just want to kill*” (148). And it is here that the question of human history is most relevant, “the revolution” being, of course, the event that gave birth to the Soviet Union, an odd combination of violence and humanism, violence *for the sake of* humanism. Given the success of the October Revolution, the fact that Rumata is both drawn to and horrified by interventionism only makes sense. If it worked before, will it work again? Was it worth it then, and will it be worth it now? Hot-tempered as Rumata may be, he is always reminded of the right way to do things by his superiors, the voice of authority speaking as if from the present to the past. A humanistic non-violence is, in the end, the ideology that the text prioritizes, at least in *this* encounter with *this* alien race. Neither the text nor the authors, at least at this point in the series, can resolve the

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<sup>215</sup> It is hardly true, as Nadya Peterson states in *Subversive Imaginations: Fantastic Prose and the End of Soviet Literature, 1970s-1990s* (New York, 2019), 36, that the “perfect people” (i.e., the Progressors) slide into the role of “men of action” with ease and that their plans are never questioned in the novel itself. On the contrary, *Trudno byt’ bogom attests* to the opposite: that taking action is made paralyzingly difficult when you have the humanist duty to enact it without violence and without imposition.

underlying tension between the evidence of the Revolution's success and the experience of its excesses.

Ultimately, the reader is left in the dark about the future of Arkanar: it appears that, at least for now, the Progressors will allow history to take its natural course there. Anton, meanwhile, is relieved of his duties as Rumata, if temporarily, after going on a violent rampage against the pre-human savages who, in the final pages of the novel, murder Kira, his beloved, a young and exceedingly sweet Arkanarian girl whose sole narrative existence, it seems, is to be murdered at the novel's end to justify his rage. Kira is emblematic of the potential that the Progressors find in even the most backwards societies. The novel treats her and the various intellectuals whom Rumata is attempting to save from certain death differently from the rest of the Arkanarian people. They are neither savage nor human, but something in between, and the task of the Progressor Rumata is, even in this early stage of the Progressorist project, pedagogical. This "in-between" category attests to the persistence of Rumata's humanist ideals despite the kinds of setbacks that lead to his growing pessimism (we see the "in-between" category again in *Paren' iz preispodnei*).

Rumata attempts to teach the "in-betweens" because, unlike the savages, they can be taught. Hence, for example, the conversation between Rumata and Doctor Budach, whom the former has spent more than one hundred pages trying to rescue from death at the hands of the kingdom. Rumata tries to communicate to the latter that *it doesn't have to be this way*. Budach asserts that "evil is ineradicable," that "there will always be kings," and that "there is no sense in a tree lamenting that it cannot move," while Rumata challenges him on every point and entreats him to envision a world where humanity can change those supposed "divine decrees" (206-07). As it stands, however, Budach and his like still lack the imagination for a better world. He argues

that humanity has the endurance for any punishment, though “the habit of enduring and adapting turns people into dumb beasts, who differ from animals in nothing except anatomy” (205).<sup>216</sup> The conversation can be read generously or ungenerously, as an affirmation of the power of humankind to persevere in the face of oppression, or as an indictment of the self-superior stance of the Progressors (especially in light of Rumata’s remark on “divine decrees”). The title, after all, suggests that he is the one capable of delivering that decree himself, though he is forced not to by his superiors (it is *hard to be a god*). The novel questions: what does *organic* historical development look like, and what are the consequences of an *imposed* historical structure of *one* vision of progress? My analysis of *Paren’ iz preispodnei* holds at least one key to answer the latter.

*Paren’ iz preispodnei* was published nine years after *Trudno byt’ bogom*, in 1973, and the twenty-second century has sped along in the Noon Universe to bring some significant changes in the practice of Progressorism. At this point in the series, the Progressors have started to take a significantly more interventionist approach. The Institute has now tasked itself with the challenge of lifting primitive alien civilizations out of their backwardness, bestowing upon them not only the technology necessary for a more enlightened form of life, but likewise the correct moral (read: humanistic) attitude. The Progressors’ updated, interventionist approach to effecting historical change takes a similar stance as Rousseau and his perspective on historical development in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755), which helps us understand the pedagogical bent of humanism. Rousseau argues that primitive man,

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<sup>216</sup> Budach’s language here is a near word-for-word reiteration of Agamben’s concept of bare life, a human life made non-human because the biological fact of survival has taken precedence over the way that that life is lived. Bare life is the relation of the Arkanarians to their sovereign power, which deals out death as a means of governance, reifying Agamben’s fundamental categorical pair of bare life/political existence. In this context, even the “in-between,” *almost*-humans of the Noon Universe are relegated to bare life because their death at the hands of sovereign power is always imminent. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, 1998), 8.



though close to animality, possesses certain innate, *human* characteristics (perfectibility, the faculty of self-improvement) absent in non-human animals. The problem is that these faculties innate to primitive man may never develop “of themselves,” and require “the fortuitous concurrence of many foreign causes that might never arise.”<sup>217</sup> The Progressors have decided to stop waiting for primitive alien civilizations to encounter those happy “accidents” (Rousseau’s word) that would speed up their development; they have decided to do it for them. Where, in *Trudno byt’ bogom*, Rumata acknowledged that any society, in order to be successful, must eventually come to support the flowering of knowledge, leading to a peaceful social existence, in *Paren’ iz preispodnei*, the Progressors have decided to pass this truth down to the primitives themselves—a humanist pedagogy—to save them from the trouble of organic historical development. Their task is now to effect progress (*their* idea of progress) and speed up history.

The novella takes place on the planet of Giganda, another alien planet with a humanoid civilization, where our protagonist, Gag, is fighting as part of an elite army unit of the Alai Duchy in its war against the Empire. The Progressors have infiltrated both the Duchy and the Empire, and by the end of *Paren’ iz preispodnei*, they have brokered a peace between the two. Armies will no longer exist on Giganda from this moment on, only civilians—and peaceful civilians at that. But between the first chapter and the last, the book’s action takes place exclusively on Earth: the Progressor Kornei, while working on Giganda, saves Gag from certain death and, unbeknownst to the latter, brings him back to Earth, where Kornei hopes that Gag will integrate into Earth society and help the Progressors in their mission on Giganda. Gag, however,

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<sup>217</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (London, 1973), 74, quoted in Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976). Meek’s book deals with the theory of the four stages of development according to means of subsistence (hunting, pasturage, agriculture, commerce), a theory that was born of Enlightenment humanism and influenced by discourses of primitivism, “savage” man, and the state of nature vs. the state of society.

finds it hard to adapt to this new reality. He cannot come to terms with its peaceful state of existence, in an anti-Bildungsroman that sees him fail to integrate into society.

Again, the “pre-”humans of Giganda are depicted as animals that have yet to evolve into human beings with all of their attendant values. This identification takes place on a basic semantic level, as Gag’s unit is called the Fighting Cats, his best friend is named Leopard, and other men in the unit have names like Rooster, Rabbit, and Crocodile. Nearly every Gigandan character in the text, except the Alaian Duke himself, is identified with an animal of some sort. The imperial enemy is referred to as rats (“even the smell of them had something ratty about it” [109]), but Gag refers even to his own underlings in animalistic terms: “my cockroaches really set to work, almost like real people” (111). In this society of savages, no one is a “real person,” neither friend nor foe.

A central episode in the miniature natural history “museum” in Kornei’s basement makes this indistinction between animal and savages explicit. Gag comes upon a skeleton that he instantly recognizes as a member of his own race: “You think I don’t know a human skeleton when I see one? Maybe the ribcage was broader, the hands tinier ... but all the same, it was a man” (138). Kornei reveals to him that it is, in fact, the skeleton of a race known as the “pseudo-homo” [*psevdokhomo*], with which a scientific party on the planet Tagora attempted to establish contact, though in the end they “came to the conclusion that they [the pseudo-homos] were animals” (138). That Gag earnestly and without hesitation identifies with the pseudo-homo is telling, placing him on the animal side of the animal/human equation. The name itself suggests the concept that I have tried to illustrate here: the pre-human. Just as the pseudo-homo, Gag (and indeed all humanoid alien races in the Noon Universe) is for the “real” humans an evolutionary curiosity. He and all like him must be helped in their movement up the evolutionary ladder

toward “true” humanity. Though physically similar, and both gifted with the capacity for speech, the pre-humans of the Noon Universe are deficient in their rational faculties, and consequently lack the proper values to be termed “human.” The pedagogical approach that Kornei takes to Gag, a miniature of the Progressorist approach to entire civilizations, suggests that the necessary faculties can nevertheless be made to develop to make a human out of Gag—though the text asks the reader to question this possibility.

The episode at the natural history mini-museum in Kornei’s basement may hold the key to unlocking the violence of Progressorist humanism. Gag’s visit to the mini-museum recalls Haraway’s visit to the early-twentieth-century African Hall in New York’s Museum of Natural History, where “primitive” African and Native American figures dressed as “savages,” standing beside an equestrian (and, of course, contemporary) Teddy Roosevelt, greet visitors at the entrance.<sup>218</sup> More such figures are found in the hall, among dioramas featuring non-human animals at what seems to be the beginning of time, a prelapsarian natural paradise. Haraway points to the gorilla diorama as a double for the human, “natural man.” She argues that the African Hall demonstrates a mode of knowing concerned with the purity of the social body from racial, sexual, and socio-economic others. Much like the African Hall, Kornei’s mini-museum testifies to the human(ist) preoccupation with categorization of the other in order to distinguish it from the self, to guard the purity of the human subject by capturing the other as an object of knowledge and thereby draw the border between the former and the latter. The museum, of “at least a hundred” (136) specimen, presents an entanglement of knowledge and violence, where knowledge, the primary value of the Noon-series *intelligenty*, is violence.<sup>219</sup> To know, to study,

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<sup>218</sup> See Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936,” *Social Text* 11 (1984-85), 20-64.

<sup>219</sup> In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that disciplinary power, which is realized through surveillance, observation, and examination, is a power that acts directly on bodies, and is in this sense covertly violent, though it

to draw conclusions—these are the activities of this utopian twenty-second-century humankind, where every Earthling is engaged in his intellectual pursuits. But where the African Hall presents man at the dawn of time as an example of a “pure” humanity untouched by modernity, Kornei, and his society at large, values the opposite: modern man, whose purity has come via his journey through historical time, who has reached the apex, or so it seems, of evolution. His is a teleological purity through time, not a prelapsarian purity outside of time. The specimens on display, including the pseudo-homo, are frozen in the stasis of an unwelcome past; they are curiosities left behind by history. Unlike *Trudno byt’ bogom*, where the narrative is told from Rumata’s perspective, *Paren’ iz preispodnei* is told half from a third-person omniscient perspective, half Gag’s perspective; the chapters alternate back and forth between the two. This passage is told from Gag’s perspective, bringing the reader to sympathize with his worldview, which makes the violence of the museum explicit:

All these animals lived their lives thousands of lightyears away from this spot. And lived happily, although of course they had their worries and troubles. The men come, shove them in a bag—and into the museum. For scientific research. And we, too, live our lives, fight battles, make history, hate our enemies, worry ourselves silly, and they watch us and get the bags ready. For scientific research. Or some other reason. What difference does it really make? Perhaps we’ll end up in basements like this, and they’ll stand around and argue: why are we what we are, where did we come from, and why? Suddenly all these animals became my friends. (137)

Though benevolent in its aims, this mode of knowing appears to Gag cold and, indeed, inhuman. The humanist preoccupation with knowledge, categorization, and taxonomy is here rendered into a discursive violence more concerned about the production of discourse itself, than about the humanity of the objects of this discourse.

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is also manifestly violent in the ways that it manipulates bodies through different forms of material coercion. Though it is not as spectacular as the public beheadings or hangings of yore, it is not a nonviolent power.

That Gag again identifies with the animals rather than his human companion in the museum is significant. He sees himself as another object of knowledge for the humans and resents that, here, every move of his is “calculated in advance” (156) based on the knowledge that they have already amassed. He resents their knowledge itself, that “they know everything about us, but we don’t know shit about them” (127). And he resents the fact that they insist on the universalism of their knowledge (i.e., of humanism), the idea that “that our world has to be remade in their image” (127). The universalism of the Progressorist perspective is cleverly demonstrated in one exchange between Gag and Kornei. On his tour of the hospital facilities back on Earth, when Gag first awakes, he cannot seem to grasp the fact that there is nothing that could cause him harm neither inside the hospital building, nor outside, in the surrounding nature, verdant, overgrown, and populated with animals like the “zebrogiraffe.” “I understand,” he says, “no danger here. But over there?” Kornei replies that, “Here—is also there” [*zdes’—eto i est’ tam*] (122). This simple sentence sums up the Progressorist-universalist-humanist worldview as a whole: to make *there* as it is *here*. Point, from Earth, to any humanoid-populated planet in the cosmos, and Kornei’s statement still rings true: here—is also there, at least if the Progressors have anything to say about it (for this reason, “they walk around on our Giganda like it was home to them” [127]).

Placed in this foreign setting, whisked by the colonizers back to their home (this same plot will play out again in Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.*), Gag becomes an active site of resistance against assimilation, and though this is apparent in his characterization, it is also effected at the textual level. Half of the novella is told from Gag’s “I” perspective (the other half from the third-person omniscient), a framing that allows a unique look into the mind of the pre-human other as constructed by the Strugatskys. This perspectival switch inverts the colonial gaze, and it is no

longer the Enlightener Kornei who occupies the position of the “scientific observer,” Gag, who places humanity in the role “historically occupied by those who are looked at and theorized about rather than those who look and theorize.”<sup>220</sup> The outcome, though it may come as no surprise, is that Gag sees *himself* as human and the humans as *other than* human: their rational humanism has transformed them into *other than* for Gag. And Kornei only confirms the difference between them, when Gag first refers to his race and the humans as “we,” but Kornei says that there is “you” and there are humans (123). The borders between the two are drawn by both the human and the other—though which is which depends on whom you ask. This world without want has transformed humanity, according to Gag, into non-humans, “their goals otherworldly, and their means beyond anything recognizably human” (167). Above all, Gag resents how “kind” but “condescending” (167) Kornei is, and this criticism easily extends to Progressorism as a whole, which seeks to solve problems that only it, and not the actors of those problems, has formulated. Where, in *Trudno byt’ bogom*, the human Anton/Rumata anguishes over his descent into savagery, in *Paren’ iz preispodnei* Gag anguishes over becoming one of them, becoming *other than* human; after all, he believes he already *is* human. Both instances testify to the porous boundary of the human subject, which requires constant discursive articulation to keep it from infection by other categories, like the animal, or here, the *other than* human. These errant possibilities of transformation—of progression or regression, depending on the perspective—and the fear that they engender in the subject suggest that the value of autonomy is paramount to any speaking subject of the Noon Universe.

In the end, it is unclear where the authors’ sympathies lie. *Trudno byt’ bogom* hardly gave a voice to the savage other, while here we have an othered anti-hero whose psychology is

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<sup>220</sup> Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, 7.

complex and whose perspective is favored by the narrative. At the same time, though Gag is shown to suffer at the hands of the Progressor Kornei, trapped on Earth against his will as if in a museum display, he is also shown to be spiteful, aggressive, a trained killer, and an anti-intellectual (what is perhaps the greatest sin in the Noon Universe). In its penultimate chapter, the novel sets up an encounter between Gag and another Gigandan on Earth: the handicapped, doll-eyed, and emaciated intellectual Dang. Just as in *Trudno byt' bogom*, the novel comes to disturb the at-first easy distinction between human and pre-human with the figure of the alien intellectual. When Gag overhears Dang speaking Alaian in Kornei's garden, he corners him, hoping for some camaraderie—but Dang rebukes his friendly advances, clearly disdainful of the Fighting Cats and all they represent. Dang is an intellectual who is excluded from the colonizing efforts of the Progressors because, unlike Budach in *Trudno byt' bogom*, he has already internalized their ethos: he is the ideal, submissive colonialist subject. Dang has bought into the Progressorist message and hopes that Giganda will, too, become like Earth. He calls Gag a “traitor ... a cold-blooded executioner, a killer” (176), before Gag proves his point and beats him for his words. Peaceful Earth society and the kind but condescending Kornei have left Gag unchanged, and he is sent back to Giganda, as per his wishes, to continue fighting a war that the Progressors have already ended. *Paren' iz preispodnei* testifies to the impossibility of a true tabula rasa in the construction of the ideal socio-political subject: old habits always seem to linger in the savages of the Noon Universe. Nevertheless, we do see progress in the Progressorist project from *Trudno byt' bogom* to *Paren' iz preispodnei*, from an intellectual milieu reluctant to envision an alternative to one that is an active collaborator in the process of cultural colonization.

## 2.2 The Enemy Within: *Zhuk v muraveinike* (1979) and *Volny gasiat veter* (1985-86)

The last two works in the Noon Series, the most portentous of the bunch, are two novels steeped in paranoia—over internal and external enemies, over the precarity of the human subject’s ontological stability, over the boundary between self and other. Unlike the majority of the Noon Universe works, these two novels take place primarily on Earth: after our storied travels around the universe, we come back to face the problem at home. *Zhuk v muraveinike* is told from the perspective of Maksim Kammerer, a former Progressor and now an agent of COMCON-2. COMCON-1, the Committee for Contact with Other Civilizations, houses the Institute for Experimental History and its Progressorist program, while COMCON-2 appears to be something of a secret police organization hidden deep in COMCON-1 and tasked with safeguarding humanity from extraterrestrial threats. The very existence of this kind of secret police organization marks a shift in the Noon Universe series. Where, in the past, Earth was presented as a near-perfect society free of social stratification and open in its socio-political activities, the last two works in the series suggest otherwise, that there is a social hierarchy and those at the top run things with a high degree of secrecy.

In the novel, Rudolf Sikorski, the head of COMCON-2, charges Kammerer with investigating Lev Abalkin, a former Progressor who has come back to Earth unexpectedly and against orders. Kammerer comes to find out that his superiors believe Abalkin to be a secret agent for a super-intelligent alien civilization. Though hints to an unknown and superior alien race abound throughout the Noon Universe works, it is not until *Zhuk v muravenike* that this anxiety is made explicit and humanity fears that it may be the object of the “Progressorism” of another civilization: the Wanderers [*Stranniki*]. The existence of the Wanderers is only hypothetical, for they are never encountered once throughout the series, only evidenced



piecemeal in the technological artifacts that they have left scattered throughout the galaxy as many as hundreds of thousands of years ago. Nevertheless, their hypothetical existence disrupts the schematic humanist paradigm of the Noon Universe works: pre-human (primitive, savage, animal) and human (capable of limitless self-improvement), a teleology that moves from the former to the latter and extends, within the latter, into infinity.

This ontological hierarchy no longer holds, because the Wanderers, according to common knowledge in the twenty-second century, are “a super-civilization. We know that they are much more powerful than we are ... we think they have mastered our entire galaxy a long time ago” (85). Knowledge is here equated with power because the simple dictum that knowledge is power is, after all, the organizing principle of the Noon Universe. Twenty-second-century humanity conceptualizes Progressorism first and foremost as an epistemological practice, where knowledge is its own reward. The reality, however, is that this knowledge is weaponized for the proliferation and reproduction of human(ist) values. The novel features a series of flashbacks from Abalkin’s time as a Progressor on the planet Hope, where we see Abalkin and his alien friend Shchekn debate Progressorism on these same terms. Shchekn argues that their practice of knowledge accumulation appears purposeless (“you keep learning and learning and you don’t do anything with what you learn” [89]), to which Abalkin retorts that knowledge is the door to other worlds. “It’s crowded for our imaginations” in this world, he claims (90). And Shchekn begins to understand that Progressorist knowledge is not an end in itself, but the means by which humanity exercises its power in an attempt to extend itself across the universe. “No sooner do you get into another world than you start changing it to resemble your own. And then, naturally, your imagination gets crowded and then you look for another world and you start changing it” (90). He identifies here the logic of the biopolitical-colonialist state, which exists only to expand itself,

to bring the other under the domain of its political will, and thereby guarantee its continued existence. It is the logic of the same, which aims to cover the world in its sameness.

But with the introduction of the Wanderers, humanity itself becomes an object of knowledge to an outside observer for the first time in its history. It becomes other to a more ideal subject—more knowledgeable, thus more developed, thus freer to pursue its own goals toward its own ends. As Lipovetsky suggests, their existence makes “subalterns” of Progressors and, indeed, of humanity at large, which now find itself at danger of being colonized for the sake of *another* vision of progress.<sup>221</sup> The introduction of the Wanderers throws a wrench into the hegemonic humanist pretensions of Progressorism and demonstrates that the practice is indeed an exercise in and of power: not only is humanity stripped of its autonomy, in fear that the Wanderers will impose their own values, their own version of progress upon Earth, but the universality of human values and the human subject is rendered null in the face of another, more powerful subject that asserts its own universality. Any claim to universality now appears arbitrary, and any such claim is hegemonic violence against an other.

It is perhaps this new context that allows the novel’s protagonist to question the project of Progressorism itself. “I still remember perfectly that vision of the world in which any intelligent creature was seen as a creature ethically equal to yourself, in which it was impossible to ask the question was he better or worse than you, even if his ethics and morality differed from your own” (7). Kammerer now recognizes the naivete of this former point of view. It was the idealism that led him to join the Progressors. But based on his past experience on war-torn planets like Saraksh, he saw that humans have indeed made decisions about who is better and who is worse. It is this fixation on categorization that he detests and sees as faulty, their ability to “decisively

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<sup>221</sup> Lipovetsky, “Eshche raz o komplekse progressora.”

divide the world into friend or foe” (7). His words here point to the historical naivete of the Soviet project at large, which attempted—by Leninist vanguardism, Progressor-style—to lift the masses out of their own backwardness, and which was likewise fixated on categorizing the bad and the good in an attempt to create the ideal socio-political subject. For the Progressors, as for Soviet thinkers, a different ethics or morality has not been something to respect, but something to fix, to bring up to the standard of (Progressorist-cum-Soviet) humanity. And now, as the twenty-second century draws to a close, humanity fears that it will succumb to the same fate as other alien races have succumbed to at their hands.

The narrative suspense of *Zhuk v muraveinike* hangs on the possibility that the Wanderers may in fact already walk among humanity in human bodies indistinguishable from our own—in the guise of, say, the human known as Lev Abalkin—much as Progressors have walked undetected among the supposedly lesser civilizations of previous Noon works. The upper echelons of COMCON-2 believe that the Wanderers have planted half-human spies in our society, unaware that they themselves are spies “until the indefinite moment when the program clicks on at last, explodes the earthling inside and ... what?” (186) The thought is left unfinished. This idea of programmability—a possibly evil hybridity—suggests an internal, infernal other that drives the subject but cannot be known, what Lyotard terms the *inhuman*: the “infinitely secret” other at the core of the human, something fundamentally unknowable that lives within the human subject and threatens its humanist pretensions to autonomy and rationality.<sup>222</sup> Human agency is continuously put into question in these final Noon Universe works as the Wanderers are feared to take control of human history, of the human body and mind itself. In the previous novels, the Strugatskys stuck primarily to presenting the humanist worldview of the Progressors and only

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<sup>222</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 2.

implicitly, by narrative means, exposing its faults. Here, however, they engage with an explicitly posthumanist discourse that does not only criticize humanism for its smugness, inflexibility, and ultimately, its violence, but also presents an alternative conception of the human(ist) subject that undermines its basic tenets of rationalism, autonomy, and universality.

Rumata's fear in *Trudno byt' bogom* that he would become one of the savages, Gag's fear in *Paren' iz preispodnei* that he would become *other than* human, the fear that runs throughout the entire Noon series over the infection of the self by the other is, in *Zhuk v muraveinike*, actualized in the allegedly evil hybridity of Lev Abalkin and those like him, who are said to be part human, part Wanderer. (This fear is doubly actualized in *Volny gasiat veter*, as I demonstrate below.) Kammerer's investigation reveals that the conspiracy is—yes—true and that the Wanderers have indeed meddled in human history: exactly thirteen hybrids created by crossing *Homo sapien* and Wanderer DNA walk among us, and the question becomes whether to allow them to continue life on Earth and risk takeover at any moment, or to kill them. Rudolf Sikorski, the head of COMCON-2, chooses the latter course of action. This hybrid form is never allowed to realize its potential—whatever it may be—out of fear of takeover. The question is repeated over and over: to what extent are these hybrids in control of themselves, and to what extent are they led by a built-in *program*? Do they have free will, or are they merely automatons? The novel ends with Sikorski's sacrificial killing of Abalkin, a very real and rare moment of violence in the Noon series that erupts because the human's autonomy and exceptionalism are threatened. This killing demonstrates that even the gold standard of the socio-political subject here—the Progressor—may be excluded from his own ranks, even only on the basis of fear or suspicion.

This fear of the Wanderers, however, resolves itself in *Volny gasiat veter* (1985), the final novel and overall work of the Noon Universe series—and the real danger is revealed to have been humanity all along. In the end, it is not the Wanderers who should be feared, but an incredibly small subset of humanity who has developed what is called the “Third Impulse” and is evolving infinitely quicker than the rest. “It looks as if humanity is being divided into a higher and lower race” (186). The enemy, if that is indeed the right term, is therefore within rather than without, for it was never an alien enemy, but rather, a superhuman—or perhaps *other than* human—enemy. The novel takes the form of Kammerer’s memoir, which lays out his part in this important historical moment at the end of the twenty-second century known as the Great Revelation.

This revelation turns on the idea of exceptionalism that is so crucial to the humanist paradigm of the human being: that humanity stands apart from the rest of the natural world thanks to its capacity for conscious and continued self-perfection (the Noon Series makes mention of other developed and peaceful alien races, like the Leonidians, whose development has stalled while humanity’s continues; and, of course, there are the “lesser” races who have to be helped along by the Progressors). The final Noon Universe novel thus makes explicit the aporia at the heart of humanist exceptionalism: can the capacity for self-perfection lead humanity away from itself, toward a state *other than* human? The Strugatskys appear to suggest as much, as they take the idea of human exceptionalism to its extreme to separate humans from other humans, wherein only thousands out of billions achieve perfection—some 0.0001 of a percent.

The political implications of this development are sufficiently clear in the context of the catastrophes of the twentieth century, implied throughout the Noon Universe series, but heretofore only as remnants of the past now seen only in less developed civilizations. The

existence of the Third Impulse in humanity—and possibly, it is said, of another Fourth or Fifth Impulse thereafter—recalls Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of the totalitarian “gardening state,” which separates (“weeds out”) and selects useful human materials from its surplus populations.<sup>223</sup> Bauman argues that phenomena such as the Holocaust or the Soviet Gulag, though extreme examples, do not represent a breakdown in humanistic Enlightenment practices, but are rather their logical conclusion. Modern social structuring based on the humanistic values of rationalism, universalism, and exceptionalism will invariably lead to social engineering that separates “good” human material from “bad” human material—and justifies it as something done in the name of progress. The gardening state is here dramatically literalized in the final work of the Strugatskys’ *Noon Universe*.

As humanity becomes split according to the “higher and lower” versions of itself, Gorbovsky, one of the greatest and most celebrated Progressors, confirms that, “of course it’s a schism ... where have you seen progress without a schism?” (188). In progressing toward a higher state, toward a state of perfection, humanity has in fact regressed to its totalitarian past. The newly emerging superhuman figures of *Volny gasiat veter* take from the Nietzschean superman tradition of the New Soviet Man—cold, cruel, uncompromising, yet supremely reasonable—bringing us to the birth of the Soviet period and the New Soviet Man, now without a human face. The characters term these new people *liudeny* (from either or both *liudy* and/or *homo ludens*). And the *liudeny* are “totally uninterested in the fate of humanity or in humanity” itself (186). One might hope that these new people will be kind and benevolent to their former brothers and sisters, but this fact is anything but guaranteed, as the super-reasonable *liudeny* seem more than happy to forget their human flesh. The question thus becomes whether “super-

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<sup>223</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1989).

reason is super-good” (130). The following exchange, which takes place earlier in the book, characterizes the complex relationship between historical change, individual autonomy, and those supposedly more *reasonable* powers who might take it away—whether that be Progressors, the Wanderers, or the new people of the Third Impulse.

“Good is always good!” Asya said.

“You know perfectly well that that isn't so. Or maybe you really don't know? But I've explained it to you. I was a Progressor for only three years; I brought good, only good, nothing but good, and Lord! How they hated me, those people! And they were right. *Because the gods had come without asking permission.* (130)

The Noon Universe series, from the earliest to the latest, dramatizes the notion that “aliens differ from humans, but humans differ from themselves.”<sup>224</sup> By the end of the series, the human subject has indeed evolved to literalize the Lyotardian inhuman, creating a caesura within the structure of the humanist subject that separates it from its own humanity. In achieving an extra-human state of perfection (the Third Impulse is said to “transform people into non-people” [196]), the humanist precept of self-perfection has made the subject other to itself. It is thus that the humanism of the Noon Universe deconstructively contains within itself posthumanism, as the Strugatskys take the logic of human exceptionalism to its natural conclusion.

Though the discourse on the machine hybrid is relatively undercooked in the Noon series, especially in comparison to earlier works like Yuri Olesha’s *Zavist’* (1927) with its super-machines Chetvertak and Ophelia, or later works like Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.* (discussed in the next chapter), the series contributes significantly to the discourse on the animal hybrid (what I termed in this chapter the pre-human), and in the final works, also to that on the divine hybrid (superhuman or other than human). The *liudeny* stand apart from humanity because they have achieved a kind of perfection that has historically been reserved for God or the gods, but which

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<sup>224</sup> Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London, 2013), 124.

humanism has secularized and bestowed upon humanity as a teleological possibility of historical development. The repeated references to the gods, as in the above excerpt or in the title of *Trudno byt' bogom*, demonstrate the specific coloring of the divine in the Noon Universe: the divine is all-powerful, and this power is taxing and tiresome to him, because his good works are unappreciated in his time (only the hindsight of historical experience will vindicate him). I have demonstrated why the Strugatskys' posthumanist discourse is tied up in the question of the animal—it has to do with the question of social evolution and the capacity to repress the animal unconscious, the inhuman, at the core of the human—but why do the Strugatskys choose to end the series with a meditation on the divine? What is the relationship between the posthuman and the divine? The two are connected by the idea of power, and the Noon Series is, ultimately, a reflection on the uses and abuses of power in the twentieth century. Where does the power lie, and how is it used? These are the fundamental questions that guide their sprawling ten-work study on power via the metaphor of Progressorism.

### 2.3 Epilogue: *Malysh* (1971)

Though the Noon Universe concludes with *Volny gasiat veter*, I want to end this chapter on a different note: with a meditation on the (non)encounter with the totally unknowable, even inconceivable, other in an earlier Noon Universe work, the 1971 short novel *Malysh*.<sup>225</sup> It is in this work that the Strugatskys reckon with the other in its ultimate alterity, not only as the

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<sup>225</sup> This text remains among the most understudied of the Strugatsky brothers'; critics tend to see it as a footnote in their work. Yvonne Howell, in *Apocalyptic Realism*, 140, devotes less than half a page to it, little more than a cursory plot recapitulation for the sake of completion. Erik Simon calls it "a politically safe, thematically conventional, but conceptually sophisticated" work (391). Elana Gomel, in "The Politics of Censorship," sees in it a more democratic approach to reading than in some of the brothers' more popular works like *Trudno byt' bogom*: "by distancing themselves from the immediacy of political concerns, they successfully raise the issues of freedom, choice, and history that remain short-circuited in the allegorical works" (102). Gomel goes on to devote a full page to it in *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism*; she seems to be nearly as big a fan of the novel as I am, calling the titular *malysh* "one of the Strugatskys' artistic triumphs" (87).



posthuman but as the fundamentally non-human. *Malysh* challenges the negative posthuman figure of the liudeny with a positive one, who does not deny but affirm alterity. The novel further demonstrates that the Noon Universe, rather than following an easy narrative arc of pessimism to optimism, presents pockets of opportunity for resistance against humanist assimilation.

The novella takes place on the planet Ark, where a small team of human scientists has begun to terraform the unpopulated planet's biosphere to make it livable for the humanoid alien species known as Pantians, whose home planet has become unlivable. Humanity has taken it on itself to move their whole civilization to another planet resembling theirs, hence the Ark Project of the year 2160. In the process of their work, the humans discover that there is at least one inhabitant on Ark: a young *human* boy, thirteen years old, whose parents' spaceship crashed on Ark when he was just a baby. His parents perished, though the boy thrived. *But how?* The team of scientists comes to realize that Ark is—must be—populated by a native civilization, possibly quite advanced, but what form this alien species takes is unknown. They conclude that the aborigines live underground, and that they took the boy into their care, raising him as one of their own. The problem is that the boy believes in full sincerity that he has been, since the death of his parents, completely alone on the planet. Based on this fact, the humans come to their final conclusion: Ark's natives are non-humanoids whose form is either too large or too small to comprehend, or perhaps does not manifest in any visually recognizable or intelligible materiality. Perhaps it is a mist, a breeze, or a scent.<sup>226</sup>

The human boy has developed—has been *made* to develop—in such a way that he lives comfortably on the harsh terrain of the planet Ark. His skin blue-green, his musculature uncannily non-human, the *malysh* has the capacity to rest, run, swim, and even fly expertly in

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<sup>226</sup> In *Zhuk v muraveinike*, a humanoid native of the planet Hope says something similar about the Wanderers. “Rumor has it that *they have no shape at all, like water or steam, say—*” (126; emphasis mine).

sub-zero temperatures without a single piece of clothing on his body. He can cast protective phantoms to ward off predators. And he can mimic any sound or piece of speech heard since birth. In short, the natives have “equipped him with new physiological mechanisms, the development of which in the ordinary human being still had to be regarded as impossible from the viewpoint of contemporary Earth science” (286). The kid is the halfway point between the human and the non-human, a posthuman hybrid of the two. For this reason, Gennady Komov, the leader of Project Ark and a celebrated COMCON official, wants to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to understand the non-humanoid mind via an intermediary that is half and half. The rest of the novella is a debate between the members of Project Ark on how best to go about making contact with the aborigines—or whether to make contact at all.

*Malysh* features the first appearance of the ecologist, and later historian, Maia Glumova, the sole female character of any significance in the Noon series (she appears also in *Zhuk v muraveinike*, as Abalkin’s lover, and *Volny gasiat veter*, as Toivo’s mother). The Strugatskys rather crudely code the character feminine: she is prone to emotional outbursts; she is impulsive and acts on intuition rather than reason. But Glumova brings to the work an important female perspective on the question of alien contact, or more broadly, the relationship between self and other, that is antagonistic to the perspectives of the men on the mission. She holds the key to the Strugatskys’ critique of anthropomorphism in *Malysh* that recreates, in miniature, the argument of the Noon Universe series as a whole. Glumova teaches the other characters, perhaps unsuccessfully, respect for the other, on the one hand, and respect for the past, on the other. I will first attend to the latter.

That the humans first believed Ark to be unpopulated comes as no surprise. A feeling of emptiness reigns on the planet, which seems to contain neither intelligent life nor wildlife of any

kind. Stanislav Popov, our young technician protagonist, puts it as follows: “we were not only saving the Pantians from inevitable and universal destruction, but also saving this planet—from emptiness, from deathly silence, from absurdity” (200). Project Ark envisions the possibility of a tabula rasa for the Pantians, the promise of a new world remade in their image.<sup>227</sup> The failure of Project Ark, however, argues for the impossibility of a tabula rasa given the persistence of the past in the present. The planet Ark cannot be repopulated by the Pantians because it is not the tabula rasa that the humans had imagined. Maia Glumova is the only one to grasp as much. Though initially enthusiastic about the project, her time on Ark has convinced her that the planet is “an old castle with ghosts” (221), that it smells of the death of past life. And she is not wrong. Whoever the aborigines may be, they abandoned the surface of the planet to hide underground, and the surface, in its emptiness, is more of a graveyard than a tabula rasa.

In this way, *Malysh* dramatizes one of the central anxieties of the Soviet project, of the capacity for the Revolution (or revolution as such) to inaugurate an age of radical newness—of redemption, rebirth, and renewal. The longed-for “post” of post-Revolution or post-Stalinism (or, indeed, of the posthuman, who is revealed, in *Volny gasiat veter*, to be *other than* human), is a misnomer, according to both Koselleck and Lyotard. On the one hand, Koselleck argues that, at first, revolution seems to “unchain” the yearned-for future (the “post”), which is conceptualized as an ideal end-state, whether that be the Thousand-year Reich or the classless society.<sup>228</sup> In reality, however, revolution gives birth to its opposite, reaction, and modern historical experience becomes an infinite chain of revolution and reaction (thesis and antithesis) that never resolves in the ideal end-state (the “post”). The post is, for this reason, a “futureless future,” that is, a future

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<sup>227</sup> Popov also seems to suggest here that emptiness is an improper and undesirable (or at the very least, initial and immature) state, that it longs to be filled. Again, the logic of expansion reigns among the intelligentsia of the twenty-second century, who continue to conceptualize the universe as an empty receptacle for the human imagination.

<sup>228</sup> Koselleck, 23.

that never comes. Lyotard, on the other hand, argues that historical periodization using terms like “post” is born of modernity’s fixation on development through diachrony, which is ruled (he agrees with Koselleck) by the principle of revolution.<sup>229</sup> Starting the clock again, marking a year zero, we yearn to live in the radical newness of the “post” that revolution promises. Therein lies the issue: the “post” is not an actuality, but a promise. It is not the temporality of the after, but the temporality of the *in-between*, the time of waiting for the birth of another history.<sup>230</sup>

Drawing on Freud, Lyotard argues that, in our experience of time through historical periodization, through the “post,” which crafts experience into a linear narrative with beginnings and ends, we are doomed to repetition of the past. What appears to be linear becomes, rather, circular, another evil endlessness. Rather, we must *work through* the past (in the psychoanalytic sense) to move into an other, new future. Maia Glumova is the only Project Ark crewmember to understand the importance of this kind of reckoning with the past. Rather than deny the past in an effort to effect a *tabula rasa*, Glumova demands that the humans on the planet Ark respect the past by acknowledging it, mourning it, and leaving it be. She recognizes that Ark cannot be “a new home for an entire humankind” (221) because it is the resting place of another civilization. And she is the only crewmember to voice concern over the mourning (or lack thereof) of the human remains found on Ark, those of the boy’s dead parents. “I can’t explain it, and maybe I’m acting like a naive child, but there should have been... there should have been a minute’s silence. But no, it was one-two-three: the position of the remains, the loss of cybers, the topographic parameters... Damn! As though we were doing an exercise at school” (226). We see here the importance she places on mourning the past as a method of working through it, while the rest of

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<sup>229</sup> Lyotard, 25.

<sup>230</sup> Stefan Herbrechter, in his interpretation of Lyotard in “Postmodern,” *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Cambridge, 2016).

the crew, particularly their captain Komov, is happy to move forward without acknowledging the loss of human life that has taken place. And it is not insignificant that Glumova herself likens her perspective here to that of a child, bringing her closer to the *malysh* that the rest of the crew treats as little more than a scientific object.

This point brings me to my final one, on respect for the other in its unknowable alterity. The alien species indigenous to Ark is never apprehended, in one way or another, by the team of human scientists on the planet. Their form, their methods, their needs, and their wants all remain a big question mark throughout the text. Their way of being in the world is unknown to the humans and to us, the human readers. This is an other that breaks any ontological-cum-axiological hierarchy present in the Noon Universe series, of humans, pre-humans (savages), posthumans (superhumans), animals, plants, and any other lifeform that is already known to us and subject to our methods of knowledge and ordering. This encounter with a fundamental alterity dramatizes the concept of the other that we find in the works of Levinas. Levinasian ethics argues that the other always “exceed[s] the idea of the other in me.”<sup>231</sup> There is always more to the other than I know of him. I cannot conceive of the other in his totality, and it is the work of ethics to come to terms with this fact and act with respect toward the other, knowing that he is unknowable to me. The other resists my identification and domestication of him, much as Gag rebelled against Kornei’s methods of knowing him and his people. And much as the Levinasian other, so, too, are the natives of Ark “infinitely transcendent, intimately foreign,”<sup>232</sup> and thus, beyond our cognition. There is no conceptual paradigm to describe this difference, which is beyond language. In the end, my interpretation of the Noon Series leads me to an ethics of self and other that is radical in its refusal to identify the other by name or even by category.

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<sup>231</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, 1969), 49.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter with the other is the moment when the alterity of the other becomes known in its unknowability to the self. It is the *human* face of the other that elicits an ethical response in the self. But to say that an encounter between the Project Ark team and the aborigines has taken place is not exactly correct. Yes, an encounter has taken place between the humans and their representative, if you can call him that. But the natives have, at most, suggested their presence rather than revealed it—in the form of giant, insect-like antennae that extend over a distant mountain range whenever the kid comes to visit the humans; whether these antennae are part of their bodies, or merely machinery of some sort, is never decided. Thus, the ethics of self and other in *Malysh* has a distinctly posthumanist twist that demands respect not only for the human other, but for all forms of life, which may be far more numerous, more complex, more *other* than the human imagination allows. The other in Levinas designates any marginalized figure—he gives the examples of the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the Jew<sup>233</sup>—and the Strugatskys extend this ethical precept beyond the marginalized human to any life that has been cast aside or taken for granted. The novella is, indeed, a critique of an exclusively anthropomorphist ethics.

As before, it is Glumova who acts as the reader's moral compass and points to the anthropomorphism of the protagonist Popov's theory of intelligent life. Popov believes that "humankind *knows* enough to judge which forms of development [life] are historically promising and which are not" (244; emphasis mine). In other words, humanity has gathered enough knowledge about the development of human and non-human life alike to be able to ascertain whether a given civilization will flourish or perish. Glumova rejects the very terms of his theory. Firstly, she argues that our epistemological tools are all *too* human: our knowledge is based on

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 78.

our experience, and our experience limits our possibilities of interpretation. Secondly, she argues that our quest to make contact with non-humanoids, as in the present case on Ark, is an essentially inward-looking one.

Really we are not interested in the problem of reason in general but the problem of our human reason; in other words, we are interested above all in ourselves. For fifty thousand years already we have been trying to understand what we are, but the problem cannot be solved by looking inward, in the same way that you can't lift yourself by your own bootstraps. You have to look at yourself from outside, through others' eyes, through alien eyes. (245)

Humanity does not seek to understand others, but itself. Not only have we not gathered enough knowledge to understand others, she says, but we have not gathered enough to understand even ourselves (and her argument is, in the end, prophetic, as the Noon series ends with the emergence of the Third Impulse, rendering the human other to himself).

*We are always looking for ourselves.* The denouement of the novella presents an effective visual metaphor for this fact. The humans equip the kid with a camera headset and allow him to travel back underground to the natives. Once underground, we hear, via the kid's headset, gurgling, wheezing, clucking, sizzling, and thanks to the infrared camera, we see that the entire underground space is filled with a phosphorescent mist with "hints of structure" in it (301). The sounds continue to escalate—rumblings, shrieks, bronze gongs—and it suddenly appears as if the kid is surrounded by hundreds of people. It is at this moment that Glumova, in an apparent attempt to jeopardize contact, sabotage and end the mission, turns on the emergency flare light on the headset. The camera cuts out—the kid presumably destroys the headset—but not before the picture becomes crystal clear for a fraction of a second and we see what he sees: "many people, many black figures, absolutely identical, arranged in a chessboard pattern ... the rows appeared infinite ... It hit me: it was the kid, repeated in countless mirrors, a countless number of times" (304). We went looking for the other, but we only found ourselves. The image of the kid

multiplied ad infinitum is an apt visual metaphor for the inherently solipsistic practice of knowledge acquisition about the other, which according to Glumova, is really only about the self.

Ultimately, Glumova fails to put an end to the humans' continued study of the kid. The novella ends with the promise of a long and perhaps fruitful exchange between the humans and the kid. But by its end, the humans know as much about the natives as they did at the beginning: nothing. No mention is made of the project in the next Noon novels, and we can only assume that it ended in failure. It is not insignificant that the five Noon works that I have discussed in this chapter—half of the works in the series—are stories of failure. Though the humans that populate this storyworld have achieved something resembling a utopia on Earth, the Strugatskys focus on their failures rather than their successes. In humanity's failure to spread Earth ideals to the outermost reaches of the galaxy, the Strugatskys consider the limits of power, knowledge, and progress as envisioned by a humanist ideology. At the same time, they present modes of narrative resistance against the logic of humanism's "make the other into the same," and they present both negative (the *liudeny*) and positive (the *malysh*) posthuman subjects, which, respectively, reify exclusionary ontological and ethical structures or deconstruct them to offer ontologies and ethics of openness and alterity.



## **Chapter 3: Post-Soviet Panic: Petrushevskaya's, Pelevin's and Sorokin's Apocalyptic Narratives, or Whither Humanism at the End of the World?<sup>234</sup>**

The fall of the Soviet Union heralded also the fall of an epistemological system that structured artistic production according to a Marxist-Leninist metanarrative that promised an ideal state, Communism, at the end of history. By the time that the Strugatskys wrapped up their Noon Universe series, with *Volny gasiat veter* in 1986, that metanarrative's grip on cultural production had significantly loosened. The Noon series first replicated it in its optimistic premise (Earth has achieved Communism by the twenty-second century and is exporting it to other planets, so that they may, too, join the "end" of history), then travestied it in its pessimistic conclusion (the advent of Communism has led to such extreme ontological changes in the human subject that the New Man is no longer human, and it is not only the end of history, but also of the human). It should come as no surprise that, though they were free to ignore it altogether, Russian writers in the two decades following the dissolution of the USSR continued to grapple with the Soviet metanarrative, how to make sense of the world without it, and with what to replace it. In losing the Soviet metanarrative, the Russians joined the postmodern era in earnest, which

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<sup>234</sup> Translations of Petrushevskaya's *Nomer Odin* are my own; page numbers refer to the Russian publication in the bibliography. Translations of Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* and Sorokin's Ice trilogy belong to their authors, though I have edited them for accuracy where necessary; page numbers refer to the English translations in the bibliography.

according to Lyotard's famous argument, is defined by the refusal of modern metanarratives (like "the emancipation of the rational or working subject") that helped us structure our experience of history—and, indeed, gave us faith in a better future.<sup>235</sup> The texts that I analyze in this chapter do not only refuse the Soviet metanarrative: to varying degrees, they even grieve its loss, nostalgize it, and *rewrite* it.

One of the guiding principles of my dissertation has been Lyotard's rethinking of postmodernity as "rewriting modernity." Modernity, Lyotard tells us, seeks to exceed and resolve itself in a state of ultimate stability, and for this reason, always suggests the promise of postmodernity within itself.<sup>236</sup> The postmodern is implied in the modern, and I have extended this idea to suggest that posthumanism is implied in humanism. It helps us to think of both postmodernism and posthumanism not as something that comes "post" the modern or the human, but as a "rewriting" of the modern or the human that does not only negate but rethinks, even repurposes them. In this way, Lyotard argues, we can *work through* the problematics, contradictions, and dead-ends in both the one and the other via the work-without-end that is criticism. Along these same lines, it is also helpful to think of the post-Soviet as "rewriting" the Soviet experience. The five works that I discuss in this chapter—Petrushevskaya's *Nomer Odin, ili V sadakh drugikh vozmozhnostei* (*Number One, or In the Garden of Different Possibilities*, 2004), Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* (2011), and the three novels in Sorokin's Ice trilogy (2002-06)—are all, in one way or another, a *rewriting* of the Soviet project, the New Soviet Man, and of course, humanism. They use the Soviet experience to understand the post-Soviet one. In these works,

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<sup>235</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984), xxiii. Lyotard identifies the Enlightenment narrative as the one in which "the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace" (xxiv). On the other hand, he defines the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). The postmodern condition is in part predicated on the question, "where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?" (xxiv-xxv)

<sup>236</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford, 1988), 24.

Soviet ideology becomes both an impetus for reenvisioning the ideal subject, as well as a roadblock for that goal. Petrushevskaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin ask: which of the old Soviet ideologemes persist in the post-Soviet period, which are useful to us, and which are not.

### **3.1 The Animal and the Ritual: Petrushevskaya's *Nomer Odin, ili V Sadakh drugikh vozmozhnostei* (2003)**

Of the five works that I discuss in this final chapter, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya's *Nomer Odin* (2003) represents the grim socio-economic reality of the post-Soviet condition most directly. The havoc caused by the 1990s transition to capitalism is here tangible in the material and spiritual impoverishment of our characters. At the same time, the novel is the most stylistically experimental work among other works tackling posthumanism, a postmodern masterclass in generic, narrative, and syntactic diversity that also makes tangible the discursive disorder of a nation newly deprived of its long authoritative metadiscourse and metanarrative. Half the story set among post-Soviet Russians, half – among an ancient, indigenous Arctic peoples, *Nomer Odin* demonstrates how the colonialist logic of dehumanization comes back to haunt the colonizer himself: in this fictional world, where humanist principles have died with the dream of Communism, it is the post-Soviet Russians themselves who are the savages, the primitives, the cannibals.

The titular protagonist, referred to simply as Nomer Odin, is an ethnographer at an unnamed research institute in post-Soviet Russia. He researches a fictional indigenous Arctic people known as the Enttis, whose pagan mythology is centered around the god of the underworld and the ritual passage between life and death. The narrative follows the protagonist as he attempts to secure a hefty sum as ransom for his colleague, who has been kidnapped by the

savage Chuchun people (the Enttis' sworn enemy) while on assignment in the Arctic. In the process, his soul crosses the threshold between life and death twice, dying once and entering another's body, dying twice and re-entering his own. The reader is left to piece the narrative together from various fragments of a multigeneric text, which includes a conversation between two unnamed individuals in the style of a piece of theater (chapter one); a letter (chapter four); an email (chapter ten, the final one); and a third-person narrative (the remaining chapters). This simple list, however, does not do justice to the originality and boldness of Petrushevskaya's text. *Nomer Odin* presents a polyphony of voices that becomes, indeed, a cacophony in, for example, its persistent refusal to designate who is speaking or who is our focalizer, or its rambling, pages-long stream-of-consciousness passages, flitting from one thought to the next with little to no sense of continuity or, for that matter, intelligible syntax, standard grammar, or even punctuation. Filipp Kataev calls this textual element "verbal garbage: endless misprints, misspellings, abbreviations, and slips of the tongue."<sup>237</sup> The world of the novel is a fallen world in which no sense can be made of the present, and for this reason, our protagonist studies the past.

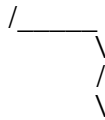
The sheer multiplicity of voices present in the text, none of them authoritative, declares the death of the Soviet metadiscourse, which was not only authoritative but totalizing. The official discourse of the Soviet Union had a "uniformity, anonymity, and predictability" that made all of its various official texts—party speeches and documents—sound as if they were excerpts from one and the same text (a metatext, if you will).<sup>238</sup> This authoritative metadiscourse extended its reach to cultural production, too, and it takes no great insight to suggest that a Frankenstein's monster of a text like Petrushevskaya's would have been impossible to produce

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<sup>237</sup> Filipp Kataev, "Liudmila Petrushevskaiia v sadakh drugikh vozmozhnostei. Vosem' let spustia," *Voprosy literatury* 3 (2012), 132.

<sup>238</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2005), 47.

and publish in the Soviet Union. *Nomer Odin* is a jumble of genres that reads as if sourced from multiple different authors with distinct authorial voices. The difficulty of making sense of the text, however, prompts the reader to search for an authoritative voice upon which to hang one's interpretation, though none is to be found. It may even make the reader nostalgic for the old authoritative metadiscourse that structured language and thought. But language here is out of our control. Not only does the novel end mid-sentence, the final sentence is not even a sentence, but rather a clutter of abbreviated and misspelled words, all of which ends not with a word but an incomprehensible symbol:



The book ends with no sense of conclusion or clarity, though it does certainly end.

Defamiliarization here takes place not only at the level of the narrative, but in the fabric of the text itself, opening up “other possibilities” of reading to which the reader may not be accustomed.<sup>239</sup> The reader can choose how to decipher the misspellings and misprints, how to distinguish between characters when their speech is not individuated, how to piece together the various, sometimes contradictory, narratives. Authorial instruction is missing, in a mirror of the missing authoritative discourse.

The narrative confusion of the text reminds the reader that present history is no longer comprehensible or controllable, the Soviet metanarrative of history also dead. There is a palpable panic here—and in all the works that I discuss in this chapter—over the end, that we have

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<sup>239</sup> Kataev, “Liudmila Petrushevskaia v sadakh drugikh vozmozhnostei. Vosem’ let spustia,” for example takes a cue from the repeated mention of a video game in the novel (which goes by the novel’s title) to read it as if it were structured like a video game. His reading is convincing: the protagonist’s name recalls the standard video game “Player One,” he is reborn whenever he dies, just like a video game protagonist, and the fractured quality of the narrative, its various repetitions and dead-ends, suggests multiple outcomes are possible depending on the “player’s” actions.

reached the end of history but *not* its consummation. For this reason, the narrator spends his time in the study of the past, of an ideal beginning untainted by the overripe fruits of postmodernity. It is there that we find the novel's ideal subject, the noble savage, and where we also find his mirror counterpart, the ignoble savage. The animal hybrid returns in the guise of both the one and the other. *Nomer Odin* participates in a critical posthumanist discourse on the noble savage as a model to emulate; at the same time, it also participates in a classically humanist discourse on the ignoble savage as a model to exorcize. The novel constructs a bipartite system of values: a good pre-modern condition to which we must return, and a bad, also pre-modern condition that mirrors our own contemporary reality. It announces the death of humanist ideals in post-Soviet Russia, and envisions—much like Berdiaev, Gorky, or Blok in Chapter One—the return to nature as an alternative to the discursive crisis of a post-Soviet postmodernity. Having moved away from the Soviet set of transcendental signifiers, we return instead to a pre-modern truth that is beyond discourse.

The Enttis are a small indigenous Arctic nation, an ancient people who, according to the ethnographer-protagonist, are the only civilization to survive the various ice ages of the past thousands of years. While “the remains of former civilizations [are] pressed under the ice” (328) of past ice ages, the Entti people continue to exist and add to their culture into the contemporary period. They are at once the most ancient civilization on Earth, and in a state of ultimate precarity, about to disappear from the face of the Earth (more on that shortly). Theirs is not a written culture (*pis'mennost'*), but an oral one, and one of their most sacred rites is known as “night singing” (*nochnoe penie*). The way that the protagonist talks about night singing is telling: he has a reverence for it that is only compounded by the fact that he is one of the only non-Entti individuals both to witness night singing and be able to translate and interpret it. *Nomer Odin*

comments that night singing can be “compared only to a magical laughter [*magicheskii smekh*]” (161). Propp reminds us that ritual laughter, a type of laughter divorced from the comic, is a generative practice that kindles and increases vital forces and accompanies birth or the act of creation.<sup>240</sup> Night singing is thus a creative act that generates life. The Enttis, especially their most relevant representative in the text, the shaman, poet, and night singer Nikulai, recall Blok’s *chelovek-artist* from “Krushenie gumanizma,”<sup>241</sup> whose power rests in the spirit of music rather than in the written word. Much as Blok found the answer to the turn-of-the-century crisis of humanism in the figure of the *chelovek-artist* and the ancient, even extra-temporal category of music, so too does Petrushevskaya’s text offer an antidote to the post-Soviet crisis of humanism in a return to a pre-modern creativity, an escape into a creative nature (the “New Man” thus becomes the “Ancient Man”).

The creative oral culture of the Enttis stands at odds with the distinctly written culture of the text itself, presented in the form of a script, a letter, or an email, and the culture that the text comes from and represents, a highly mediated one of computer and television screens that only simulate reality, all in the service of capital (for example, Nomer Odin keeps insisting he has created a video game that will finally make him rich). Tatiana Prokhorova suggests that the protagonist’s repeated exposure to the language and culture of the Entti people has given him a new, defamiliarized perspective on the world.<sup>242</sup> The (pre-modern) ideal subject has rubbed off on the protagonist in the best possible way; his repeated contact with the culture has granted him a new set of eyes, just like Vertov’s camera did the viewer. He can see modern post-Soviet reality for the dog-eat-dog world that it is. And perhaps his new set of eyes is also the reason that

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<sup>240</sup> Vladimir Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter* (Toronto, 2009), 131.

<sup>241</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>242</sup> Tat’iana Prokhorova, “Kak sdelan pervyi roman Liudmily Petrushevskoi?” *Voprosy literatury* 1 (2008), 252.

his streams of consciousness are riddled with incomprehensible (though sometimes beautiful) figurative language. But I have to add a caveat to this argument: yes, there is a tension between the form of the novel itself and the creative oral culture that the protagonist studies, between postmodernity and premodernity. Nevertheless, the defamiliarization that takes place on the textual level here (a literary feat in its own right) is possible only because of postmodern techniques of writing; in a way, Petrushevskaya undermines her own idealization of the premodern subject by creating a postmodernist text that is nothing if not fascinating in its fragmentariness and elliptical quality.

The post-Soviet crisis of humanism looms large throughout the text, as Petrushevskaya describes a world that seems to have reverted to a pre-civilizational time where the survival of the fittest is the reigning logic. The post-Soviet is here equated with the pre-humanist, a place and time where humanist ideals are not criticized, but ignored. The “laws of the cave” reign in post-Soviet Russia, where you either “get beat up or can fight back” (137). Prokhorova suggests that Petrushevskaya links the motif of Hell and the underworld, which features heavily in the Enttis’ mythology, and which Nomer Odin appears to visit more than once in the course of the novel, to the everyday life of post-Soviet Russians, in a kind of Dantean journey through the post-Soviet space.<sup>243</sup> This is an impoverished population where everyone is forced into thievery by material circumstances, a fact most obvious in the younger generations, those most strongly shaped by the post-Soviet reality, which the protagonist likens to “the Stone Age[, which] comes out of all the back alleys with every new generation of kids” (137). The emerging generations of Russians are “not concerned with civilization, education, and growing up,” “unable to progress,” “little primitives” (138). The protagonist’s worldview here mimics the Westernizer perspective

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 257-58.



of the Russian intelligentsia nearly two hundred years before him, who likewise saw in Russia a child in comparison to the grown-up heavyweights on the European stage.<sup>244</sup> But here, there is no possible future for the infantile Russia: a futureless child without the capacity for progress, a case of a perpetual arrested development.<sup>245</sup> Petrushevskaya's text suggests the fear that post-Soviet man is, much like the cannibalistic Chuchun, prey to his own animal instinct rather than led by the kind of rational thinking born of education.

The narrative asks the reader to draw a connection between the "Stone Age" savagery of post-Soviet society and the pre-civilizational society of the Chuchuns, a likewise ancient, cannibalistic, proto-human people who have long hunted the protagonist's dear Enttis. Like the Strugatskys' pseudo-homo, the Chuchuns are "relict hominoid[s]" (37), that is, they are *not quite* human, but "humanoids," "not human beings," "paleoanthropic cannibals," "cave animals" (73). The scale in them is tipped toward the animal rather than the human, as they lack one of the main identifiers of humanity in classical humanist thought: speech. Nevertheless, they have a culture of sorts, and it is one based around ritualistic cannibalism. Theirs is a "sacred cannibalism" (75) that does not only seek to destroy, but to desecrate the sacred places of the peoples on whom they feast: they defecate there. As the seemingly natural-born enemies of the Enttis, who are presented as an artistic if ancient culture, the Chuchuns are, in contrast, presented as destroyers of culture. By linking the two, Petrushevskaya stages the return of the "colonial boomerang" (Hannah Arendt): the new post-Soviet subject is dehumanized and exploited in the same way as

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<sup>244</sup> In his first philosophical letter, for example, Petr Chaadaev deemed Russia "an adolescent" that "must repeat the whole education of mankind." Peter Chaadaev, *Major Works of Peter Chaadaev* (Notre Dame, 1969), 29, 31.

<sup>245</sup> Dar'ia Markov suggests that in the novel "pedagogy [becomes] the main question of a nation's existence": to what extent can a nation *learn* to develop on its own? I would argue that this theme is mirrored in the reader's experience of the book itself: to what extent can the reader learn to read a book like this? Daria Markova. "Liudmila Petrushevskaja. Nomer odin, ili V sadakh drugikh vozmozhnostei," *Znamia* 3 (2005), 215.

the colonial subject that has been degraded by Soviet exploitation.<sup>246</sup> Dehumanization and exploitation here is primarily effected through money: the introduction of capital has caused the post-Soviet subject to degenerate into a negative pre-modern one (in contrast to the positive pre-modern subject that is the Entti, though their culture is, too, being exploited by others for financial gain).

The postmodern man is at once far removed yet intimately close to the ancient Chuchun. “In ancient times, man runs from danger or, conversely, for prey” (138), theorizes the protagonist. Back then, there were direct connections between immediate material reality and one’s reaction: if you were afraid, you’d flee; if you were hungry, you’d hunt. On the other hand, the modern condition—especially the postmodern one—is a highly mediated experience without an immediate connection between circumstance and reaction. The dangers are more abstract: “an exam tomorrow, paying off a debt, a threat over the phone, a diagnosis made yesterday” (139). As a result, “a system of amulets emerges. A system of illogical gestures and actions,” and “from there it is not far to ritual, prayer” (139). Nomer Odin would agree that money, in the world of the novel, is the ultimate amulet and safeguard against future woe. The way that money moves around the novel is itself a ritual of sorts, comparable to the Chuchuns’ cannibalism in that both the cannibalistic act and money impart meaning upon the ritual doer. Securing money, stealing it, tricking others into giving it to you, all to pay off debts that are, in one way or another, life threatening, is what drives forward the narrative of Petrushevskaya’s novel. Nomer Odin must pay the ransom for his colleague lest the latter die at the hand of the Chuchuns. At the same time, he must get enough money to pay a doctor for a miracle cure for his severely handicapped son.

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<sup>246</sup> Michel Foucault builds on Arendt’s concept of the colonial boomerang to demonstrate how colonialism’s “techniques of power,” as applied on the colonial subject, can then be repurposed by the colonial power and used on its own subjects at home. Michel Foucault. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76* (New York, 2003), 103.

He begs, mortgages his apartment, steals a car, brokers and barterers, dies and comes back to life, all to secure a sum that will secure the livelihood of himself and others. The novel also depicts the mysterious process of metempsychosis, by which dead souls may be revived in new bodies; an unnamed character announces to another that “for a hundred bucks you can revive [so-and-so]! All you have to do is bring in the body” (304). This is a population on the verge of death that is looking for a way out of it. And the only way out is—money.<sup>247</sup>

Because they have been ruthlessly hunted by the Chuchuns without protection from the state, the Enttis are, too, on the verge of extinction. The protagonist harbors a real fear over the end of their civilization (“soon they’ll be extinct. There will be no more of this culture, no more of these poems” [138]) and wonders who, if not him, will preserve their culture. Nomer Odin insists that the institute treat the Enttis with the respect they deserve and not tread on their sacred sites. “Without their shrine, the Enttis will perish,” he says, and then extrapolates that, “every nation disappears when there is nothing sacred” (55). The implication here is that our postmodern world is, too, without anything sacred—a culture of empty rituals and signifiers that promote a savage lawlessness, stripping our humanity from us in prolonged life-and-death situations. Much like the Entti people, so too is our own civilization in danger. For Petrushevskaya, the postmodern is the *pre*-human in the most pessimistic perspective: not a locus of historical progress and artistic ingenuity, but of a regression to an ancient Stone Age where a dog-eat-dog mentality reigns.

In the end, the novel is something of a swansong for the Soviet metanarrative, which was based on a humanist conception of history in which humankind endeavors toward its own emancipation. Without it, Petrushevskaya suggests, we have become nothing but savages. By

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<sup>247</sup> In this way, Petrushevskaya’s novel marks the end of the biopolitical state. The post-Soviet Russian state seems to have no interest in keeping its subjects alive and teaching them how to discipline their own bodies.

incorporating into global capital, Russia has lost its humanist legacy. Though the ideal subject she offers in the stead of the now-savage post-Soviet subject can be said to be a posthuman construction (the Entti is not rational and individual, but creative and collective—indeed, a multiplicity of subjectivities in one body thanks to the practice of metempsychosis), Petrushevskaya deals mostly in humanist tropes of dignity and tolerance. Though her humanism is one that expands its borders to extend the productive elements of humanism to indigenous peoples, she lapses into the colonial stereotype of the noble and ignoble savage, the former armed with a mystical knowledge and the latter cannibalistic.

### **3.2 The Sex Robot That Came to Life: Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* (2011)**

A panic over the end is palpable, too, in Pelevin's utopian-dystopian 2011 novel *S.N.U.F.F.*, which takes place a millennium into the future and, by its end, also illustrates the rapid deterioration of a once-great civilization. Again we see here an ontological hierarchy of the political subjects that populate this fictional world, where the superior subject has all the hallmarks of the classical humanist subject, whereas the inferior one is again conceptualized as the colonial savage. This hierarchy is undone, however, by the presence of the human-machine hybrid in the text, the first significant android to appear in my study. The presence of an animal-human hybrid in a text (most commonly found in the form of the savage, like the Strugatskys' Gag or Petrushevskaya's Chuchuns) communicates the fear that the human subject is victim to his "animal" instinct rather than in control of it via his "human" reason (as Petrushevskaya's Entti does, it can also effect a transvaluation that places extra-rational creativity *above* human reason). Pelevin picks up on this strain of thought here with a savage of his own, but he complicates it with the figure of the machine-human hybrid, which communicates yet another

fear: that that which supposedly sets humans apart, reason, is easily replicated, or even improved upon, by the machine, that—in the end—the human is *replaceable*.

Two pieces of critical literature on *S.N.U.F.F.* identify Pelevin as a humanist (even an “incorrigible” one).<sup>248</sup> As you might imagine, the label confuses me, especially because *S.N.U.F.F.* is one of the most straightforward critiques of humanism on my reading list. Sofya Khagi notes that, whereas in the West posthumanist theory has flourished in the past couple of decades, in Russia posthumanism tends to be thought of negatively, as a theoretical stance that contributes to dehumanization if anything.<sup>249</sup> Pelevin’s critical posthumanism, however, is anything but pessimistic. Yes, he denies the classical humanist subject his rationality, his autonomy, his universality; but in the process, he rescues the colonial other from dehumanization, and he constructs an image of a posthuman subject that is radical in her knowledge, her creativity, her empathy, and—importantly—her capacity for social and spiritual change. It is the female android Kaia who, in *S.N.U.F.F.*, becomes the spiritual leader of an anarchic group that lives beyond the bounds of society. Khagi goes on to argue that, in *S.N.U.F.F.*, “it is no longer a question of machines developing consciousness and will, but of humans losing them or never having possessed them in the first place.”<sup>250</sup> I say: why not both? While the latter point presents a pessimistic view of the humanist subject, it is not necessarily a pessimistic view on the human as such. And, in my reading at least, Pelevin seems to suggest that the posthuman will not replace the human, but that the two will develop in a mutual social-spiritual symbiosis.

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<sup>248</sup> Alexei Lalo, “New Trends in Russian Intellectual Anti-Americanism: The Strange Case of Viktor Pelevin’s Novel *S.N.U.F.F.*,” *Slavonica* 20.1 (2014), 39, and Sofya Khagi, *Pelevin and Unfreedom: Poetics, Politics, Metaphysics* (Evanston, 2021), 88. Lalo even calls him a “moralist”—yikes!

<sup>249</sup> Khagi, *Pelevin and Unfreedom*, 87.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

Allow me first to introduce you to the world of the novel before I get into the details of my argument. *S.N.U.F.F.* takes place on a post-apocalyptic Earth as far as one thousand years into the future. Over the course of our twenty-first century, the two superpowers of the day (America and China) fall into chaos, and the elites of various emerging states move to “off-globes” (*ofshary*, a pun on *shar* and *ofshor*), self-contained settlements in the sky. A nuclear war of mutual extermination begins, and a new savior, Manitou the Antichrist, reveals himself to humanity. Each of the off-globes comes to its end, until there is only one civilization left in the air, Byzantion (the “upper people”), and one civilization left on the ground, Urkaina (the “lower people”). The two are thinly veiled references to contemporary America and Russia, respectively,<sup>251</sup> though the names also suggest a parallel between the Byzantine Empire and Kievan Rus.<sup>252</sup> In the present, these two cultures remain in a state of stability, the prosperous upper people leeching off the downtrodden lower people.

By most accounts, the society of Big Byz is a utopia: its thirty million citizens live in a state of prosperity, with every creature comfort and great personal freedom thanks to an exceptionally high level of technological development as yet unknown to us in the twenty-first century. Their time is known as the “Age of Saturation,” for they live in a post-progress society, “when technologies and languages [...] hardly changed at all, since the economic and cultural meaning of progress had been exhausted” (64). Now that no more progress can be made, all that is left is to reap the rewards. The term “post-progress” itself suggests utopia: progress is over,

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<sup>251</sup> Lalo, “New Trends in Russian Intellectual Anti-Americanism,” convincingly maps the consumerist, screen-mediated, highly PC culture onto contemporary American culture.

<sup>252</sup> Keith Livers notes that the word ‘Urkaina’ comes from a piece of Russian slang for a professional criminal: *urka* (pl. *urki*) (Keith Livers. “Is There Humanity in Posthumanity? Viktor Pelevin’s *S.N.U.F.F.*,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 62.3 (2018), 506). Though, in the world of the novel, Urkaina represents post-Soviet Russia and Big Byz represents the US, the twist on the word Ukraine and the fact that it is the colonized other is nevertheless notable in the context of Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

and history is at its end. Byzantion has achieved a utopian stasis on the other side of history: every day is a celebration in Big Byz. The Soviet promise of utopia has come true, only inverted: this is the utopia of capital, of *big business*.

The stability and prosperity of Big Byz, however, come at the expense of the people of Urkaina, the lower people. Theirs is a dystopian society, another regression to a feudal Europe, the kind of which we also saw in the Strugatskys' *Trudno byt' bogom*, one plagued by war, death, and inequality. In reality, Urkaina's is a society controlled by a Big Byz shadow government. The upper and lower people are in a perpetual state of war, solely for the entertainment of the upper people, whose main industry is the filming and televising of this war. The lower people exist only as a foil to the upper people, to be the villains in this never-ending televised war. "You were invented so you could be hated with a clear conscience" (195), one of the upper people tells one of the lower. A S.N.U.F.F. (Special Newsreel / Universal Feature Film), which is what the upper people call the televised footage of the wars, is a combination of fact and artifice, news and film, meant both to inform and entertain. The aim of a S.N.U.F.F. is to create a "stable and permanent" (192) reality that can be shared by all the citizens of Big Byz, allowing them to live in that indefinite state of utopian stability. Its primary subjects are death and sex, neither of which may be simulated according to religious law (the law of Manitou, which, coincidentally, is also the word for "money" and "screen" on Big Byz), hence the necessity of the ongoing war on the ground. In other words, the S.N.U.F.F.s provide the upper people with the metanarrative that stabilizes their experience of *post*-history, that gives it meaning. The S.N.U.F.F.s dramatize a perpetual battle between good and evil, between Big Byz and Urkaina, that reifies those categories and structures their reality. And they make good money doing it; the flow of seemingly endless capital continues on Big Byz. In this sense, the

S.N.U.F.F. is the opposite of Vertov's *kino-glaz*: it does not defamiliarize reality, but automatizes it for easy digestion.

The novel stages a (quite explicit) debate on the merits of the humanist subject and the basic tenets of humanism: namely, the autonomy, rationality, and universality of the human(ist) subject.<sup>253</sup> The three protagonists of *S.N.U.F.F.* take turns variously trying to uphold or challenge the humanist vision of the human being. I have divided them into three categories: the humanist subject, the posthumanist subject, and the colonial subject. First, there is the novel's chief protagonist, Karpov, a S.N.U.F.F. cameraman and citizen of Big Byz, from whose perspective the story unfolds. I have termed him the "humanist subject": he believes human beings, not least of all himself, to be rational and free agents, endowed with a soul that animates their consciousness and gives their lives some higher meaning. Second, there is Grym, one of the "lower people," who are seen by the upper people as less than human. In other words, Grym is a "savage," a mere human animal lacking in the divine element that animates the consciousness of the human being proper. Lastly, there is Karpov's sex robot Kaia, an achievement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) entirely indistinguishable from an actual human being in appearance or behavior ("333.33% Turing test passed" [386]). She is his property, he is her Pygmalion: he chose all her attributes, both physical and behavioral, and brought her to life with his desire (and some hefty loans). Kaia may be nothing more than an information processing and output machine, as Karpov constantly reminds us, yet the algorithm that animates her proves to be more powerful than the cognitive capacity of the human brain. Kaia is the "posthumanist subject" who recognizes the fallacies at the center of the modern conception of the human being, and challenges Karpov at every turn to assert the "humanness" of the non-human, or perhaps, the

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<sup>253</sup> Rosi Braidotti, "Introduction," *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, 2013), 1-12.



“non-humanness” of the human itself (the glass may be half-empty, or half-full, depending on your perspective). Karpov and Kaia’s debates animate much of the novel and form a productive text of critical posthumanism.

Much as he believes in the stability of the world around him, Karpov believes in the stability of the human subject. He asserts, what is to him a self-evident fact: “I’m this person right here, all the time, and that’s what everything else starts from” (120). That “that’s what everything else starts from” suggests that Karpov considers his essence to come prior worldly existence; he is, and the world is, too, as a result of his perception. His belief appears mirrored in Pelevin’s choice to make him the first-person narrator of half the novel, and the focalizer of the other half, in which Karpov writes Grym’s story from an omniscient third-person perspective. Karpov argues that, though at first his “attempt to see the world through the eyes of a young Ork might seem unconvincing” (4), the Orkish culture has been structured “so that its mental horizon would be absolutely transparent to appropriate oversight and monitoring” (5), and is thus, highly predictable and easily explainable by a member of the “upper people.” It is entirely within Karpov’s capacity to envision the inner world of one of the lower people. His experience and perspective is universal—it can be used to explain the experience of others, especially those less developed than he.

Pelevin, however, undermines Karpov as both narrator and focalizer. Karpov makes his readers aware from the first that he is not writing this story himself; he is simply feeding it into the “creative articulator.” A creative articulator is “a programme [that] took into account everything that had ever been said by people, all of the countless semantic choices that had ever been made over the centuries” (401), to deliver the best possible version of the thought at hand. The machine can be adjusted to make a given semantic string “more complicated, simpler,

angrier, kinder, cleverer” (401) and so on ad infinitum, perfecting the tone of the story as you feed more raw information into it. The narrative is, as such, not Karpov’s own, but the result of a machine algorithm, undermining his agency in its production and his universality in its insight. Though Karpov may consider himself to continue in the “art—almost forgotten in the times—of writing books” (3), it is not he who is doing the writing.

Karpov draws a sharp line between the upper and the lower people, a clear ontological hierarchy where self is superior to other. This distinction is evident in the text itself. The upper people are often referred to simply as “people,” whereas the lower people are always referred to as Orks: people vs. Orks, human vs. animal. Yet, it is Grym, the savage, who is shown to be the real creative talent as a poet, upending the distinction between the upper and the lower people prevalent on Big Byz thanks to his capacity for a distinctly human creativity. Karpov “writes” Grym’s half of the novel as a Bildungsroman, depicting “how a young savage, who has almost no concept of history and the order of the universe, gradually grows into civilization, becoming accustomed to its miracles and culture” (5). Grym is “rescued” from Urkaina and brought to Big Byz (“the Orks were presented to mankind” [234]), and he finds work as a screenwriter for the S.N.U.F.F.s, inclined, as he was, to writing poetry in his former life.

As Grym comes to find out, however, the civilization into which he has entered, demands complete narrative conformity of its screenwriters (“sommeliers,” as they are called), crushing his creative powers. He is taught that the easiest way to write is to “repeat the morning headlines. Only in the first person and straight from the heart” (408). And the morning headlines—every morning’s headlines—repeat the same good vs. evil, “human” vs. “Ork” story ad infinitum. Pelevin here may be taking target at the persistent and certainly one-dimensional Soviet metanarrative, but also at metanarratives as such, which provide easy fill-in-the-blank narrative

structures for their subjects to complete with ease. Moreover, the creative articulator comes to do the bulk of Grym's work for him. Though he at first finds the productive capacity of the machine thrilling, he ultimately feels stifled by its suggestions and develops writer's block, despite the fact that the writing is no longer being done by him. Writing in 2023, I cannot help but be reminded of our own ChatGPT, which has become ubiquitous in conversations about teaching, writing, and art in the past half-plus year. The question today has become whether creative writing, or art at large, made by AI can be considered "true" art.<sup>254</sup> A dozen years before the emergence of ChatGPT, Pelevin seems already to have come to an answer: regardless of the beauty or verisimilitude of this art, it is a sap on human creativity, itself a kind of vital force (as in Blok) that animates humanity.

Karpov's female android (sex robot, in fact) complicates this picture significantly because she, too, is powered by the same machine-learning algorithm that powers the creative articulator (more on this below). First, let me say that Kaia's continued debates with Karpov provide the novel with its primary critical posthumanist thrust. The philosophy of this supermachine, pronounced over many pages, though it most often falls on deaf ears, undoes the boundaries between man, machine, and animal to suggest that all three are designed in the same

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<sup>254</sup> Here are a couple of articles debating the topic: Ben Meisner, "Is AI-Generated Art 'True Art'? Implications and Considerations for Businesses," *Forbes*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/12/09/is-ai-generated-art-true-art-implications-and-considerations-for-businesses/>. Meisner seems pretty optimistic for AI art to benefit both uncreative individuals who can now express themselves, and businesses who can cut costs (surprise, surprise). Ken Weiner, "Can AI Create True Art?," *Scientific American*, November 12, 2018, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/can-ai-create-true-art/>. Weiner's article is more measured: less about profits, more about the partnership between a human and AI working in tandem.

The current Hollywood writers' strike also seems pertinent to this discussion: writers are striking because they fear that Hollywood executives will replace them with AI (some media publications have already begun this process, in fact). Like the creative articulator, our present-day AI works by farming what has already been written (language models) to create novel content; how "novel" that content is is another question, which I also discuss below. For more, see Ryan Broderick, "AI can't replace humans yet—but if the WGA writers don't win, it might not matter," *Polygon*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.polygon.com/23742770/ai-writers-strike-chat-gpt-explained>.

way: to fulfill a pre-designed program (whether it is nature's, man's, or Manitou's design is irrelevant).

Kaia is shown to have the so-called “ideal” female body—immortal, forever young, and free of any of the unpleasanties of an actual functioning body such as digestion or disease. Moreover, she has been programmed with a heightened human consciousness. The whole of surviving written human thought is available to her at any moment, and she can draw instantaneous connections and conclusions from this vast body of knowledge. Karpov writes, “I don't think there'll ever be anything more perfect, all the innumerable ancient technologies that animate and motivate her little body can only be imitated and replicated now” (50). Kaia cannot be perfected further and is, in this way, the product of a post-progress society. But despite her impeccable craftsmanship, Karpov believes that Kaia lacks “whatever we might call that which makes us human: personality, consciousness, or soul” (83). It becomes Kaia's pleasure to tear down this belief of his, to demonstrate that human consciousness is nothing more than an algorithm of sorts much like her own. “You're just another program,” she tells him, “only a chemical [rather than informational] one. And there isn't any ‘I’ in any of this” (395). With these words, the “posthumanist subject” attacks the agency and rationality of the “humanist subject.” “The [chemical] reactions that result in the appearance of the self occur before they are consciously perceived,” she argues, “they are controlled by the same physical laws governing the entire universe” (395). In this materialist framework, the human being is not an active agent, but merely a conduit of nature. Nor is it rational—it is merely chasing its next dopamine fix. Karpov himself is the best example: he is mesmerized by the sexual tricks that Kaia has to offer and is constantly chasing his next sexual high. She is, after all, a sex robot, and she further undoes the man/animal/machine boundary in this function; woman, as a sexual being, is identified with

nature, whereas machine, as a rational being, is the height of artifice: the two ends meet in the sex robot. With Kaia, Pelevin thus parodies the modernist trope of the gendered and eroticized robot,<sup>255</sup> and ultimately suggests that the human and the machine are two sides of the same coin.

Karpov himself continually undermines his own assertion of the stable and singular human subject — “I’m this person right here, all the time” — whenever he makes mention of his flying drone-cum-camera, which he controls remotely from his apartment on the offglobe. The camera is state of the art, exceedingly expensive, and his professional pride and joy. “I feel as much at ease with it as my own body” (8). When he loses the machine at the end of the novel, he writes, “I had gone and lost the second, or rather the first, body of mine” (444). He is, in his own words, part machine himself. Karpov — though he is too stupid to realize — demonstrates that technology and the human are not separate categories, but that the former always lies within the latter.<sup>256</sup>

But Karpov is not the only one who lives his life on a screen. In Big Byz, everyone does. The contours of this reality are simulated and mediated exclusively through screens: the landscapes that adorn the windows of Big Byz citizens are all simulated on screens (“manitous”); here, there is no “outside.” And it is all made possible by the circulation of capital (also “manitou”). The richest have the best views and the best sex robots, and though Karpov lives

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<sup>255</sup> See, for example, Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine: Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, 1986), notes the truism that “the world of technology has always been the world of men while woman has been considered to be outside of technology, a part of nature” (69). But Huyssen goes on to say that, by the nineteenth century, representations of female robots began to outnumber those of male robots: the fears associated with the machine as a threat to human life were recast in the terms of the male fear of female sexuality (both threatening in their otherness). Kaia takes this to the extreme; in fact, she even proves Karpov’s fears right: her sexuality becomes uncontainable for him, as does her machine subjectivity, and she runs away with Grym.

<sup>256</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epithemeus* (Stanford, 1998), 1-18, provides a brief philosophical history of the co-evolution of humanity and technology. Stiegler argues that the human being is an inherently technical being, not strictly biological, because human evolution is made possible by technological evolution. In this sense, the history of humanity is the history of technics: “the pursuit of the evolution of the living by other means than life” (135).

comfortably, he is still paying off the loan that he took out to pay for Kaia. Even love is simulated here, something that Karpov seems to have no problem with; though he thinks himself superior to Kaia, he loves her as if she were human.

As others have noted before me, the novel is a critique of American globalist capitalism. Masha Boston, for example, reads the novel through Baudrillard's journey through America and his critique of utopia.<sup>257</sup> Baudrillard argues that contemporary America resembles utopia in "its mythic banality, its dream quality, its grandeur," a technologically-mediated hyperreality ("a giant hologram") that resembles Big Byz in the extent of its simulated-ness.<sup>258</sup> Because this life is artificially sustained, Baudrillard deems it "dead": a utopia of stagnation. In the same way, Pelevin's utopia is labeled "post-progress" and its economic functioning is only possible thanks to the death and destruction it wreaks below, which provides it with a metanarrative that powers its primary economic industry (film). Pelevin's critique of globalist capitalism lines up nicely with Petrushevskaya's, whose novel also demonstrates how, under a globalist capitalism, even science answers to the whims of capital<sup>259</sup> (Number One's boss at the institute is more concerned about his next vacation and his new car than he is about the extinction of the Entti people). What is interesting is that Pelevin, just like Petrushevskaya, puts forth his critique using the same pair of the "noble" and "ignoble" savage. In *Nomer Odin*, the noble savage (the Enttis) exist outside the economic realm, while the ignoble savage (the Chuchuns) are linked to a money-obsessed post-Soviet population. Here, the ignoble savage is similarly money obsessed: Grym's girlfriend Khloia, who also joins him on Big Byz as a "rescue" from below. Khloia assimilates to Big Byz easily and enthusiastically: she becomes an actress and socialite, decks herself out in the latest

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<sup>257</sup> Masha Boston, "Church-American in Viktor Pelevin's *SNUFF*," *Transcultural Studies* 6-7 (2010-11), 171-85.

<sup>258</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York, 1988), 33, 29-30.

<sup>259</sup> Prokhorova, "Kak sdelan pervyi roman Liudmily Petrushevskoi?" 249.

fashions, and perfectly performs the role of the exotic other for an equally eager audience. Grym, on the other hand, has trouble fitting in and monetizing his creative talent, and just like the Strugatskys' Gag, in the novel's finale elects to abandon the society that adopted him. And Kaia, who has no economic entanglements and who, with Grym, escapes the world of capital, becomes the ideal subject here: a being aware of her hybridity, her alterity, her programmed-ness, and is able to transcend them toward autonomy and a higher spirituality.

By the novel's end, Kaia gains the capacity to program herself, thanks to the fact that Karpov set her settings to "maximum bitchiness" *and* "maximum spirituality" (the manual warned him not to...). In the combination of the two, she achieves nothing less than the kind of autonomy generally reserved for the ideal humanist subject.<sup>260</sup>

Unlike Khagi's reading, which sees no positive in "machines evolving upward toward human consciousness,"<sup>261</sup> my reading of the novel suggests that Pelevin finds hope in a figure like Kaia. By the novel's end, Kaia becomes the spiritual leader of a group of anarchists who has fled civilization for nature. There, she preaches a kind of Buddhist emptying of the self, of letting go of the idea of control: revel, she says, in that un-understanding.<sup>262</sup> "You have no more power over yourself than over the weather—and if you can occasionally predict it correctly, that does not mean that the rain falls because of your incantations" (449). In the end, Pelevin suggests that humans and machines are able to help each other improve and co-evolve. Humans created Kaia, and now Kaia is "creating" humans, i.e., helping them in their spiritual self-actualization.

Though Kaia is built on the same algorithm as the creative articulator, she seems to be capable of higher-level thinking than the creative articulator, which may provide for finesse of style but not

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<sup>260</sup> Perhaps this is Pelevin's feminist riff on the idea of the "bitch" as a self-certain woman.

<sup>261</sup> Khagi, *Pelevin and Unfreedom*, 106.

<sup>262</sup> Khagi notes that Kaia gives voice to the "Buddhist notion that one needs to overcome one's biological construct (i.e., one's desires) to push through false material reality" (Ibid, 105).

depth of content. Pelevin seems to suggest as much: he makes her the mouthpiece for the resistance against global capital and the humanist subject, who are here inextricably intertwined. But I want to push back on Pelevin's optimism, at least a little. Perhaps I am taking a too-literal perspective on Kaia as a result of the past half-plus year learning about ChatGPT. As ChatGPT shows us, a language-model generative AI can only do what the name suggests: model language based on existing scripts.<sup>263</sup> It is built to produce language that already *tends* to be produced. The chances that it would produce a figurative turn of phrase rarely heard before are slim to none, and by design. In this way, AI flattens language—it automatizes it. Kaia appears to prove me wrong. Perhaps she runs on a much better, future/futuristic version of the same model that powers ChatGPT, hence her capacity to produce original thought. It is indeed the originality of her thought that is so appealing to the people beyond the borders of society. Or maybe it just seems so to them, because of the lifetime of pro-screen, pro-biz, pro-self propaganda that they have spent a lifetime ingesting.

The novel ends in the return to nature (the most successful return in this chapter; Nomer Odin longs but cannot complete the return to nature, and the case of Sorokin's Brotherhood of the Light is complicated; more below). That motif from the thought of Berdiaev and Blok comes back one hundred years later to suggest that a true (post)humanism—humanness, but also self-abnegation, which here go hand in hand—is only possible when we focus on each other and on the act of artistic creation, away and free from postmodern mediation. Though it is true that *S.N.U.F.F.* “does not openly address and deal with Russia's Soviet past,”<sup>264</sup> it nevertheless uses

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<sup>263</sup> Ian Bogost, “ChatGPT Is Dumber Than You Think,” *The Atlantic*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/12/chatgpt-openai-artificial-intelligence-writing-ethics/672386/>, suggests that “ChatGPT isn't a step along the path to an artificial general intelligence that understands all human knowledge and texts; it's merely an instrument for playing with all that knowledge and all those texts.”

<sup>264</sup> Boston, “Church-American in Pelevin's *SNUFF*,” 171.



the same tropes associated with Soviet posthumanism: capitalism as dehumanization; the colonial other redeemed (the savage made noble); and a posthuman subject that rejects discourse and returns to nature.

### 3.3 The God in the Ice: Sorokin's Ice Trilogy (2002-05)<sup>265</sup>

Vladimir Sorokin offers his own take on the New Soviet Man in his Ice trilogy—*Led* (*Ice*, 2002), *Put' Bro* (*Bro's Way*, 2004), *23,000* (2005)—which actively engages with the Soviet concept from a post-Soviet perspective. My dissertation ends where it began: in the early Soviet period, with a focus on the New Soviet Man, albeit with a perspective afforded by a century's hindsight. In a story that spans from 1908 to his present day, the author takes stock of the Soviet project, which, as I demonstrate in Chapter One, offered itself as a necessary corrective to European humanism and offered its subject, the New Soviet Man, as the realization of the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous and rational human being working towards his own perfection. In the process, he builds a “monument” to twentieth-century totalitarianism<sup>266</sup> that implicates the reader for his part in maintaining its ideological structures—but also locates the reader as the site of resistance against those same structures. The trilogy demonstrates the disappointment of a humanist ideology to stave off the horrors of twentieth-century totalitarianism, parodying the Soviet myth of emancipation via the rational working toward

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<sup>265</sup> Prokhorova, 256, notes the similarities between Petrushevskaya's *Nomer Odin* and Sorokin's Ice trilogy—indeed, “the god in the ice” could also be the title to an analysis of the former. Beyond the superficial icy parallels, however, Prokhorova cites O. Bogdanova's book on Sorokin (*Kontseptualist pisatel' i khudozhnik Vladimir Sorokin*) to argue that, just as in his trilogy, Petrushevskaya's protagonist passes through ice (such is the process of metempsychosis described) to perform a rebirth ritual, become a new person, and gain a new consciousness.

<sup>266</sup> This is Sorokin's own wording, in *Contemporary Russian Fiction: Russian Authors Interviewed by Kristina Rotkirch* (Moscow, 2008), 149, quoted in Victoria Nelson, “Children of the Light: Gnostic Fiction and Gnostic Practice in Vladimir Sorokin's *Ice Trilogy*,” *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 1 (2016), 271.

communism with a violent, cultish group that finds emancipation in a spiritual, trance-like state that is beyond human reason. Sorokin's is perhaps the most pessimistic posthumanism of the bunch: while he denies the validity of the human(ist) subject, the posthuman that he offers in its stead is, like the Strugatskys' *liudeny*, a negative rather than productive construction. Sorokin's posthuman does not affirm—he only denies.

The trilogy features a vivid cosmology in which 23,000 divine rays of light—perfect and whole, united but separate—begat the universe, which existed in harmony until they created water on Earth. The water trapped the divine light in its reflection, now doomed to physical incarnation in human form. At any given time, the 23,000 divine beings exist in exactly 23,000 human bodies, each one ignorant of his provenance. But their overlong imprisonment in human form is nearing its end. In the early twentieth century (on June 30, 1908, to be exact, the date of the Tunguska event), an ancient meteor resembling ice falls to the Earth. Contact with this piece of prelapsarian perfection awakens any of the 23,000 gods now trapped in human bodies to their true identity. Once reborn in this way, their goal is simple: to awaken their still-dormant brothers and sisters, come together, and in so doing, destroy the Earth and return the universe to its original perfection. The Brotherhood of the Light, as they call themselves, are ruthless in the accomplishment of this task, killing any ordinary human being who gets in their way with ease and without regret.

And they call us, ordinary people, *meat machines*. “I understood the very essence of human beings. Man was a MEAT MACHINE.” The narrator continues:

Meat machines consisted of the same atoms as other worlds we had created. But the combination of these atoms was ERRONEOUS. For this reason the meat machines were mortal. They could not be in harmony, either with the surrounding world or with themselves. They were born in suffering and in suffering they left this life. (177-78)

This is the point of view of the narrator or focalizer that dominates the trilogy. Though its antihumanism may at first shock the reader, the narrative invites us to identify not with the “meat machines,” but with the 23,000, whose perspective is given textual authority, repeated ad infinitum throughout the trilogy as, if not a self-evident truth, a hard-earned one. Not only that, but the 23,000 are attractive characters, each one beautiful, confident, and capable. If we accept their rationale, that humanity was a mistake and that the proof is in the millennia of human suffering (the proverbial pudding), their antihumanism only makes sense.

The second and (in my view) central novel in Sorokin’s Ice trilogy, *Put’ Bro* (2004), unfolds against the backdrop of the post-revolutionary NEP period and the Stalinist 1930s. (The first and third novels take place primarily in post-Soviet Russia and will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.) *Put’ Bro* functions as yet another Bildungsroman of sorts, as the protagonist (and narrator) comes of age in the comfort of a bourgeois mercantile family in pre-revolutionary Russia, only to be separated from his family with the dawn of the Revolution. The real Bildungsroman, however, reveals itself only with the slow realization that the protagonist is not merely a human being caught up in the forward march of history, but a divine and originary being of light trapped in a human body. Sorokin here parodies the SR Bildung of spontaneity to consciousness, as the protagonist does indeed achieve a higher consciousness, but it is a spiritual, not a socialist one. Brought to the site of the Tunguska meteor by a scientific expedition, he comes into contact with the fallen object, revealed to be something with the outward appearance of ice, though in fact an originary material from the pre-temporal void of the universe. Contact with the Heavenly Ice awakens him to his true identity: he is Bro, one of the 23,000. He is the first to awaken. And his one and only task, which he understands immediately and instinctively upon awakening, is now to awaken the others. When one of the 23,000 makes contact with the

ice, it occasions a “coming of age” by means of which they understand their purpose: to unite together, all 23,000, and thereby correct the mistake that is life on Earth, returning the universe to its original emptiness.

Embodied in the material realm and therefore trapped within time, the Brotherhood of the Light aims to effect a decisive break in horizontal time, for another, transcendent and vertical time, a non-time, to erupt. When the 23,000 reunite, the Earth “will dissolve in the Primordial Light. And disappear forever. ... And the light will shine as before in the Emptiness, for Itself Alone. And it will beget a New Universe—Sublime and Eternal” (80). To escape from time and revel in eternity is the primary goal of this divine logic. It is here that I will begin my analysis of the Brotherhood in relation to the Bolsheviks to demonstrate how Sorokin fashions the latter into the former. The temporal logic of the Brotherhood draws from the Bolshevik theorization of the Revolution, likewise meant to effect a small break in historical time and engender another kind of temporality: a revolutionary time which looks forward to the ultimate temporal break that will be the advent of communism.<sup>267</sup> For the Bolsheviks, the first step is the Revolution and the second and final step is communism. For the Brotherhood, in a parallel structure, the first step is awakening and the second and final step is the unity of the 23,000. The first step engenders the possibility of the second, which, in both cases, is the end of human history.

Igal Halfin writes Soviet communism was to be both the “consummation and end” of human history. The eschatological bent of its driving ethos suggested that humanity is moving “from the darkness of capitalism to the light of Communism,” which is the promised land at the end, on the *other side* of history.<sup>268</sup> Communism, even from the perspective of the Revolution,

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<sup>267</sup> Like Halfin, Yuri Slezkine, in *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, 2017), also identifies the millenarian dimension of Bolshevik ideology.

<sup>268</sup> Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, 2003), 11.

remains in the future, and the Soviet people remain in calendar time until communism has indeed been consummated. The temporal logic of the Ice trilogy exhibits the classic eschatological paradise-fall-return structure that Halfin also locates in the myth of communism: the fall into history, which introduces exploitation, and the return beyond history, which terminates class struggle.<sup>269</sup> The Revolution, however, is not the ultimate return to the prelapsarian paradise, but only the promise thereof. Though it has sparked a new, revolutionary order of time, its participants are still very much in time. Indeed, perhaps for the very first time, the Russian masses now enter modernity, the era of humanism. They dive into the streams of historical time and gain a novel consciousness with “the ability to see the laws of history and comprehend one’s own potential as a subject of historical action.”<sup>270</sup> The Soviet subject is thus stuck in this kind of temporal confusion between historicity and ahistoricity, a tension that Osip Brik locates in Gladkov’s *Tsement*, between the “heroic” time of myth and the “historical” time of *byt*.<sup>271</sup> He is stuck in a historical time that anticipates an ahistorical—eternal—time, much as the Brotherhood of the Light has fallen to temporality and works to escape it.

The Revolution comes to the world of Sorokin’s novel in the form of an explosion, which shakes and halts the protagonist, the as-of-yet unawakened Bro, as he and his family attempt to drive out of Kyiv, now in the upheaval of the Civil War. The blast, caused by an exploding six-inch shell that kills his father, brother, and uncle, mirrors the Revolution in that it breaks apart his family and effects a temporal split within the protagonist. “The explosion knocked not only childhood out of me, but something else as well. It was as though it cut me off from my past. And along with my past—any love for it” (30). Such is the case, more literally, with his brother,

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<sup>269</sup> Halfin, *Terror in My Soul*, 11

<sup>270</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, 2009), 17 - 18

<sup>271</sup> Osip Brik, “Pochemu ponravilsia Tsement,” *Na literaturnom postu* 2 (1926), 30.

who had earlier forsworn his family and its bourgeois roots to join the cause of the Revolution. But the explosion has another effect on the protagonist, too. “It halted [his] development” (35), and he loses all interest in life. Sorokin thus makes perverse the logic of the Revolution and marks its temporal break as a *traumatic* break that temporally arrests the protagonist instead of introducing him into the stream of history.

Sorokin doubly mirrors the Revolution in the physical and psychological transformations that take place in the protagonist upon his encounter with the Heavenly Ice. Both the physical and the psychological metamorphoses are nothing short of extraordinary—indeed, posthuman in their excess of the human form—and correspond both to the machine and superhuman models of the New Man. The awakened are ultra-rational and physically incorruptible, much as the machine, but ultra-energetic and fearless, like the superhuman warrior. The emphasis, however, is on the latter, as Sorokin’s New Men come to personify the Socialist Realist model of the superhuman.

Though they are still trapped in their human bodies, contact with the ice significantly “upgrades” the mortal physical shell of any of the 23,000, leaving them all but invincible in the face of bodily decay. At last, the body comes into harmony with itself and its surroundings, and a feeling of perpetual physical satisfaction sets in. “I was in wonderful form,” Bro proclaims as he draws nearer to the ice and nearer to awakening. “Good spirits and energy filled me to the brim. ... I wanted one thing alone: for the joy my body felt to go on forever” (65). Hunger soon becomes a foreign notion to the body. Their meager diet consists only of fresh fruit, vegetables, grains, and tea, in reference, perhaps, to the asceticism advocated in the earliest Soviet period, and in itself a small gesture of the return to nature. Everything cooked, processed, and dead becomes completely inedible, as the materialist dictum “you are what you eat” is here literalized.

“Our organisms could only accept that which was *whole* into our bodies, what had not been destroyed by humans” (165; emphasis in the original). Sleep is barely essential and disease is completely foreign. Much as the body no longer battles hunger, exhaustion, or disease, the mind no longer suffers from anxiety, uncertainty, or distraction. “My head was clear,” Bro says upon awakening, “it was as though it had been cleansed of everything petty, disturbing, alarming, pointless. My thoughts were surprisingly quick and precise. With every step I discovered anew the world in which I had lived for twenty years” (81). The awakened has the capacity for a higher, defamiliarized perspective on the world. Moreover, the mind is now ultra-focused on the goal of “spreading the good word,” so to say, and they become warriors for their cause. Their bodies now “inexhaustible” and their characters “bold” (103), the awakened exist with one sole purpose: to locate the still-sleeping brothers and sisters and awaken them to a higher state of consciousness. They pursue this one goal relentlessly and efficiently, working seamlessly in tandem with one another. Their affect always calm, poised, and matter-of-fact, their actions deliberate and thought through, each of the 23,000 crosses immediately from spontaneity to consciousness in the coming of age that is awakening, traversing the entirety of the SR novel’s characteristic odyssey of character in one moment of enlightenment. Their subjectivity is always sublimated in service of the cause of the collective, as in the Socialist Realist ideal, and they always act in accordance with this cause in mind. They are, in this sense, the ideal Soviet subject, albeit working not toward communism, but the unity of the 23,000.

These parallels to the Bolshevik project and Soviet subjectivity are numerous, self-evident, and deliberate, though the doctrine of the Brotherhood is an amalgamation of various sources, from premodern rites of passage, to Gnosticism<sup>272</sup> and New Ageism—suggesting,

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<sup>272</sup> Victoria Nelson, in “Children of the Light: Gnostic Fiction and Gnostic Practice in Vladimir Sorokin’s *Ice Trilogy*,” has convincingly argued the parallels between the Brotherhood and Gnostic philosophy, whose myth of the

perhaps, the hodgepodge quality of the Soviet doctrine itself. As was common practice among Bolshevik revolutionaries and the New Men of the 1920s, Sorokin's New Men also take up new names for themselves, as they shed the trappings of the former life and begin anew. Bro is the first to announce his new name to the world, and many others follow suit, with such idiosyncratic names as those of brothers Ig and Ep, or sisters Fer and Khram. It is no coincidence that so many prominent Bolsheviks adopted new names, including Lenin and Stalin. Hellbeck points out that the practice also recalls the Christian practice of adopting another, second name after baptism.<sup>273</sup> But in the case of the Brotherhood, it is more accurate to say that these names are predetermined—they exist eternally, outside history—and merely revealed in the moment of awakening. In fact, each of the 23,000 divine rays of light has a unique name pronounceable in human language, and there are no more and no fewer than 23,000 names in total, something of a twist on the very many names of God according to the Abrahamic religions.

Much as those sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause abandoned their bourgeois families and the Civil War saw White fathers and Red sons quite literally at each other's throats, the awakened also choose to "[throw] off the stones of [their] past, dead life and [break] kinship ties" (166) with family and friends (another parallel to the Strugatskys' *liudeny*), who they come to understand are merely human "meat machines," fundamentally dissimilar and, indeed, inferior to the Brotherhood of the Light. Sorokin's New Men emulate the ideal Soviet citizen in their single-minded pursuit of one task—not, of course, the realization of communism, but the

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world's creation is very similar to the former's. Nelson states that Gnosticism is an anti-materialist philosophy; "in most gnostic systems, the more physical something is, the less "being" or ultimate reality it possesses" (259). The link to the kind of Buddhist anti-materialism that Kaia preaches, which also posits the idea of false material reality vs. a true transcendental one, is significant. Again, the post-Soviet subject seeks refuge in a spirituality that denies the primacy of material existence, in direct contradiction of (a response to?) Soviet ideological practice.

<sup>273</sup> Hellbeck's book dives deeper into the parallels between Bolshevism and Christianity, as I discuss in the introduction. See Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*.



unification of the Brotherhood, an event that will, like communism, mark the end of history and return its inhabitants to a prelapsarian paradise (classless society in one case, non-being in the other). Parallels such as these draw clear links between Sorokin's decidedly fantastical New Men and the concept of the New Soviet Man at large, but far more productive are the moments of tension and inconsistency between the two, which lay bare the inconsistencies within the New Man himself, between ahistoricity/historicity and individualism/collectivism.

The Revolutionary logic of the *tabula rasa* advocated, in effect, an escape from culture, from the bourgeois culture of the recent Russian past. Nevertheless, the new culture to be built on the ruins of the old still had, at least nominally, all the hallmarks of the Enlightenment: reason, order, knowledge, discipline. After all, the Revolution was to be a fresh start for the humanist project, newly freed of the burdensome weight of capitalism hung around its neck. Not only do Sorokin's New Men take this *tabula rasa* logic to its extreme in their desire for the destruction of all human culture (and, indeed, life), but they effect their own escape from culture while still trapped in Earthly existence via their "language of the heart," a communicative and epistemological system based not in discourse, but in affect, defying the Enlightenment ethos of reason and the humanist pride in the products of civilization.

The Brotherhood deems human language to be less than the sum of its parts, for words are cheap and an aberration of the essence of things, into which only the awakened have insight. This divine logic rallies against the discursive regime of reason, which it identifies as the primary villain and scourge of human life:

Dependent on flesh and time, people began to live by the laws of the brain [earlier deemed a 'tumor']. They thought that the brain helped them dominate space and time. In fact, it only enslaved them to disharmonious dependence on the surrounding world. People with well-developed brains were called intelligent. Intelligent people were considered the elite of humankind. They lived by the laws of the mind and taught them to each other. People began to live by the mind, enslaving themselves in flesh and time. The

developed mind engendered the language of the mind. And humans began to speak this language. And this *language covered the entire visible world in an opaque film*. People *stopped seeing and feeling things*. They *began to think them*. (78; emphasis mine)

In this severe transvaluation of values, that which, in the humanist framework, separates us from and elevates us above the rest of material existence—the human toolbox of language and reason—appears but an illusory mastery. Instead, the Brotherhood elevates an affective relation to one another, “speaking with the heart,” by means of which they access a transcendent, non-material realm. These conversations of the heart are extra-linguistic, their content inexpressible by human language (the Nietzschean “new word” taken to its extreme). Their affective language registers in the material world only as an extraordinary sensation of utter bliss in the body of its participants. Those engaged in such conversations witness the affective borders of their bodies dissolve as they begin to feel as one. Speech, meanwhile, that “miserly language of the mind” (103), those “short-lived human words” (117), leaves reality automatized, and upon awakening the world is ideally defamiliarized. The newly awakened sister Khram “looked at [her] hand. [She]’d seen it thousands of times. But [she] looked at it—as though seeing it for the first time” (382), as if through Vertov’s *kino-glaz*.

Indeed, the process of awakening is likened to birth, “always painful” (252), and the awakened sob uncontrollably for seven days after this “second birth.” In the process of awakening, and during their first conversation of the heart, the awakened also exhibit an infant-like loss of bodily control: overcome by the affective power of either the Heavenly Ice or the conversations of the heart, they urinate or defecate themselves. The movement of this rebirth may be likened to premodern rituals, which Clark also located in the structure of the Socialist Realist novel reproducing Van Gennep’s structure of the rite of passage: separation, temporary

death, rebirth,<sup>274</sup> a structure symmetrical to the eschatological narrative discussed above in reference to both the Ice trilogy and Soviet communism at large.

The first brother and sister take the principle of an escape from discourse to the extreme. Thanks to their seniority of sorts, Bro and Fer gain the capacity for deeper insight than the others: they can read minds and see across space and time. In the language of the books, they are “seeing hearts.” These abilities, however, come with the caveat that they lose the capacity to perceive images of the human form—representations of any sort, including paintings, photographs, films, and sculptures. Theirs is thus also an escape from *visual* discourse, a representational failure that suggests the incapacity of representation to capture the essence of the original, which is, in itself, but a weak shadow of the higher reality inaccessible in the material realm (the Gnostic, Neoplatonist dimension here is evident). This transformation takes place in the protagonist simultaneously with his newfound understanding of humans as “meat machines.” As Bro scans the portraits of the Russian greats hanging on the walls of the public library, he comes to understand that “the sum of the life of the bearded man with the serious gaze [Dostoevsky] is only paper covered with combinations of letters” (175). The portraits then begin to lose visual coherence, as “paint swirled, trembled, and blended. There were no faces” (177).

In contrast to the divine members of the Brotherhood of the Light, their bodies ultra-vital and their minds ultra-rational, the human beings (the “meat machines”) that populate the Earth are revealed hardly to resemble the image of the ideal human *à la* European humanism. They are, rather, shown to be weak, unfree, and fallible creatures that live only with their physical survival in mind (the same argument that Kaia presented to Karpov). In an extra-temporal vision bestowed upon him after awakening, the whole of human history rises up before the protagonist

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<sup>274</sup> Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago, 1981), 168.

and he sees it with the eyes of the other: an unremitting cycle of death, violence, oppression, and humiliation, a virtuosic panorama to which Sorokin dedicates several pages. The scene that witnesses this vision in the protagonist is a powerful example of defamiliarization—seeing human civilization, culture, and indeed, human life at large “for the first time,” thereby throwing in question its worth and its sanctity. In the end, Bro understands that nothing categorically separates human life from the rest of material existence: “there was no difference between a stone and a man, a tree and a bird” (175); “there was no difference between this table and this woman” (91). The protagonist pulverizes any ontological hierarchies created by human thought. He states that the Soviets “considered the nature of meat machines perfection” (208), linking the Soviet view of the human to humanism without naming it outright. But the insight of the Brotherhood demonstrates just the opposite, that the nature of humanity is neither perfect nor developing toward perfection. Rather, it is stuck in an evil infinity of birth and death, wherein no real progress is possible despite the forward march of time.<sup>275</sup> “People gave birth and killed, killed and gave birth” (79). While this circular logic reigns, progress is merely yet another ruse of humanism, which proves to be a disappointment in its failure to provide for humanity any realization of the ideals towards which it aspires: autonomy, equality, brotherhood.

Bro’s newfound other-than-human gaze has freed his mind from the semiotic associations commonplace in post-Enlightenment thought, such as, for example, *humanity, reason, and dignity, or history, justice, and progress*. His defamiliarized account of human history invites the reader, too, to question such associations. It reveals humanity in its ordinariness, and human history in its baseness. The cyclicity of birth and death, war and oppression evidenced in Bro’s

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<sup>275</sup> The anti-natalist implications here could have their source in numerous religious utopian thinkers of the turn of the century, including Nikolai Fedorov, Vladimir Solov’ev, or Berdiaev. See Eric Naiman, “Historectomies: On the Metaphysics of Reproduction in a Utopian Age,” *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture* (Stanford, 1993), 255-76.

account of human history suggests that *humanism was a lie*. Humanity is not developing toward a perfection of the individual subject or of the collective. History has failed to rescue the masses from their subjugation to nature, on the one hand, and to the more powerful, on the other. This critique of humanism is in line with contemporary scholars of (post)humanism. Braidotti, for example, asserts that humanism has left in its wake a “history of unfulfilled promises and unacknowledged brutality.”<sup>276</sup> Sorokin’s narrative also extends this critique to the proletarian humanism that the Bolsheviks promised. Looking back on the USSR from the twenty-first century, the third-person narrator of the third book speaks in the voice of the Brotherhood and deems the Soviet project doomed from the start, “because there could be no brotherhood between meat machines. . . . Each meat machine wanted happiness for his own body above all” (530). For this reason, the Soviet ideal of collectivity is incompatible with human nature, which the Brotherhood casts as merely an animal nature, by design selfish and petty. A destructive individualism reigns even in a socialist society. Sorokin captures this mindset with the potent image of “people locking their houses with *complicated* locks so that other people could not enter” (177; emphasis in the original). “The entire city consisted of stone caves,” narrates Bro through the eyes of the other, and “in each cave lived a family of meat machines. The caves were firmly locked against other meat machines, although none of them differed *structurally* from one another” (179; emphasis in the original).

The recurring epithet “meat machine” [miasnaia mashina] also flips the early Soviet logic of the ultra-rational machine on its head. The oxymoronic word pairing degrades both terms to suggest the worst of both: the unfreedom of the machine coupled with the corruptibility of the flesh and the irrationality of the human-animal mind. The machine does not exist for its own

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<sup>276</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 51.

sake, but in a state of perpetual programmed service (that is, unless she is as advanced as Pelevin's Kaia, who develops something resembling free will and stands in for the ideal human subject). The narrator further links machines and unfreedom when he suggests that the human reliance on machines of any kind is herald of the sign that humans are "born an eternal CRIPPLE and [need] crutches" (113). The Brotherhood detects signs of the basic unfreedom of human life in all of its habits, customs, and rituals. Human dietary and drinking rituals, for example, betray "the monstrosity of human life, its lack of freedom. ... They always overate tremendously, disfiguring their bodies and willpower. ... The amazing popularity of vodka among humans, and their dependence on it, proved once again that man was incapable of being happy" (106). Stripping humanity of the lofty characteristics bestowed upon it by European and proletarian humanism, Sorokin endows these characteristics instead to his own New Men—a very select group, in an allusion to the exclusivity of both humanist and Revolutionary ideals. He widens the gap between the human, in his framework merely a "meat machine," and the New Man, now cast in the mold of a divine being whose power grows to rival that of the socialist state and, later, the post-socialist state, too.

As in *Volny gasiat veter*, the desired characteristics that set some apart from others exist only within an exceptionally small population: exactly 23,000, in fact. For this reason, the undesirable elements must be eliminated, a task with obvious totalitarian overtones. The trilogy becomes a bloodbath as "meat machine" after "meat machine" is killed and tossed aside in the Brotherhood's search for their own. In this quest, Sorokin dramatizes the Bolshevik impulse to rid the nascent Soviet state of the bourgeoisie and other "enemies of the people." He adds to this, however, a distinct racial aspect, which we also see in *Nomer Odin* and *S.N.U.F.F.* The Brotherhood knows only that their kin are *blond-haired* and *blue-eyed*. Racially coded in this

way, the Brotherhood's exceptionalism gains an even more sinister, white-supremacist element on top of the dehumanizing discourse on humanity as "meat machines."

The human death toll in the trilogy is great. Because only one "seeing" brother and sister have the power to locate their own (and only sometimes at that), the Brotherhood attempts to awaken many ordinary humans. The process of awakening involves a hard and sharp knock to the chest with an "ice" hammer, which leaves humans dead or severely injured. Regardless, they time and again execute the deadly task coolly and efficiently, exhibiting the Bolsheviks' "ruthless proletarian morality ... [which] sanctioned brutality against class enemies," and in another parallel to the Brotherhood, "mandated hard work, self-discipline, and a Spartan lifestyle."<sup>277</sup> Over some seven hundred pages, thousands (if not more) die at the hands of the Brotherhood as they attempt to find their own. To achieve its goal, the Brotherhood infiltrates the OGPU and utilizes the long arm of the law to its advantage, hiding its murderous crimes under the guise of the "holy cruelty" of men like Cheka and OGPU boss "Iron Felix" Dzerzhinsky,<sup>278</sup> thus mirroring that state-sanctified violence in their own actions. Their violence, morally justified in their exclusionary ethical framework that elevates the few over the many, exhibits the perverse logic of the communist discourse of "equality and justice," which Halfin argues to be at once a discourse of "purity and death," in as much as both evince the same quest, to bring humanity to moral perfection.<sup>279</sup>

At the same time, the Brotherhood's "trial by ice" of its own members, themselves often badly bruised and battered in the process of awakening, echoes the logic of the production of Stalinist heroes, which glorified Soviet citizens as heroes for their sacrifice and suffering, not

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<sup>277</sup> Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 202.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, 203.

<sup>279</sup> Halfin, *Terror in My Soul*, 2.

uncommonly physical, in the name of the USSR. Ostrovsky's *Kak zakalialas' stal'* (1932-34) provides the canonical example. The Socialist Realist novel sees its iconic protagonist Pavel Korchagin become blind and paralyzed in his service to the Soviet state as he ventures toward a communist consciousness.<sup>280</sup> The selection and curation of heroes from the Soviet masses through violence and ordeals is mirrored in the Brotherhood's selection of the divinely preordained from the masses of the meat machines. The process recalls Bauman's notion of the totalitarian "gardening state," a concept that I previously put to use in my analysis of *Volny gasiat veter* in the preceding chapter. The gardening state separates ("weeds out") and selects useful human materials from its surplus populations.<sup>281</sup> The violence of the Soviet state and that of the Brotherhood run in tandem—indeed, their perpetrators are often the same in the world of the novel—as Sorokin attempts to glean the signified of Soviet violence. The fact that the violence of the Brotherhood imparts meaning on those lucky to awaken under the blow of its ice hammer suggests that violence is indeed both the signifier and the signified in the framework of the Soviet state. Inasmuch as violence gives meaning, bringing the recipient into consciousness in the context of both the Soviets and the Brotherhood, violence is its own meaning. The fact of this violence puts the Soviet project at odds with its humanist-cum-humanitarian aspirations, but as Davies, quoted above, has suggested, humanism is not without violence. Indeed, Elena Gomel writes that violence is the logical endpoint of the exclusionary dimension inherent in humanist discourse, which separates desirables from undesirables.<sup>282</sup> In this sense, the Soviet project to purify its populace toward perfection (again, "purity and death") is not an antihumanism, but the height of humanism, and Sorokin only draws attention to this fact.

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<sup>280</sup> See Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was (Un)Made* (Pittsburgh, 2008), 20-23.

<sup>281</sup> Zygmunt Bauer, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1989).

<sup>282</sup> Elena Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule* (London, 2014), 29.



### 3.4 *Led* and *23,000*: Global Capitalism, and a Post-Soviet Humanism?

The first and third novels in the trilogy, *Led* (*Ice*, 2002) and *23,000* (2005), take place primarily in the post-Soviet period, and it is here that Sorokin gestures toward the possibility of a humanism free of its long history of violence. By the twenty-first century, the Brotherhood has amassed incredible wealth and risen to the very highest echelons of the world elite. Now it exists as the Ice Corporation, an umbrella of numerous—very successful—business ventures with, of course, the same secret aim of awakening the 23,000 (they have even developed an at-home DIY ice hammer that they market as a self-care wellness tool; numerous pages of Amazon.com-style online reviews follow). The divine hybrid again voices a concern over the seat of power, not only in the Soviet period (where power lies with the death-dealing nomenklatura), but also in the post-Soviet (where power lies with international multi-conglomerates). The first book details the goings-on of the Ice Corp. in the present day, as they inch closer to their goal, and gives the second “seeing” sister, Khram, a backstory similar to Bro’s in the second book (her origins, how she was swept up in the winds of history, and how she came to replace sister Fer as a “seeing heart” upon the death of the latter).

Only in the third book does the reader encounter a narrative voice distinct from that of the Brotherhood in the form of Olga, a young woman on a mission to unmask the Ice Corp. as the violent cult that they are, after being brutalized and left for dead in a failed attempt at awakening. Her story, she comes to learn, is similar to that of many others throughout the world. Olga is the first and only truly *human* narrative focalizer throughout the trilogy. Up until this point, Sorokin has invited the reader to follow the Brotherhood on its journey, to identify with his semi-human protagonists even as they rally, quite violently, against the entirety of humankind. Sorokin treats

the violence of the Stalinist Terror and the Holocaust, which the Brotherhood also uses to its own advantage to find its own and simultaneously hide its crimes, with an ambivalent, almost neutral attitude. The first two books are speculative-revisionist histories that insert the Brotherhood as active participants into some of the worst crimes of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Sorokin has, time and again, presented the Brotherhood's violence through their own focalization, goading the reader to approve or, at the least, ignore the brutality for the sake of narrative momentum, difficult as it is to read the trilogy without wishing for the narrative satisfaction that would be the realization of the 23,000.

With the introduction of Olga, who comes to find herself imprisoned in an extrajudicial labor camp whose sole purpose is the production of ice hammers (a state of exception *par excellence*), Sorokin allows the reader, at last, to take a step back and question what has come beforehand, to see this long history of violence for what it is: an insidious kind of antihumanism that does not only argue against the autonomy of the human subject, but desecrates and mocks it. The contemporary reader, via Olga, therefore becomes the locus of humanism in the final pages of the novel, as s/he is called to respond to the depiction of violence and, indeed, to reject it. In this way, Sorokin creates the possibility for a humanistic ethics in the space between the reader and the book, in that same space where he had goaded the reader to cheer on the brutality of a self-certain cult made up of virile and beautiful blonde individuals.

Lynn Festa argues that, in various early Enlightenment genres, humanity was defined not via formal definitions, "but through the performative interpellation of readers and viewers by fictions: writers and artists produce humanity by requiring their readers or beholders to enact

qualities that define them as such.”<sup>283</sup> Sorokin appears to rely on the same strategy; he calls on the reader to deny the formal definition of humanity as “meat machine” and instead produce the human *performatively* in the response elicited in the reader himself, who (ideally) becomes empathetic and indignant to the horrors on the page. In that reaction, perhaps, is where we find the human.

The question remains, however, whether this narrative strategy is entirely effective, especially in the form of a relatively underdeveloped cipher for the reader introduced near the trilogy’s end. Prior to Olga’s introduction, the reader has traversed over 500 pages dedicated to the glorification of the Brotherhood. Sorokin himself points to the fallibility of his late-in-the-game strategy, as Olga also comes under the spell of the Brotherhood and works to help them achieve their goal (she, together with another human prisoner named Bjorn, holds up the two infant-aged Brothers in the circle of the 23,000): the reader’s cipher becomes complicit in this violence, much as the reader already has. Once both reader and character are confronted with the beautiful “muscular, bronzed bodies” (524) of the blonde and blue-eyed members, the “ideal cleanliness” (522) of the material opulence that surrounds them, the appeal of this fascistic order is easy to understand, even in meta-parodic form. Is this indeed an attempt to condemn twentieth-century totalitarianism, the reader is left to wonder, if the Brotherhood appears so appealing, and its discourse is adopted so convincingly?

Following Žižek, the Ice trilogy may be considered a case of over-identification or subversive affirmation, as Sorokin adopts a violent totalitarian discourse and takes it to its logical

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<sup>283</sup> Lynn Festa, *Fiction Without Humanity: Person, Animal, Thing in Early Enlightenment Literature and Culture* (Philadelphia, 2019),

extreme, excluding all human life from the dignity and autonomy that humanism attempted—and failed—to afford it. Over-identification is an artistic strategy that aggressively overemphasizes its adopted discourse for the sake of critique, a sort of very straight-faced parody that is easy to confuse with the real thing.<sup>284</sup> Žižek writes that, “by means of the elusive character of [his] desire, of the undecidability as to ‘where [he] actually stands’, [the artist] compels us to take up our own position and decide upon our desire” (65). Overidentification thus places the reader in a zone of indeterminacy where he may indeed become complicit in the support of said discourse—and indeed, this is what takes place in the Ice trilogy, difficult as it is to resist the narrative satisfaction of the 23,000 uniting for the destruction of humankind. In an attempt to unmask the legacy of humanism in Russia and the USSR as a failure, Sorokin overemphasizes the allure of totalitarian discourse: its appeals to beauty, order, wholeness. The reader is left to rebuke these values, but I suspect that the end of the trilogy will leave any reader disappointed to find that the 23,000 do not, in fact, succeed in their goal.

In 2008, Sorokin stated in an interview,

I believe that humanity is not yet perfect, but that it will be perfected, that contemporary humans are thus far imperfect beings, that we still do not know ourselves or our potential, that we have not understood that we are cosmic beings. We are created by a higher intelligence, and we have cosmic goals, not just comfort and reproduction. We are not “meat machines.”<sup>285</sup>

He went on to identify the problem: the mass market culture of the twentieth century, which has deprived the human of his “divine image.” How to interpret his words? At first, it seems pretty

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<sup>284</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, “Why Are Labaich and Neue Slowenische Not Fascists?” *The Universal Exception* (London and New York, 2006), 63-66. The practice also recalls the late Soviet practice of *stiob*, which functions along very similar lines. See Yurchak, “Dead Irony: Necroaesthetics, ‘Stiob’, and the *Anekdot*,” *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 238-281.

<sup>285</sup> Sorokin, *Contemporary Russian Fiction: Russian Authors Interviewed by Kristina Rotkirch*, 145, quoted in Nelson, 272-73.

straightforward: the meat machine is a metaphor for consumerist man, who even under socialism, strives only for comfort through material consumption. But why does divine man take the form of a cruel, cult-ish figure here? Why is a cosmic spirituality, which was a positive category in Petrushevskaya and Pelevin, and certainly seems such in his words above, degraded by making its mouthpiece a transcendentalist totalitarian cult? Perhaps the very ending of the novel holds the key. Once the 23,000 have united in a circle, Olga witnesses as the prophecy comes half true: the 23,000 die simultaneously (maybe even transcend, though their faces remain distorted in frozen expressions of pain), but humanity does not disappear. Life goes on just as before. But “all this,” Olga and Bjorn decide, “was done for us ... by God” (693). They repeat the last two words twelve times. “I want to talk to God,” Bjorn decides, and Olga replies that to find out how, they “have to *return to people and ask them*” (693; emphasis added). Alexei Pavlenko argues that the ending of 23,000 demonstrates that “that any attempt to find salvation outside of language, outside of human history, is misleading and destructive.”<sup>286</sup> With the novel’s abrupt and even unsatisfying end, Sorokin suggests that true spirituality lies beyond the pages of the book, in interactions with people, *humans*. He puts the onus on the reader to go and do the same as Olga and Bjorn, to find spiritual satisfaction among others. In that interaction between self and other is where we find and elaborate man’s “divine image.” While the 23,000 attempted to recede into the depths of the exclusive self, the real task of divine understanding lies in simply *talking to the other*.

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<sup>286</sup> Alexei Pavlenko, “Sorokin’s Soteriology,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 53.2 (2009), 275.

### 3.5 Conclusion: A Post-Soviet Posthumanism

Ilya Kukulín argued that Russian society of the post-Stalinist period, not least of all artists and writers, exhibited a reinvigorated interest in classical humanist values and texts as a response to Stalinism.<sup>287</sup> While humanist discourse was under attack in the poststructuralist West, it found an interested audience in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, where intellectuals were eager to define themselves against Stalinist values. Can we say the same of the post-Soviet period, about a renewed interest in humanist discourse as a response to the social catastrophe of the 1990s? Yes and no. Just as in the previous chapter I argued that Kukulín's concept of a posttraumatic humanism is more productive as a posttraumatic *posthumanism*, that is, a critical discourse on humanism rather than an outright embrace, the same principle applies here. Petrushevskaya's novel laments the death of humanist principles in the post-Soviet space, where a hyper-capitalistic "survival of the fittest" logic reigns, where money has become the transcendental signifier, and where little boys and girls are, too, hardened criminals. *Nomer Odin* is also populated by posthuman (and *pre-human*) figures like ancient shamans capable of rebirth and transfiguration, as well as the half-human, half-animal "relict hominids" similar to the "pseudo-homo" in *Paren' iz preispodnei* (or, if you recall, Merezhkovsky's "Anthropoid"). Petrushevskaya's posthuman subjects are from the very distant past, and with the duo of the noble and ignoble savage she participates in the posthumanist "return to nature" discourse that we saw in texts, of various ideological orientations, from the pre- and post-Revolutionary period in Chapter One. Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* also takes up the noble savage as a figure with which to think through humanist ideals, though his novel's biggest contribution to my argument lies in the

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<sup>287</sup> Ilya Kukulín, "In a Muddy Land, Wearing a Historical Costume: Posttraumatic Humanism in Post-Stalinist Soviet Culture," *Partial Answers* 15.2 (2017), 341-68.

female humanoid super-robot (a New Woman, if you will) that attacks our protagonist's humanist ideals. The novel is a masterclass in critical posthumanism, and demonstrates that the "ideal" subject is a fallacy of a humanist ideology. Meanwhile, Sorokin, whose three texts occupy the biggest part of this chapter, tackles the Soviet past head on, with a narrative that spans from the pre-Revolutionary period to the post-Soviet, rewriting the New Soviet Man as a divine—and divinely cruel—posthuman figure. His "regulative ideal" does not resemble the pleasant and diligent New Men that we saw in the Strugatskys' series. The Ice trilogy draws, rather, on the early debates on the New Soviet Man, tracing the development of the New Man from the avant-gardist machine type into the Nietzschean-cum-Stalinist superman type; Sorokin's New Men are those *without* a human face. My work is, once again, focused on the ontological and temporal hierarchies that structure the subject in these works. How does the *post-Soviet* New Man understand his experience of history? How does he relate to the other, now that his categories of understanding self and other have so radically shifted without an authoritative discourse to guide him?

A few different vectors of meaning bring the works of these three authors together. Petrushevskaya's *Nomer Odin*, Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.*, and Sorokin's Ice trilogy are equally interested in the logic of colonialism and totalitarianism, how it studies the other, exoticizes and dehumanizes him, but also how the colonized or totalitarian subject creates pockets of opportunity for resistance against that logic. These novels take place, at least in part, in a post-Soviet reality (or, in Pelevin's case, a futuristic parody of that reality), and they criticize that reality—one of global capitalism—using specifically Soviet tropes of anti-capitalism, as well as the posthumanist trope of the return to nature. They each answer to the death of the Soviet metanarrative with a renewed interest in mysticism, pre-modern religion, and even occultism. In

the process, these three authors construct their own versions of the ideal subject—primitive, machine, or divine—that offers posthumanist epistemological and ethical alternatives to the humanist subject. In the end, however, none of the three is able to relinquish some of the basic categories of humanism: dignity, rationality, and autonomy. In rewriting humanism, Petrushevskaya, Pelevin, and Sorokin attempt to make space for the marginalized other, in all his various guises: the primitive, the savage, the refugee, even the non-human. Rather than move past humanism, they elaborate a critical posthumanism that expands those cherished categories like dignity and autonomy to the other, and they invite the reader to participate in this task of generosity.



## Conclusion

### 4.1 Rewriting Enlightenment, Reading Posthumanism

One of the last texts that Foucault completed before his death in 1984 was a lecture titled “What Is Enlightenment?”<sup>288</sup> In this “qualified defense”<sup>289</sup> of the Enlightenment, Foucault attempts to disconnect the concepts of Enlightenment and humanism. He presents two legacies of the Enlightenment, one negative and one positive: on the one hand, the Enlightenment promoted a “faithfulness to doctrinal elements,” an attitude that Foucault suggests is better left in the past;<sup>290</sup> on the other hand, however, it also promoted “a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era,” or in other words, an attitude of continual, processual investigation and appraisal of our political, social, and cultural forms.<sup>291</sup> *This*, Foucault argues, is the legacy of the Enlightenment that we cannot discard, whether we are “for” or “against” the Enlightenment (which, he says, is really a moot point anyway). The Foucault whom we see in this final text is one that believes in “the progress of truth and the history of liberty,”<sup>292</sup> which he ties to that process of perpetual critique and unties from the concept of humanism. Whereas critique, according to his reading of Kant, is a collective process

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<sup>288</sup> Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves, “Critique and Enlightenment: Michel Foucault on ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’,” *The Enlightenment and Modernity* (London, 2000), 184. The lecture never took place due to his death.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” *The Foucault Reader* (New York, 1984), 42.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

that unites, humanism is a “set of themes” that “have served as a critical principle of differentiation”; it has been used, that is, to set yourself apart from others, to claim the superiority of your ideology over another because *yours* is done in the name of “man.” Even the Stalinists, he notes, called themselves humanists.<sup>293</sup> In my interpretation, we can take his use of the word differentiation here even further: humanism works by differentiating not only among ideologies, but among groups of people, based on who has the “correct” principles, and decides who counts as people and who does not based on a set of constantly shifting parameters.

In the end, Foucault sees humanism and Enlightenment in tension with one another more than anything. The Enlightenment promotes a perpetual critique that perpetually “creates” the human subject in his “autonomy”;<sup>294</sup> the subject’s autonomy, in other words, is not a given and completed state, but a critical process that requires constant tending to. While humanism creates categories for easy, ready-made comprehension, the Enlightenment deliberately complicates our understanding of those categories to help us see the world not as a static, ready-made object, but as something that requires constant critique because it is in flux (we could say that humanism automatizes, while Enlightenment critique defamiliarizes).

To add to Foucault’s argument, not only are Enlightenment and humanism in tension with one another, but humanism is in tension *with itself*. Humanism, though it promotes a universal subject as a normative ideal, still houses within it worthwhile social and political categories that, just like Enlightenment principles, are difficult to discard: tolerance, dignity, autonomy. The problem is that it assigns some subjects as worthy and some as unworthy of the benefits of these categories, hence the tension at its core. As Foucault attempts to disjoin humanism and the Enlightenment, the authors of my study attempt to disjoin humanism from

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

itself, to create a (post)humanism that can afford those benefits not only to the ideal subject but likewise to those subjects historically ignored by humanism: indigenous peoples, non-human animals, or simply the other as such. A critical posthumanism is exactly that process of perpetual critique that Foucault identifies as the enduring legacy of the Enlightenment.

In the preceding three chapters, I have demonstrated how a critical posthumanist discourse resorts to those same humanist categories because, again, there is *something* worthwhile in humanism, and the task of critical posthumanism is to identify exactly what that something is, and how it can be salvaged. It is for this reason that humanism and posthumanism are inextricably interconnected. The New Man is but one of the sites of that interconnection. With this in mind, I have also demonstrated how the principle of differentiation that Foucault identifies in humanism works to make the human(ist) subject other to himself, in what I have termed a *negative* posthuman subject: a subject by all accounts “better” than a human subject—more rational, more knowledgeable, more in control of his social and political existence in the world—yet one who denies humanist principles to other, “lesser” subjects. Examples include the Strugatskys’ *liudeny* and Sorokin’s Brotherhood of the Light. The foil to the negative posthuman subject is the *positive* posthuman subject who typifies the kind of processual identity-creation that Foucault identifies in the act of critique: the positive posthuman subject has an identity that is not static but is constantly made and remade; he affirms alterity and acknowledges that the subject is a creature of multiplicity that is interconnected with what is outside, just as much as what is inside him. Examples here include the Strugatskys’ *malysh* and Pelevin’s *Kaia*. Finally, I have also demonstrated how critical posthumanist narratives resist the logic of humanism that denies subjecthood to the other, how they create moments of narrative resistance in texts that might seem hostile to figures like the Strugatskys’ Gag or Sorokin’s Olga.

The way I see it, critical posthumanism is as much a reading practice as it is a writing practice. These texts leave much in the hands of their readers, who are left with the responsibility of developing a kind of reading practice that can redeem those “othered” characters who find no redemption in the texts themselves. The authors make possible that kind of reading practice through narrative strategies that bring the reader closer to those characters, creating a space of intimacy between reader and character; in that space, the reader is required to take an ethical stance that is often at odds with the authoritative voice in the text. In *Paren' iz preispodnei*, for example, the Strugatskys present Gag as someone who *does* need to be educated by the kinder and wiser Kornei; at the same time, by allowing Gag the “I” perspective, by defamiliarizing the kindness of strangers (thus made to seem unkind), they ask the reader to understand the difficulty that Gag has in fitting into the ready-made box of subjecthood that Kornei has prepared for him. *Malysh* also presents a similar challenge to the reader: by all accounts, the characters understand Maia Glumova’s attempt to sabotage the mission and cut off contact with the natives of the planet Hope as the wrong thing to do. But the reader is asked not to judge, but to understand and even agree with her decision. By placing this decision in her hands, the Strugatskys give Glumova narrative control: the novel ends because she has willed it. In the conclusion to the previous chapter, I also detailed at length the kind of reading that Sorokin’s Ice trilogy demands by its end, and it is in that reading that we find the real locus of humanism (a redeemed humanism) in the text. A critical posthumanist reading aims toward the same as a critical posthumanist writing: not negating humanism, but expanding its borders, complicating its categories of “right” and “wrong” subjecthood, understanding the “I” not as a fixed state but as a critical process. Ultimately, a critical posthumanist reading practice is one that can find the inherent and complete dignity, to quote Platonov, in the eyes of a tortoise.

## 4.2 Epilogue: The Robot That Isn't *Luchshe, chem liudi* (2018)

In the final pages of my dissertation, I want to look at a piece of media from the last five years to demonstrate how the thematics and narrative techniques of critical posthumanism operate in the contemporary period, and to what ends. *Luchshe, chem liudi* (*Better Than People*, 2018), the first Russian-language Netflix original, takes place in Moscow ten years in the future, a 2029 where humanoid robots have taken over both skilled and unskilled labor from humans, and where more advanced androids have begun to occupy a social function, too, as lovers and companions (not unlike Pelevin's *Kaia*, though not as advanced in the algorithmic technology that gives them "personalities"). The story concerns the Safronovs, who unwittingly become the adoptive family of a super-robot named Arisa. The owner of the robotics firm Cronos, the largest corporation in the Russia of the future, has purchased Arisa on the Chinese black market based on the promise that she is the next step in android evolution: a robot that is not only super-strong and capable of mastering any practical human skill, even one as complex as brain surgery, but that can also understand and react to human emotion. Unfortunately for the owner of Cronos, Arisa escapes from the corporation's compound in the first episode and, because the Safronovs happen to be in the right place at the right time, imprints on the family. For them, she announces, she would do *anything*—going as far as murder.

Though the series begins by stating Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics (a robot may not injure a human being, or cause injury by inaction; a robot must obey human orders, unless in conflict with the First Law; and a robot must protect its own existence, unless in conflict with the First and Second Laws), it introduces Arisa as a robot that no longer abides by the Three Laws. Arisa's monomaniacal devotion to the protection of the patriarchal family, coupled with her emerging humanness, creates an odd posthuman figure of her, one who breaks my categorization

of positive and negative posthumans. On the one hand, she is a positive posthuman in that she couples a “higher” rationality with a learned humanness (kindness, tolerance, openness to ambiguity and alterity, qualities that she at first lacks). The story is again structured as a Bildungsroman, half earnest, half parody, given that Arisa, despite her best efforts, does not come to fit into human society or into the family unit. Nevertheless, she slowly comes to understand the intricacies of human interaction, develops into a more complex subject who recognizes the moral grayness that permeates it, and breaks out of a binary ethics of “right” and “wrong.” At the same time, Arisa is depicted as a tool of the patriarchal family, headed by the strong and wise father (the Safronov patriarch is an acknowledged medical genius with an unremitting energy for keeping his family together). And her narrative function is to secure the integrity of the nuclear family, although she comes to learn that she herself cannot replace any member of that unit. As a killer robot with the sole purpose of saving the patriarchal family from disintegration, Arisa also represents a negative posthuman figure: whoever is not part of the family (the collective self) becomes expendable as the other. The posthuman, the series seems to suggest, is dangerous unless it functions in service of traditional values. By the end of the series, Arisa sacrifices her life to save the Safronovs, and her narrative function is complete: the family unit remains intact thanks to her endeavors. Though one cannot fault the show for Luddism, its social politics are conservative. *Luchshe, chem liudi* demonstrates what may be an emerging trend in contemporary Russian culture: the political instrumentalization of the posthuman as a means of neoconservative propaganda.

It is instructive to compare *Luchshe, chem liudi* with the series upon which it is based: the 2012 Swedish series *Real Humans* (British, American, and Chinese adaptations have also followed, and it would be a productive exercise to compare all five iterations of this story). The

androids in *Real Humans*, much like those in *Luchshe, chem liudi*, work as skilled and unskilled laborers, companions, and even sexual partners to humans. Unlike the androids of the Russian series, however, some have started to develop (like Kaia) something resembling free will, thanks to an upgrade in their code. These androids, with the protagonist Bea (Arisa's Swedish counterpart) at the fore, are now fighting for their own "robot rights," including their protection from sexual abuse. Arisa, on the other hand, has no such interest in her "rights." Even when, halfway through the series, she is rebooted and her system is said to progress to a "new developmental level," there is no discernable difference in her programmed function: she exists only to secure the safety of her adopted family.

Toward the end of the series, her origins are at last explained, and her function as a tool of the patriarchal family becomes sufficiently clear. Arisa is a test model for an abandoned Chinese project: to replace the wives and mothers who were wiped out by the one-child policy, which led many Chinese families to abort daughters in favor of sons. Her origins as a replacement wife and mother explain her monomaniacal devotion to the Safronovs. Given that the Safronov father and mother are divorced, it makes sense why Arisa spends the entirety of the sixteen episodes attempting to ingratiate herself with the Safronov father, reading up and asking for advice on how to be an attractive romantic partner to him (she is, from the first, an ideal mother to his little daughter; it seems kids are easier to win over than men). She simply cannot do otherwise—her code demands that she be the ideal wife, and she seems to short circuit whenever he rejects her awkward advances, though she persists nevertheless. And though she does not, in the end, replace the Safronov mother, she has fulfilled her duty by sacrificing her life to ensure the Safronovs' safety. Her instrumentalization as a safeguard for the family unit does not go to waste.

It is no exaggeration to say that every positive character in the series ends up in a romantic couple, and even one of the negative characters still has the familial security of his sister's devotion to count on (though he remains behind bars). The end of the series sees the Safronov mother reunite with her new husband; the Safronov father build a new family with his new partner, who also regains the young daughter that she had initially given up for adoption; the Safronov son fall in love with his new girlfriend; two police detectives fall in love; and other, more tangential characters also couple up. I am not content to attribute this insistent romantic coupling to the narrative convention of a happy ending. Rather, by this barrage of happy couples and parents reunited with children at the series' end, *Luchshe, chem liudi* seems to insist on the family unit as the source of social meaning. The posthuman becomes only another means by which to achieve the integrity of that unit, and not a viable replacement for any member thereof. Though Arisa fails in her capacity as wife to Safronov (and in this regard, the series rejects the intervention of the state, in the form of the biopolitical one-child-policy, into "family matters"), she succeeds in her narrative function of bringing the Safronovs together: she facilitates the reconciliation of the Safronov father and mother, who, although they do not reunite romantically, go on to create successful romantic partnerships with others, and can now co-parent amiably, thanks to Arisa's role in their reconciliation.

In the end, *Luchshe, chem liudi* illustrates an opposing trend to the one that I have narrativized over the course of my study: the appropriation of the posthuman in post-Soviet culture, not as a critical tool for a more equitable ethics of self and other (which is what both positive and negative posthuman figures gesture toward, whether by affirmation or negation), but as a propaganda tool for a traditionalist, neoconservative social outlook. The posthuman, suggests *Luchshe, chem liudi*, is a false replacement for humanist values and the human subject,



but a useful tool to uphold those values and that subject. The New Man has no place in the Russia of today, if we are to take *Luchshe, chem liudi*'s word for it. Sofya Khagi points out that, in the Russian context, posthumanism is most often conceptualized in negative terms as dehumanization,<sup>295</sup> rather than an expansion of humanism that makes it a more equitable, tolerant, and capacious discourse. My study demonstrates that this is not always the case, that authors of critical posthumanism celebrate, on the one hand, the positive posthuman subject who affirms alterity and multiplicity, and on the other, criticize the negative posthuman subject who denies them. As *Luchshe, chem liudi* suggests, however, an opposing attitude has emerged in popular culture of the twenty-first century: the appropriation of the posthuman, and the motifs and techniques of critical posthumanism, toward the reification of traditional family values. In other words, an *uncritical* posthumanism has begun to appear in the contemporary cultural, and even political, context. And when posthumanism stops being critical, it becomes, much like humanism itself, an optimal vehicle for those ideologies of supremacy—national, racial, gender—that continue to contribute to Russian neo-imperialism in the present day.

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<sup>295</sup> Sofya Khagi, *Pelevin and Unfreedom: Poetics, Politics, and Metaphysics* (Evanston, 2021), 87.

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