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Resistant Postmodernisms:
Writing Postcommunism in Armenia and Russia

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Comparative Literature

by

Myrna Angel Douzjian

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Resistant Postmodernisms:
Writing Postcommunism in Armenia and Russia

by

Myrna Angel Douzjian

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor David W. MacFadyen, Co-Chair

Professor Kathleen L. Komar, Co-Chair

Many postcolonial scholars have questioned the ethics of postmodern cultural production. Critics have labeled postmodernism a conceptual dead end – a disempowering aesthetic that does not offer a theory of agency in response to the workings of empire. This dissertation enters the conversation about the political alignment of postmodernism through a comparative study of postcommunist writing in Armenia and Russia, where the debates about the implications and usefulness of postmodernism have been equally charged.

This project introduces the directions in which postcommunist postmodernisms developed in Armenia and Russia – in locally unique ways that reflected both the problems

of the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present. It then moves on to an analysis of the work of five playwrights and novelists: Aghasi Ayvazyan, Perch Zeytuntsyan, Gurgen Khanjyan, Victor Pelevin, and Vladimir Sorokin. In reading the plays and novels of these authors, this study identifies several formal and stylistic connections between the post-Soviet renditions of the theater of the absurd and postmodernism: a resistance to interpretation accomplished by indeterminacy; a desire to push beyond the limits of logic; an emphasis on signs and symbols as opposed to their referents; and a rejection of well-made generic forms through the incorporation of intertextuality and textual play. On the thematic level, these plays and novels employ madness and confinement as metaphors for the problems of postcommunist nation building and politics. Through these images, the seemingly random, absurd texts of postcommunist postmodern culture unrelentingly interrogate the state apparatuses of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia; they insist upon a confrontation with Soviet history as a means by which to recognize the Soviet Union and, in the post-Soviet era, Russia as empire. Through the suggestion that the post-Soviet period entails a process of post-Sovietization rather than a radical break from the Soviet period, these texts challenge past and present power structures in the newly emerged post-Soviet nations. Taken together, the contemporaneous works of Armenian and Russian authors of the post-Soviet period offer a productive site for understanding resistant postmodernisms – that is to say, the politically subversive dimensions of postmodern literature and its critical power.

The dissertation of Myrna Angel Douzjian is approved.

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2013

In memory of Michael Henry Heim,
whose passion for the humanities and
intellectual generosity continue to inspire me.

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PART I: INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

The Subversive Power of Post-Soviet Armenian and Russian Postmodernisms

“We live in an era when there are no more political prisoners, but we still behave as if we were all still in the camps,” says the Young Intellectual in Vladimir Makanin’s 1993 novella *Baize-covered Table with Decanter* (Stol, pokrytyi suknom i s grafinom poseredine) (110). This remark in reference to the early post-Soviet period resounded in a significant body of literature produced in the former Second World in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and well beyond it. That is to say, among the plethora of post-Soviet literary themes, many works of fiction grappled with the problems of totalitarianism and the Soviet past as they related to the period of postcommunism. The Young Intellectual’s statement is emblematic, because it expresses the need for a therapeutic approach to the past as well as a resistant attitude toward contemporary politics.

The national literatures of the former Second World, including Russia, immediately responded to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which resulted in the creation of fifteen independent countries. Many works of fiction treated the changes in political, social, and ideological norms with an ambivalent attitude. They proposed a distancing from both the discourses of the past, Soviet period and those of the contemporary moment:

A significant number of literary and artistic works of the early post-Soviet period offered meditations on the social and political actuality of a moment when the future was supposed to supersede the past in an explosion of social transformation, yet which was plagued by the continuities and resistances of human social experience (in this, they continued a tradition of critique of earlier

moments of “revolutionary” transformation [...]). One common technique of the literature and other cultural production of this era was the splicing together of supposedly antithetical elements of the “Soviet” and “post-Soviet” worlds into shocking, monstrous formations that allowed a reexamination of their subterranean points of contact. (Platt “The Post-Soviet Is Over” 5)

The writers of this period, then, conceive of the developments in postcommunism – undemocratic elections, the haphazard privatization process, the “free market” economy, the increased impact of globalization, and the drastically widened gap between the rich and the poor – not as a violent break from the past, but rather as influenced by and deeply rooted in Soviet dynamics. As a result, Soviet memory remains an important component in early post-Soviet authors’ conceptualizations of their respective nations and national consciousness. In fact, “Russian society’s confrontation with its past has remained one of the main themes of Russian culture throughout the 1990s and the early twenty-first century” (13). In very much the same vein, artistic and literary movements in the other former republics of the Soviet Union have grappled with the consequences of the Soviet past on their contemporary statehood and identity.¹

Alongside the interest in the relationship between the past and the present, a radical new set of aesthetics developed in the realm of cultural production. During the first decade of the post-Soviet period, the aesthetics of postmodernism became widespread, if not downright dominant. Many works of fiction problematized history and present realities through provocative, disturbing, and, oftentimes, impenetrable narratives that deconstructed dominant

¹ For the role of history and reevaluating the past in contemporary Armenian literature and criticism, see Zhenia Kalantaryan’s *Urvagts'er ardi hay grakanut'yan* (7-54, 97-104, 110-27, 194-208).

discourses – all political, cultural, historical, and ideological constructs became fair game.² They incorporated many of the stylistic devices that were already familiar to Western postmodernism: a resistance to interpretation achieved by devices such as ambiguity and multiple levels of narrative; an emphasis on signs and symbols as opposed to their referents; a concern for the literary process rather than its purpose or outcome; intertextuality and textual “play;” and a rejection of formal conventions and well-made texts through an antiformal experimentation with disjunctive forms.³ At the same time, these postmodernist texts approached the Soviet past through the lens of themes – poverty, corruption, mental disorders, confinement, incest, rape, violence, bestiality, corporophilia, prostitution, homosexuality, bodily excrement, and mutilation, to name a few – that were formerly taboo under the regime of Soviet Socialist Realism.

Despite the overarching aesthetic similarities these narratives share with their First World counterparts, trying to frame them within discourses about Western postmodernism creates a host of problems.⁴ Although most discussions about postmodernism acknowledge the term’s indefinability or its multiple definitions, these caveats have not prevented theories of postmodernity from slipping into the dangerous terrain of mostly US-centric First World universality. For example, Fredric Jameson almost exclusively interprets postmodern culture

² Vitaly Chernetsky offers a productive description of the postmodern literature that began to take shape in the late Soviet era. Borrowing the term “heterotopia” from Foucault, he applies it to the texts that “undermine language,” assert and subsequently subvert “multiple textual regimes,” and explore “those topoi [...] that lie on the margins of the traditionally privileged literary discourses” (*Mapping* 91).

³ In a related discussion, Rosalind Marsh outlines a list of principles, rather than stylistic elements, that Russian postmodernism shares in common with its Western counterpart: “the end of ideology and the rejection of all ‘total explanations’ of the world; the movement from a single culture to multiple and diverse forms of thought and culture; the deligitimization of the former literary canon; and the critique of institutions and institutionalized values” (87).

⁴ For early studies that demonstrate a resistance to engaging postmodernism with Second World cultures see: Katerina Clark’s “Changing Historical Paradigms in Soviet Culture” and Marjorie Perloff’s “Russian Postmodernism: An Oxymoron?”

as a reflection of transnational capitalism and American imperialism, while ignoring the cultural and economic specificities of peripheral nations (Chernetsky *Mapping* xvii, 6). In this regard, Arjun Appadurai's call to address "the production of locality" and the "agency of the local" – the need to recognize the process of indigenization as texts, phenomena, and ideas move across different societies – proves absolutely necessary in any discussion of post-Soviet postmodernity (Appadurai 178-200). After all, in the case of Soviet and post-Soviet literatures, postmodernism neither grew out of nor responded to "late capitalism" and modernism; instead, politically, economically, and literarily speaking, it was a response to and rejection of Soviet ideology and Soviet Socialist Realism (Marsh 87). Stemming from the experience of totalitarianism, the example of post-Soviet postmodern culture bridges the gap between considerations of postmodernism as an entirely multinational concept and postmodernism as a reflection of the realities of specific empires (and not only the US):

To locate only in the postmodern present our inability to 'map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects' (Jameson 1991: 44) is to ignore what it might have felt like to be subjugated by Empire – itself the great communicational and economic precursor to our current global multinational capitalism. (Hutcheon 175)

Postmodern experimentation in post-Soviet literatures, however ambivalent and indeterminate it may be, represents a historical consciousness that challenges the dominant cultural and political constraints of the present. Post-Soviet postmodern culture may leave

audiences with a proliferation of texts, but it does not stop at that.⁵ While engaging in seemingly random postmodern play, it unrelentingly interrogates the apparatuses and consequences of the Soviet/Russian Empire.

The ability of postmodernism to effectively and ethically critique the workings of empire has been the subject of fervent debates. Many postcolonial scholars have questioned “the politically compromised identity of the postmodern and its lack of a theory of agency” (Hutcheon 173-74). If the postmodern “image addiction” described by Jameson “effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project,” then trying to determine the political alignment of postmodern texts becomes a messy task (*Postmodernism* 46). Reading postmodern postcommunist texts from both the center (Russia) and the periphery (in this study, Armenia) can potentially untangle the “complicit” role of postmodernism from its “critical power.”⁶ That is to say, the subversive power of post-Soviet postmodernism creates a dialogue between postcolonial discourse and the politics of the former Second World.

The debates surrounding postcolonial discourse – its oversights, its limitations, its end – are complex and multi-layered. The question of the relationship of post-colonialism to the Soviet/post-Soviet realm is no less complicated. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts that Armenia’s “millennial hybridity” disqualifies it from being a post-colonial nation (*Other Asias*). For reasons he does not provide, Marc Nichanian explains that in the Soviet period, “nobody would speak of a Russian ‘colonization’ of Armenia” (13). Perhaps his reasoning

⁵ Jameson asserts that in postmodern texts, “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 18).

⁶ Chernetsky succinctly describes one of the drawbacks of Jameson’s approach to postmodernism: “the unpredictability of determining the complicity versus the critical power displayed by postmodernist artworks” (*Mapping* xvii).

stems from the fact that Armenians were “settlers in their own country” – a point he makes with regard to Eastern Armenia in the nineteenth century. On the opposite end of the debate, David Chioni Moore argues that the post-Soviet nations are all post-colonial. On the one hand, his article, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” raises many convincing points, among them the idea that, due to his political leanings, Edward Said avoids an in-depth discussion of Russia in *Orientalism*. On the other hand, some scholars argue that Moore’s insistence on the post-coloniality of the post-Soviet states results in an oversimplified, totalizing theory.

Meanwhile, postcolonial thought has been slow to take root in conversations about post-Soviet cultural production in Russia. The most obvious explanation for this lack of engagement with postcolonial discourse involves Russia’s position as a colonizer:

Many, in Russia and sometimes even abroad, persist in the prejudicial colonialist belief that [Russia] is the only post-Soviet state with an intellectual discourse of note. Such prejudices highlight the persistence of imperialist attitudes in Russia that survived remarkably well after the end of Soviet rule and explain why Russian intellectuals have remained by and large deaf not only to Western Marxism [...], but also to another critical discourse – that on postcolonialism. Until very recently, it was nowhere to be found in the pages of Russian scholarly publications...⁷ (Chernetsky *Mapping* 36)

In light of the debates about the postcoloniality of the Second World, the unevenness that characterizes the discourses about the region is undeniable. Accordingly, several literary and

⁷ For examples of Russian scholarship on Russia’s coloniality/postcoloniality, see Aleksandr Etkind’s “Fuko i tezis vnutrennei kolonizatsii: Postkolonial'nyi vzgliad na sovetское proshloe”; Boris Groys’s “Imena goroda”; and Madina Tlostanova’s *Postsovetskaia literature i estetika transkul'turatsii: Zhit' nikogda, pisat' niotkuda*.

cultural critics have exposed the tendency in scholarship to treat post-Soviet studies as Russian studies and to ignore the “imperialist aspect of Russian/Soviet culture” (Chernetsky *Mapping* 41).⁸ Along these same lines, my project intervenes in the discourse on post-Soviet postmodernity, by engaging the cultural production of another nation on the periphery of the former Second World – Armenia. While it has certainly been argued that postmodern texts from the center have offered a counterpoint to Russian neoimperialist politics and cultural discourse from within, reading Armenian cultural production alongside Russian texts allows for a reevaluation of the political commitment of postmodernism, and, more broadly speaking, the universality often attributed to the cultures of the various global/cultural centers (most commonly, the West, the US, and the center of the Second World – Russia). In other words, this comparative project asserts the importance of reading the specificities of minor national traditions in order to better inform grand hypotheses about trends in global or world literature.⁹

This dissertation approaches the politics of postcommunist Armenian and Russian postmodernity through the lens of corporal and spatial metaphors – metaphors that involve the body, mental health or (in)sanity, and spaces of confinement. I read these metaphors allegorically – as symbolic of the disorders of the nation-state, as fictional representations of the problems of postcommunist nation building and politics. The fictional characters in the literature of the period undergo crises of identity: they are insane or schizophrenic; their lives

⁸ Nataša Kovačević’s *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe’s Borderline Civilization* offers a comparative analysis of postcommunist East European and Russian literature, and Vitaly Chernetsky’s *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* draws parallels between Russian and Ukrainian literature. These pioneering works have set the groundwork for what we may now call comparative postcommunist literatures.

⁹ I reject Franco Moretti’s suggestion to approach the study of comparative literature through “distant reading,” a methodology according to which literary critics can use their knowledge about Euro-American canons in order to hypothesize about texts and minor national literary traditions without actually reading any of the texts or knowing the languages in which they were written (“Conjectures” 54-55).

are absurd; their sexual desires are perverted. The crisis of the self is rooted in the characters' actual place in time, the setting of the text (madhouses, hospitals, spaces of confinement, alleys, ruins). The emphasis on the interconnections between self and place makes it possible to read the texts as symbolic conceptualizations of the nation. Moreover, these works of fiction contribute to the "literary hegemony of the catastrophe genre":

Motifs associating the end of the century and the millennium with the end of the world – fatal illness, collapse, death, madness, doom – are concentrated in the image of the hospital and the madhouse, the place where a contemporary novel's hero is likely to be found, since he is characterized by a sick imagination and morbid fantasy (including historical fantasy), by the collapse of consciousness. (Ivanova qtd. in Chitnis 7)

As politically engaged texts, the works of the catastrophe genre are provocative in their approach to problematizing history, national and cultural mythology, and, above all, ideological constructs. In other words, just as postcolonial writing creates a counter-narrative to imperial discourse, postcommunist Armenian and Russian texts propose a reevaluation of Russian political and cultural imperialism.

Historically speaking, this study focuses on the postmodernist texts written during the first post-Soviet decade¹⁰ – a period marked by a complete infrastructural, political, and economic restructuring, which drastically affected the publishing landscape and the literary field. The formerly profitable Soviet publishing industry, the distribution system, and, eventually the entire book culture collapsed along with the Soviet Union:

¹⁰ Slavists have identified at least three types of Soviet/post-Soviet Russian postmodern culture "(with further qualifications for other ex-Soviet nations)": the postmodernism of the Stalinist period, which produced simulated realities; the experimental art of the 1970s and 1980s; and the post-Soviet postmodernism that began to develop in the 1990s (Chernetsky *Mapping* 25-26).

In the mid 1980s, prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union, the high nationwide demand for books made publishing one of the country's most profitable sectors. [...] Publishing houses' printing orders were based on estimates of Soyuzkniga – the centralized agency which collected and processed book orders made on the basis of publishers' lists. Printed copies were dispatched to the wholesale book depositories. Prepayment was unheard of. The system ran on non-interest-bearing credits extended to publishing houses by printing houses and the wholesale book-trade network. Publishing houses thus had nothing to do with distribution and ran no risks. Relatively low prices for the printing and distribution services ensured the sector's financial stability... (Alekseeva 18)

The most obvious problems of the post-Soviet publishing industry involved the funding of publications and the distribution of books.¹¹ The industry saw devastating declines in the number of works of fiction published, while it struggled to circulate a relatively modest number of new publications.¹² To further complicate matters, the number of readers declined, as the culture of engaging with literature underwent a complete transformation.¹³

¹¹ In "Publishing in Russia 2012: Publishers in a Changing Industry. Exploring Ways to Move Ahead While Going Increasingly Digital" Teri Tan describes the "distorted" book market and "highly monopolized" distribution system in post-Soviet Russia, while Daniel Kalder's article "Russia's \$3.3bn Publishing Marketplace: An Overview" provides an account of contemporary distribution problems, which, as he points out, date back to tsarist times. The founder of Vagrius Publishing and the deputy director of the Russian Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication, Vladimir Grigoriev echoes these concerns in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*.

Though in much smaller numbers and with fewer resources, Armenia has undeniably had to deal with similar problems – a drastic decline in state funds allotted to the publication of books, the collapse of state-sponsored and state-organized book circulation, the lack of bookstores, the rise in book prices, the impoverished library system, and what some have called the downright "absence of a literary marketplace" (Andashian, Tanielian, Mardirosian, Hakhverdian "Uzbeks," and Hraparak.am).

¹² The data comparing trends in 1993 and 1994 gives a general sense of the decline in book publication and distribution during the early post-Soviet period in Russia: "The publication of fiction in 1994 dropped to

The complete breakdown of the Soviet publishing machine combined with the simultaneous emergence of the Internet and digital media¹⁴ created a competitive literary environment that no longer guaranteed the financial independence of writers. Gone were the days when writers could make a decent living as novelists, playwrights, or poets. The postmoderns of this period were forced to meet the challenges of the new publishing

96.5% of the 1993 level in number of titles, but much more sharply, to 49.3%, in terms of circulation” (Alekseeva 21, 1996).

Denis Maternovsky offers some compelling data on the long term fluctuations in publication trends, which indicate a drastic decline in numbers overall:

While books' diversity increased, the number fell. From the Soviet-era high watermark of 2.3 billion editions printed in 1988, the total number of new books had fallen by almost half by 1992, to 1.3 billion. This decline in part reflects the fact that data for the 14 republics were no longer included with Russia's figure after they became independent.

Throughout most of the decade, the book market continued to shrink, with the number of new books plunging another 70 percent to hit an all-time low of 408 million in 1998, the year of the financial crisis. Four years later, though, in 2002, the book industry had recovered somewhat and was back to producing just fewer than 600 million copies.

To take an example that involves book sales, in 2009, the Russian book market had shrunk by 10 percent from the previous year to 70 billion rubles (ARMENPRESS).

In contrast to the abundance of statistics on the Russian book market, no comparable data is available on book sales in post-Soviet Armenia over the long term. However, it is clear that the book market has shrunk to the degree that it is impossible to cover the cost of publishing works of fiction through revenue from sales (Hakhverdian “Selling Books” and “Uzbeks”). Data has been published annually since 2007 on the number of works of fiction published, with the numbers broken down into categories for prose, poetry, drama, and “other genres.” The statistics show that since the 2007 high of 344 titles, the numbers have steadily tumbled to an all-time low of 243 in 2011 (Book-chamber).

¹³ Although Russia is ranked the world’s third largest producer of books, recent statistics show that the number of people who read books continues to decline by 5 to 7 percent annually (Kalder “Russia’s \$3.3bn Publishing Marketplace”). Data from studies covering the first post-Soviet decade indicates that despite the increase in literary variety (in terms of the types of books, topics, and genres), aggregate print runs declined by 73 to 75 percent and, overall, the number of people who do not read at all increased from 23 to 34 percent of the adult population (Gudkov 45-46). The data comparing Soviet and post-Soviet print runs for literary magazines shows some of the sharpest declines in numbers accompanied by considerable increases in variety (Latynina and Dewhirst 235, 238-39).

While comprehensive data is not available in Armenia’s case, it is safe to assume that the situation there is comparable to, if not worse than, the Russian environment. For example, the standard print run for works of fiction during the Soviet era was 3000 or more; the post-Soviet standard is a mere 400 to 500 copies. According to the president of Hayastan Publishers, Vahakn Sarkisian, the most popular books see sales of 50 to 70 copies, despite the fact that Armenia boasts one of the highest literacy rates in the world (Tanielian and Specter).

¹⁴ In 2012, though electronic books remained a minor segment of the legal publishing industry, Oleg Novikov identified Internet piracy as a serious problem: “90% of books are downloaded from pirate sites, which seriously undermines the entire book market as a whole” (qtd. in Kalder). On the other hand, the Internet has been an enabling medium: in both Russia and Armenia it has allowed unfindable texts to be published electronically, alleviated distribution problems, and raised interest in literature by facilitating dialogue between readers.

environment, which pressured them to work across different genres in order to succeed.¹⁵

Those who were particularly successful penetrated the market of cultural production by writing plays, novels, and film scripts, and, in some cases, by also producing art and illustrations. The post-Soviet world of narrative arts, with its assimilation of genres, came to resemble a phenomenon that Henry Jenkins has described as “transmedia storytelling”:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption. Redundancy burns up fan interest and causes franchises to fail. Offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty. The economic logic of a horizontally integrated entertainment industry – that is, one where a single company may have roots across all of the different media sectors – dictates the flow of content across media. Different media attract different market niches. Films and television probably have the most diverse audiences; comics and games the narrowest. A good transmedia franchise works to attract multiple constituencies by pitching

¹⁵ I am grateful to David MacFadyen for drawing my attention to the impact that the post-Soviet publishing environment has had on contemporary cultural production.

the content somewhat differently in the different media. If there is, however, enough to sustain those different constituencies – and if each work offers fresh experiences – then you can count on a crossover market that will expand the potential gross.

Popular artists – working in the cracks of the media industry – have realized that they can surf this new economic imperative to produce more ambitious and challenging works. (loc 2043-2053)

Although Jenkins deals exclusively with the narrative crossover that occurs between various types of media – film, television, radio, and digital media,¹⁶ print media, video games, etc. – his observations resonate in the specific dynamics that developed in the post-Soviet literary landscape and literary profession. The generic boundaries that more or less used to compartmentalize novelists, screenwriters, playwrights, poets, and television personalities became less distinct in the post-Soviet world, as it became more common for authors to tell different versions of their stories across genres and media platforms.¹⁷ Despite the fact that the literary arts no longer carried the cachet that they used to,¹⁸ there was a new dynamic that empowered post-Soviet authors – the imperative to work across multiple media *and* genres of fiction. That is to say, the new difficulties posed by post-Soviet cultural production, consumption, and distribution also brought with them the possibility for the most successful authors to become “franchises” in their own right.

¹⁶ Digital media includes electronic literature, which is “generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized [and] is by contrast ‘digital born,’ a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer” (Hayles 3).

¹⁷ Though it was not unheard of for authors of earlier periods to write in multiple genres, it has become the norm in the post-Soviet era (Kalantaryan 136).

¹⁸ See Latynina and Dewhirst for a discussion of the devaluation of the role and function of literature in the post-Soviet period (234-36).

The logic for the selection of dramatic works and novels in this study is based on the recognition that generic boundaries in the post-Soviet world are no longer as rigid as they used to be. In other words, the definitions of any given genre have become increasingly inclusive, as each definition readily incorporates elements from various media and other genres.¹⁹ But beyond the familiar postmodern intertextual and intergeneric play of the texts in question, authors' cultural output has also become more dynamic, because it has carved out a significant presence in transmedia and transgenre storytelling. In the case of the Russian authors in this study, probably the most dynamic post-Soviet Russian transmedia and transgenre franchise, Vladimir Sorokin has produced novels, short stories, plays, film scripts, a libretto for the Bolshoi Theater, and multi-media projects, such as *Deep Into Russia* (V glub' Rossii). (The latter is an album comprised of photographs depicting the conceptual artist Oleg Kulik having sex with animals and captioned with short texts written by Sorokin.) And as though all of that were not enough, in addition to writing a blog on a website owned by a billionaire, Sorokin has even made an unexpected appearance in a "corny hidden camera show on Russian TV" (Kalder). Some of the most fitting descriptions of his place in the world of cultural production indicate the reach of his output: he is undeniably "Russia's literary monster" and "a cultural phenomenon" (Kalder).

Yet another "phenomenon," Victor Pelevin has published novels, short stories, novellas, essays, articles, and translations. His novels are well known for their incorporation of various genres, including films, music, poetry, and drama; one of them, *Helmet of Horror* (Shlem uzhasa) is written in the form of a group Internet chat session. Three of his novels,

¹⁹ For a discussion of the malleability of the novel as a genre in the Russian context see Igor Shaitanov, Vasili Aksenov, et al. in "Roman li to, chto ia pishu? Otchet o Bukerovskoi konferentsii." For a discussion about the erosion of genre as a rigid distinction in contemporary Armenian literature, see Zhenia Kalantaryan's *Urvagtserardi hay grakanut'yan* (123-125).

The Sacred Book of the Werewolf, *Buddha's Little Finger*, and *Generation P*, have been made into films, and one more – *Empire V* – is currently underway. A further testament to his success as a literary franchise – Pelevin's prose works have frequently been staged as plays, one of which was an interactive, multimedia performance.²⁰ Pelevin has made it a point to incorporate art in his texts, most of which have been illustrated or have inspired illustrations. The author's website displays the illustrations of his work, and it also includes a call for new illustrations. One journalist describes Pelevin as "Russia's most important living writer," citing his diverse abilities and pursuits as the reason for his unclassifiability: "He's Russia's first great writer who has worked as a copywriter in an ad agency, is a practicing Buddhist, *and* is also an enthusiastic fan of American popular culture" (Curtis).

Among the Armenian authors discussed in this dissertation, Gurgen Khanjyan is a novelist, playwright, screenwriter, essayist, and editor. His plays have been staged in theaters internationally – in Yerevan, Stepanakert, Tbilisi, Los Angeles, and Aleppo – and they have been aired on television and radio broadcasts. In addition to being adapted as films, his scripts have been used as material for television skits. He is one of the most widely published authors in Armenia today (Hovsepyan). The other Armenian authors, Perch Zeytuntsyan and Aghasi Ayvazyan belong to an older generation of writers, who have been publishing since the 1950s. Perhaps not immediately recognizable as a good fit among the most transgressive authors, Perch Zeytuntsyan has published novels, short stories, novellas, plays, poetry, a dramatic novel, and translations. He is an active public speaker, who has served as Armenia's first Minister of Culture. He has positioned himself as a dissenting voice from within the literary establishment, making significant attempts at breaking away from conventional themes, ideas, and the limits of literary genres since the late Soviet period (Kalantaryan 105).

²⁰ For a list of adaptations and performance schedules see lenta.ru and nado.znate.ru.

The late Aghasi Ayvazyan has written short stories, novellas, plays, film scripts, a series of prose sketches, a dramatic novel, essays, and articles; he was also a public speaker, editor, journalist, director, and artist. Fifteen of his scripts have been made into films, and he has directed and produced four films. His work extended to a broad range of media and generic platforms, impacting a large segment of the entire cultural field. In addition to working across genres, all three authors have had a particularly notable influence in the dramatic arts, which have experienced a vibrant reawakening in the post-Soviet era. In fact, theater has been an effective medium that has facilitated transgenre cultural production: it is common to see prose writers, poets, critics, directors, and actors writing plays in Armenia. After all, theatrical productions have a wider reach, and, as Perch Zeytuntsyan explains it, the audience of a single dramatic performance is equal to the print run of a single work of fiction (Kalantaryan 137-138).

The works of these five authors create an opportunity to consider the politics and social impact of literature in the post-Soviet era. In the case of the Russian authors, the mixed critical and public reception of Sorokin and Pelevin's works attests to both the widespread reach of their output and the subversive power of their postmodern texts. To take an example of the controversy surrounding their works, in 2000, *Idushchie vmeste* (Marching Together), a conservative "civic organization" began to wage a campaign against these authors. The members of the group believed that these authors' postmodern texts were a threat to literature and its purpose. They went around Moscow collecting Pelevin's books from readers with the intention of returning them to the author, and they collected Sorokin's works, placing them in giant replica of a toilet (Hubert 147).

Having to deal with greater financial constraints and the demands imposed by the structure of the local literary profession, the Armenian authors have constantly had to negotiate between the norms set by the post-Soviet literary establishment and the ability to break out of the status quo thematically, ideologically, and formally. The radical and outspoken contemporary poet, Violet Grigorian, describes the perpetuation of censorship in post-Soviet-Armenia:

A long time has passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of state-mandated censorship. Nevertheless, censorship survived in the people's spirit and in those who continued to govern the literary world: the institutions that remain from Soviet times (the Academy of Sciences, literature departments, publishers and Stalinesque creative unions, epitomized by the Armenian Writers Union). While these replaced Soviet ideology with a national agenda and loosened the restrictions to some degree, they continued to monopolize literature by default. Added to this was the fact that the only audience for any literary publication consisted solely of the authors and their colleagues, and literature never had a chance to escape from these narrow literary circles.²¹

Unsurprisingly, then, Khanjyan, Zeytuntsyan, and Ayvazyan have all been or are members of the Writers Union, a conservative institutional remnant of the Soviet Union. At the same time, almost paradoxically, Gurgun Khanjyan has explored almost every taboo in his works, to the point that the morality, appropriateness, and even the language of his texts have been

²¹ I have made minor revisions to the English translation that appears on Inknagir.org, the website for the online and print journal that Grigorian runs.

For a similar characterization of the institutional pressures that writers face in Armenia, see Varuzhan Ayvazyan in *Grakan t'ert'* No. 10 (2005).

questioned countless times, and his publications have given rise to heated debates in the literary press. As part of an older and less scandalous generation of writers, Perch Zeytuntsyan and Aghasi Ayvazyan wrote works that were fiercely independent from the Soviet party line. In this regard, Ayvazyan's style is closer to Khanjyan's in its incorporation of surreal and absurd elements. Zeytuntsyan has been less of a risk-taker in terms of the themes that he propounds and, as an establishment author, his plays have been staged most frequently; it is therefore very telling that his most daring post-Soviet absurdist play, *Born and Died*, has never been staged. Both Zeytuntsyan and Ayvazyan, though recognized and lauded by the establishment, have spoken out against conformity and restrictions on art in the post-Soviet era. Despite the stylistic differences in these three authors' works, they have all drawn attention to Armenia's postcoloniality – the influence of neoimperial powers, the inheritance of the Soviet legacy and its impact on Armenia's government, and the nation's peripheral position on the global stage. By questioning power dynamics and the apparatuses of the state, these authors are united in their commitment to developing an empowered and empowering literary tradition. In this regard, Gurgen Khanjyan's reflections on the purpose of literature apply to the context in which all three authors have produced their works: "I don't know how much literature has influenced the public, how much it has influenced the times or man in general [...] But, in my opinion, literature must be concerned with transforming the world. [...] Maybe this is impossible, but if I take up my pen and feel that I don't have anything to wage battle against in the world, I won't write anymore"²² (*Grakan tert'* 2004).

²² «Ես չգիտեմ, թե ինչքանով է գրականությունն ազդել հասարակության, ժամանակի վրայ, մարդու վրայ առհասարակ... բայց, իմ կարծիքով, գրականության խնդիրը աշխարհը վերափոխելը պէտք է լինի... Գուցէ հնարաւոր չէ, բայց եթէ ես գրիչ վերցնեմ ու գգամ, որ աշխարհի հետ կռիւ տանելու բան չունեմ, չեմ գրի այլեւս»:

By bringing some of the plays and novels of these five writers together, this dissertation sheds light on the directions subversive literature has taken in the post-Soviet era. In doing so, it proposes to rethink our assumptions about absurdism, postmodernism, and the cultures of the center and the periphery. The dissertation begins by examining the role of the absurd in post-Soviet Armenian drama through an analysis of three plays: Aghasi Ayvazyan's *Props*, Perch Zeytuntsyan's *Born and Died*, and Gurgen Khanjyan's *The Guards of Ruins*. Scholarship on the theater of the absurd commonly divides East and West European variants of this tradition – it reads the former as political commentary, the latter as existential or metaphysical commentary. My interpretation of the contemporary Armenian absurdist tradition exposes the inaccuracies in the treatment of the cultural production of the East and West and, at the same time, refutes ideas about Armenia's cultural belatedness (a perception fueled by the very division that scholarship has created). The example of Armenia's theatrical tradition gives occasion to reconsider literary discourses that privilege the universality of Western cultural production.

Through an analysis of the plays' settings of confinement and the characters' lack of agency, I demonstrate that these texts straddle the line between an exploration of the universal, existential problems of being and an exploration of Armenia's political position as an independent nation state vis-à-vis its relationship with Russia and the United States. The aesthetics of the Armenian absurd speak to both the general absurdities of life and the absurdities of the post-Soviet world; the uncertainties in the dramatic texts translate into the uncertainties of the postcommunist period. The Armenian plays grapple with Russia's political moves in the post-Soviet period – its wishes to reestablish its empire in the

Caucasus.²³ In doing so, they draw attention to the fact “that Soviet imperial legacies somehow complicate the formation or malformation of post-Soviet polities” (Cooley 7). The term post-Soviet in literature and politics has not meant a radical break from the Soviet. Accordingly, the plays of the Armenian absurd express an anxiety that acknowledges the possibility of the reestablishment of Russian domination. The post- in post-Soviet, like the post- in post-colonialism does not mark a categorical end:

Postcolonialism has to be perceived as a *process of postcolonializing*. To understand this process, it is necessary to disentangle the term ‘postcolonial’ from its implicit dimension of chronological suppression, that aspect of its prefix which suggests that the colonial stage has been surpassed and left behind. It is important to highlight instead a notion of the term as a process of coming-into-being and of struggle *against* colonialism and its aftereffects. In this respect the prefix would be fused with the sense invoked by ‘anti.’

(Quayson 9)

Along these same lines, the absurdist Armenian plays voice concerns about the aftermath of Soviet rule, suggesting that the post-Soviet period represents an era of confronting and coping with the Soviet past.

I read the absurdist tradition, with its emphasis on illogicality (or, more precisely, the logic of illogicality), unrealistic situations, and ambiguous meaning, as what we might call proto-postmodernist or pointing toward postmodernism. I demonstrate that both stylistically and thematically, the concerns of the Armenian theater of the absurd are a natural transition to the third part of the dissertation, which deals with the representation of schizophrenia and

²³ For convincing evidence that details Russia’s quest for reestablishing an empire in the post-Soviet period, see Kenneth Wayne Pope Jr.’s “Russian Imperialism: The Past That Haunts the Future.”

mental hospitals in Gurgun Khanjyan's *The Hospital* and Victor Pelevin's *Chapaev and Pustota*. My comparative approach to these two postmodern novels, one by a Russian writer, Victor Pelevin, and the other by an Armenian writer, Gurgun Khanjyan, creates a conversation between the center and the periphery. The contrapuntal lines of this conversation explore a "postmodernism of resistance"²⁴ that further problematizes Russia's position on the global political stage: it exposes the Russian state's neoimperial tendencies and the problematic nature of the state's control of information and production of national(ist) myth-making. This comparison further demonstrates the alignment of the concerns of literary and historical studies, with the recent surge of interest in Russia as empire.²⁵

Just as the absurdist plays present characters that occupy and subsequently try to overcome their inconsequential subject positions, the heroes of these postmodern novels try to overcome the constraints of their psyche. In other words, both the plays and the novels portray characters that are outside the norm in their struggles: the plays' heroes are illogical and unrealistic; the novels' heroes are schizophrenic and the texts themselves question their existence. My analysis of the novels focuses on shifts in narrative time – between the past and the present – and the novels' settings – institutions that function to discipline and restrict their patients. Because the patients' reality constantly shifts between past and present, their

²⁴ I borrow the phrase "postmodernism of resistance" from Foster: "a resistant postmodernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them [...] It seeks to question rather than to exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations" (xii).

²⁵ Examples of historical scholarship on Russia as empire include Brower and Lazzerini's *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, Burbank and Ransel's *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire*, Suny and Martin's *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Era of Lenin and Stalin*, and the political-science print and online journal *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space*. Literary-cultural studies that use a largely historical framework include Greenleaf and Moeller-Sally's *Russian Subjects: Empire, Nation and the Culture of the Golden Age* and Ram's *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire*.

ruptured, schizophrenic consciousness represents a bridge between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet era. The texts reveal that the characters' mental disorders are a metaphor for the contemporary moment – a moment that is informed by Soviet history. Once again, these novels link the crises of identity with historical rupture and change.

The fourth part of the dissertation returns to the genre of drama, with an analysis of Vladimir Sorokin's plays, *Dismorphomania* and *The Honeymoon*. It ties together the themes in the preceding chapters on both the drama and the novel: it focuses on the portrayal of psychological abnormalities through overlapping narratives and convoluted plots that are tied to Russia's history. Like the characters of the absurdist plays and the patients in the mental hospital, Sorokin's characters are at the margins of society. Taking the traditions of the Russian grotesque and Russian absurdism to new extremes, Sorokin's approach to his characters' identity crises is uniquely concerned with the power of Russian nationalist discourse – and a complete rejection of it. Sorokin's plays represent the problems of Russia's national past as they relate to its present moment of nation building. As the author himself notes, “[Russia's] government hasn't become accustomed to the fact yet that Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Baltic states – in fact, the entire former Soviet Union – are now independent countries” (Doerry and Schepp). Because they confront the history of the Russian/Soviet empire, Sorokin's plays have a therapeutic potential: they take audiences to emotionally uncomfortable places in order to force them to confront the consequences of the Soviet legacy.

Taken together, these three sections deal with texts that question the limits of logic and explore ways in which to write beyond those limits; the outcome is “a postmodernism of resistance.” The texts portray unusual, abnormal, mad, and marginal characters, who have

lived through multiple identities, multiple formations of consciousness. Their characterization is based on the search for a unified identity through a confrontation with a traumatic historical memory. This confrontation with history becomes a means by which to subvert Soviet and post-Soviet Russian imperialism – a form of “resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial [read, Soviet] aftermath” (Gandhi 4).

PART II: MADNESS AND CONFINEMENT IN THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD

Chapter 2

The Politics of the Theater of the Absurd:

New Considerations Offered by Post-Soviet Armenian Drama

Any discussion of Eastern Armenian literature produced in the present-day Republic of Armenia requires at least a brief introduction to the historico-political contexts that inform the evolution of Armenian letters in the Soviet period. Armenia succumbed to Soviet power and lost its short-lived independence in 1920. As was the case throughout the Soviet Union, early on in the Soviet Republic of Armenia authors were forced to comply with restrictions on the forms of acceptable artistic expression. The Stalinist purges, beginning in the late 1920s and gradually intensifying to their apex in 1937, ended the little intellectual tolerance that was left in the republic. All writers had to conform to the norms set down by the state-run Writers Union. Furthermore, all artists had to follow the requirements of Socialist Realism by eliminating the depiction of the negative aspects of Soviet life in their works, creating positive, exemplary heroes, and writing, composing, or creating in a realistic style (Sunny 347, 355, 357, 362-63, 365). Realistic in this sense was almost synonymous with bright and optimistic, making true creativity practically impossible through the end of Stalin's reign in 1953. To describe the severity of the cultural and literary losses suffered during this period, scholars aptly refer to the Stalinist purges as resulting in a long-term "intellectual genocide."²⁶

The prevalence of ideological and artistic conformity began to dwindle during the Khrushchev period, which was marked by the "thaw" in cultural restrictions. The increased

²⁶ For example, see Gabrielyan (51).

tolerance of the 1950s and 1960s led to an explosive reemergence of nationalism in Armenian art and literature, which was further intensified by the expansion of the bounds of freedom of expression under Gorbachev in the mid-1980s (Suny 369, 371, 379). Finally, by 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia became an independent nation on the path to building a democracy – one in which the state no longer directly controlled what could and could not be published and read. The new era marked a greater openness to aesthetic and stylistic experimentation and the freedom to broach formerly taboo subjects in literature. Authors began to explore themes like eroticism, incest, and the body. Some of the new literature offered socio-political critiques of the past and the present, while other works were solely concerned with aesthetic experimentation and abstract or transcendental concepts. In a word, Armenian literature experienced a radical diversification in every sense – in terms of purpose, content, and form.

During this period of late-Soviet and early post-Soviet artistic freedom, several authors produced plays, labeled as absurdist by contemporary scholarship.²⁷ Among the considerably long list are three plays that I will consider at length in the next three chapters, Aghasi Ayzvazyan's *Props* (Dekorner), Perch Zeytuntsyan's *Born and Died* (Tsnvel ē u mahats'el), and Gurgen Khanjyan's *The Guards of Ruins* (Averakneri bahaknerë). Scholars have noted that absurdist plays of the European tradition were not available in Armenia until the late 1970s, and, as a result, Armenian authors only had a real opportunity to experiment with this theatrical convention in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This type of literary history remains problematic in that it places Armenian cultural production in the position of

²⁷ See for example Nishan Parlakian and Peter Cowe's *Modern Armenian Drama: An Anthology* (330), Herand Markarian's *Contemporary Armenian Drama* (32), and Zhenia Kalantaryan's *Urvagtser ardi hay grakanut'yan* (153-158). These studies offer broad surveys of literary trends; there is no in-depth study or analysis of the Armenian absurdist plays to date.

“catching up” with the West. Furthermore, it is not enough to say that the boundless freedom in the arts after the collapse of the Soviet Union finally allowed Armenian authors to produce anti-realistic works in the form of absurdist anti-plays. Certainly, these plays emphatically reject ideologically motivated art – the art of monological meaning – and, therefore, could only be produced in the absence of censorship. However, there must be something about these plays that *specifically* speaks to and about the post-Soviet era of independence. After all, absurdist plays continued to be written throughout the first post-Soviet decade and beyond it. This trend suggests that the plays do not merely offer an opposition to the formerly imposed Socialist Realist aesthetic, but that they also comment on contemporary realities. That is, they must have something new to offer to the existing conversation about the theater of the absurd.

Scholars have rightfully classified the Armenian plays in question under the category of the theater of the absurd, a tradition that began over half a century earlier. One need only look to Martin Esslin’s foundational *The Theatre of the Absurd* in order to conclude that *Props, Born and Died*, and *The Guards of Ruins* all conform to the conventions of this tradition: the characters represent a particular attitude or idea, as opposed to demonstrating psychological complexity or a developed personality; there are no clearly positive, clearly negative, or “logically valid” characters; the characters’ conversations are often incoherent or consist of blabbering; ideological propositions or intellectual problems lack a clear-cut solution; the adventures and the fate of the characters are not a focal concern or they remain unknown; the sequence of events often produces a lack of chronology or cyclicity in the plot; the plays often present a pessimistic or hopeless view of the individual’s basic situation; and arbitrariness replaces explanations for character motivation, action, or dialogue (*Theatre*

54-55). Alongside the unifying characteristics he observes in absurdist plays, Esslin emphasizes the unique qualities of the individual texts:

By its very nature, the Theatre of the Absurd is not, and never can be, a literary movement or school, for its essence lies in the free and unfettered exploration, by each of the writers concerned, of his own individual vision. [...] The dramatists of the Theater of the Absurd are, each in his own way and independent of the others, engaged in establishing a new dramatic convention. (*Theatre* 265)

As I will show, Esslin does not always follow his own advice in his approach to reading absurdist dramatic works. Instead, he succumbs to the urge to compartmentalize the texts he interprets into subcategories that effectively erase the uniqueness of the individual plays. When actually followed, however, Esslin's recommendations for a consideration of the absurd as a principle that individual texts execute in distinct and varied ways would enrich our readings of these plays by pointing to the broad range in their approaches to subject matter and form (22). According to this type of approach, only an in-depth analysis that considers the specific, contemporary context of the Armenian plays in question can carve out a space for them in the theater of the absurd – one that does justice to their uniqueness and individual characteristics.

By moving beyond the definition-based categorization of *Props, Born and Died*, and *The Guards of Ruins*, this chapter explores their contribution to the tradition of the absurd: they can be read as texts that engage with the politics of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet era in the Republic of Armenia. Beginning with Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, readings of absurdist plays exhibit either a fair amount of tension in their discussions of

political interpretations or simply a reluctance to commit to such interpretations. Introducing Armenian plays into this conversation allows for a reconsideration of the political relevance of the theater of the absurd. Inspired by the historical moment from which they stem, these plays highlight anxieties in redefining Armenia's position on the global stage: *Props, Born and Died*, and *The Guards of Ruins* observe the "powerlessness of man," and, specifically, allegorically,²⁸ they relate this powerlessness to Armenia's position vis-à-vis world powers. In other words, they suggest the futility of being an independent nation, when the source of power lies elsewhere. The now almost cliché fixation of the theater of the absurd - the "anxiety of man" - finds a parallel in the anxiety of Armenia's relevance as a nation state.

The aforementioned ambivalence toward political readings of the theatre of the absurd probably stems from the lack of what we might call historical realia in these plays. For example, as Esslin points out, "In the late 1940s Beckett so thoroughly rejected the naturalistic theater that to use even the name of a town that could actually be found on a map would have appeared as 'unspeakably vulgar'" (*Theatre* 92). Similarly, Ionesco made it clear that in his theater the "social content" is incidental, secondary (Schamschula 339). In many absurdist plays man's accidental circumstances of social position, historical context, and time become irrelevant and therefore nonexistent: "In these plays, some of which are labeled "anti-plays," neither the time nor the place of the action are ever clearly stated. (At the beginning of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* the clock strikes seventeen.) The characters hardly have any individuality and often even lack a name; moreover, halfway through the action they tend to change their nature completely" (Esslin "Theatre" 3).

²⁸ Here again, Esslin's point about the connection between the plays of the theater of the absurd and the tradition of allegorical plays starting with those of the Italian Renaissance proves useful ("Theatre" 15). Reading these plays allegorically and paying particular attention to historic details incorporated in their content reveals their connection to post-Soviet political realities.

At the same time, however, the absence of a concrete time and place makes various political, religious, and historical readings possible: the plays' metaphorical content is relatable to a host of specific contexts. Paradoxically, the lack of specificity in terms of historical realia has made it possible for audiences and scholars to read the plays simultaneously as political *and* apolitical texts. Esslin's description of Ionesco's relationship to politics offers a telling example of this very dynamic:

All of Ionesco's theatre contains two strands side by side – complete freedom in the exercise of his imagination and a strong element of the polemical. [...] Ionesco's plays are a complex mixture of poetry, fantasy, nightmare – and cultural and social criticism. In spite of the fact that Ionesco rejects and detests any openly didactic theater, [...] he is convinced that any genuinely new and experimental writing is bound to contain a polemical element. (*Theatre* 168-169)

Here, Ionesco's rejection of singular, definable meaning does not preclude engagement with socio-political issues. Similarly, the lack of "social content" does not necessarily preclude political relevance.

Despite his acknowledgement of the complex interrelation between socio-political critique and abstract, indecipherable references and dialogue in the absurd, throughout his book, Esslin places emphasis on the messages of absurdist plays that apply to "the absurdity of the human condition." Sometimes, he does so at the expense of the specific, however subtle, political content of the plays. For example, in his reading of Ionesco's *The Lesson*, he unjustifiably ignores a historically-grounded detail in order to further his broad, universally applicable reading of the absurd. Esslin explains that Touchard's interpretation of the play

demonstrates that the teacher-student relationship always involves an inherent form of domination. According to Touchard, this relationship functions as a metaphor for dictatorship (Esslin 147). Esslin, however, minimizes the relevance of Touchard's political reading in his own interpretation:

[Touchard's] interpretation is somewhat rationalistic, although it is supported by the maid's handing the professor a swastika armband at the end of the play. The political implication of domination is certainly present in *The Lesson*, but it is only one, and perhaps a minor, aspect of its main proposition, which hinges on the sexual nature of all power and the relationship between language and power as the basis of all human ties. [...] It is all authority, therefore, which is shown up in its sexual, sadistic nature. What Ionesco is saying is that even behind so apparently harmless an exercise of authority as the teacher-pupil relationship, all the violence and domination, all the aggressiveness and possessiveness, the cruelty and lust are present that make up any manifestation of power. (*Theatre* 147-148)

Esslin's emphasis shifts the focus from the more specific phenomenon of "dictatorship" to the broader notion of power dynamics, as it applies to all human relationships.

Similarly, in his discussion of Genet, Esslin avoids committing to a political reading:

Genet's theater is, profoundly, a theater of social protest. Yet, like that of Ionesco, and of Adamov before his conversion to epic realism, it resolutely rejects political commitment, political argument, didacticism, or propaganda. In dealing with the dream world of the outcast of society, it explores the

human condition, the alienation of man, his solitude, his futile search for meaning and reality. (233)

According to this description of Genet's work, "man" as an ambiguous individual takes precedence over man as a concretely social or political being. This broad terminology has a strong presence in Esslin's scholarship on the West European theater of the absurd, so much so that it finds resonances in the thinking of many later critics, who adopt this universalist approach to the theater of the absurd: "Absurdist drama is ultimately conceptual, for in the end it too seeks to project an intellectualized perception – however oblique or abstruse – about the human condition" (Cardullo 13).

Esslin's assessment becomes the basis for related readings that draw an artificial distinction between West and East European renditions of the absurd. According to this type of criticism, the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter focus on metaphysical themes that represent the human condition, while those of Václav Havel and Slawomir Mrozek present political protests against totalitarian systems: "The Absurd of West European drama is the absurdity of existence. Socialist Absurd is the absurdity of the bureaucratic system, of the problems of daily life" (Hashamova 444). This attempt at categorization ignores the rich nuances that individual absurdist plays offer.

Even scholars who try to refute this binary opposition reiterate a subtler formulation with the same dynamic in tact:

Satiric aspects are by no means restricted to Havel or to the theater of the absurd in Eastern Europe. First of all, didacticism has survived in some reduced measure even in the works of Beckett, Ionesco, or Max Frisch. On the other hand, a didactic function is not indispensable in East European dramas

of the absurd. The Beckett type of play, with a strong existential component, is reflected in Zbigniew Herbert's *Drugi pokoj* or Mrozek's *Striptease*, and Havel's *Horsky hotel* can hardly be called a social satire. The distinction between a theater of the absurd in the West and in the East, the presence or absence of a satiric or didactic component of any kind is unjustified. The only statement we can make is that the satiric component is more prominent in the East European theater of the absurd than it is in the West European.

(Schamschula 340)

Or:

In the Western world the appeal of absurd drama is largely based on the feeling that it reveals the senselessness of life, and few question its forthright abandoning of rational thinking. It is regarded as a truly "existential" theater in the sense that it aims, in Ionesco's words, at "discovering the fundamental problem common to all men."

The recent wave of absurd plays in Eastern Europe is derived from a wholly different conception. Although here too we may talk about a "rediscovery of the human condition," it is a different, a specific condition – the context is not metaphysical but social. (Stankiewicz 190-91)

At least Stankiewicz goes on to show that East European audiences have produced political readings of Ionesco and Beckett's plays: "To the Warsaw audience Ionesco and Beckett are felt to be political writers. Their characters, like Mrozek's slogan-spouting little men, are seen as victims of a specific way of life forced upon them" (189). Shades of grey also appear in metaphysical readings of East European plays in the West. These examples suggest that, as

a whole, the interpreter largely determines the political relevance and applicability of the plays of the absurd. They also suggest an inherent politics of the metaphysical in absurdist plays – it is not that the Western tradition is entirely apolitical, but rather the political bent is more overt in some plays or in some interpretations of a given play than in others.

Recognizing these tensions in interpretations of the plays of the theater of the absurd helps to do away with the already trite and embarrassingly elitist notion that “universality” in art lies in the West, while political art is a thing of the East. Furthermore, this somewhat lengthy discussion about politics and the tradition of the theater of the absurd leads to the conclusion that all of these plays, including the Armenian variants in question, simultaneously facilitate general, “universal” and particular - socially and historically grounded - readings. This assertion does not suggest that the plays of the absurd present didactic meaning or that they offer solutions to political problems; instead, it proposes that, as a result of its commitment to the political, the theater of the absurd goes beyond the representation of the anxiety caused by the human condition. Despite the fact that the theater of the absurd “does not present its audience with sets of social facts and examples of political behavior,” (Esslin *Theatre* 411-12) it remains politically engaged through its exploration of human relationships, social interaction, language, and communication.

One might also highlight the connection between absurdist plays and politics by emphasizing the role of defiance in these works: “Defiance is key, first of all, to understanding Camus[’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*], and, thus, to a new understanding of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd” (Bennet 17). Other scholars have made related observations about power and agency in absurdist plays: in Ionesco’s *The Lesson* “language is [...] shown as an *instrument of power*” (Esslin *Theatre* 146); of course, most obviously, his *Rhinoceros*

explores the question of agency and the possibility of revolt; Vladimir and Estragon are tramps – they are unable to act and are therefore acted upon (Hristić 360); and *Tango* is just one of Mrożek’s plays that wages a “war against power’s savage parody of logic” (Esslin *Theatre* 33). Esslin concludes, “If people in these plays appear as mere marionettes, helpless puppets without any will of their own, passively at the mercy of blind fate and meaningless circumstance, do we, in fact, in our overorganized world, still possess any genuine initiative or power to decide our own destiny?” (“Theatre” 5-6). For the most part, once again, Esslin frames the question in terms of broad, universal concepts – “we,” “our overorganized world,” and “our own destiny.” His analysis consistently focuses on “humanity.” However, as the historical contexts of the theater of the absurd have shown, these plays are not merely concerned with abstract questions about the human condition. Rather, they reflect upon the actions of world powers, empires, and nations.

Similarly, while the plots of *Props*, *Born and Died*, and *The Guards of Ruins* develop existential concerns, the problem of a power struggle remains their primary focus. Although the plays were written at different points in Armenia’s post-Soviet history, over a ten-year span, the commentary they offer in their representations of independence and the post-Soviet era remains consistent: they depict relationships of dominance in order to critique Armenia’s government, the democratization process, and the role of foreign powers in the process of nation building. Moreover, as we shall see in the remaining chapters of this section, questions of revolt and external domination in these plays either express the concern that Russia wants to re-establish its empire in the Caucasus or critique the remnants of Soviet state apparatuses in post-Soviet Armenia.

World War II created the deep existential crisis, which the absurdist writers responded to in the 1950s and 1960s. The East European experience was unique in that the crisis was prolonged and caused by a more acute confrontation with totalitarianism, unlike the relatively short occupation of France. Along the same lines, the Armenian theater of the absurd stems from a twofold crisis: the experience of being part of a totalitarian regime for decades and the aftershocks caused by the collapse of such a regime. Just as much of the theater of the absurd is a response to World War II, the Armenian absurdist plays of the post-Soviet era are grounded in the specific history of Armenia's transition from a Soviet republic to an independent, democratic nation state. An in-depth analysis of the Armenian plays of the absurd in the next three chapters will allow us to rethink the political rootedness of the body of drama that constitutes the theater of the absurd.

Chapter 3

Independence as Confinement:

Reading Space, Time and the Nation in Aghasi Ayvazyan's *Props* (Dekorner)

Synopsis of Props: The play is set in "emptiness," where four unnamed men – the First Man, Second Man, Third Man, and Fourth Man – try to make sense of their location. Disconcerted by the emptiness that surrounds them, they call on the Prop Manager off stage to help them "create a place." After the Prop Manager brings in the furniture and walls that they request, the men find that they are dissatisfied with the result: the place does not turn out to be what they had envisioned. They ask for the furniture to be removed, and then they find themselves feeling uncomfortable in emptiness once again. This pattern repeats four times: each time the men ask for different props to fill the emptiness, and each time they are dissatisfied with the outcome. In the end, the men decide that they need a ceiling in order to have a bona fide place. The Prop Manager has his stagehands lower a ceiling onto the set, but the ceiling never stops coming down and eventually crushes the men underneath it.

The previous chapter gave us a glimpse of the concerns that the post-Soviet Armenian dramatic works of the absurd address: the universal problems associated with being human; and the specific political problems associated with Armenia's newfound independence at the end of the twentieth century. The remaining chapters in this part of the dissertation will gesture further toward an understanding of the dramatic representation of Armenia's position as a post-Soviet nation through a comparative interpretation of the three plays mentioned in the previous chapter – *Props*, *Born and Died*, and *The Guards of Ruins*. I begin in this chapter with an allegorical reading of *Props*, a play with a highly metaphorical plot – one that I read as symbolizing Armenia's post-Soviet statehood.

In a question and answer session that followed the Los Angeles production of *Props*, the play's author, Aghasi Ayvazyan, responded to a question about the influence of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco on his work by adamantly and somewhat angrily denying the

possibility of any relationship between his play and the absurdist plays of these authors.²⁹ An initial interpretation of Ayvazyan's response might attribute this type of reaction to the author's anxiety of influence. After all, several studies on and anthologies of contemporary Armenian literature refer to *Props* as an absurdist play.³⁰ Furthermore, as in the style of the theater of the absurd, *Props* has a cyclical, self-reflexive plot that repeatedly explores intensified variations of the same situation; and it portrays unnamed, nondescript characters, who utter philosophical incoherencies and display clown-like mannerisms (Esslin *Theatre* 404, 411-12, 415-16). *Props* also resembles the plays of the theater of the absurd in that, in terms of both style and content, it conveys a sense of the absurdity of the characters' plight, which represents the inexplicable and hopeless nature of the human condition (23-24). As a result, the action of the play, with its repetitive, purposeless plot, does not prompt the question "What will happen next?" but rather it evokes questions like "What is happening? What does the action of the play represent?" (415-16)

What, then, was the author's basis for resisting the evidently valid question? I would like to suggest that Ayvazyan's response was not literally meant to dissociate *Props* from the plays of the theater of the absurd. Instead, it demanded recognition of the play as a text that represents a specificity beyond the contexts that inform this type of drama as a category. Ayvazyan's response was very much in line with the thinking of the absurdist authors that preceded him. Despite the unified catalysts that brought about this type of theater in the aftermath of WWII, in general, the absurdist authors did not consider themselves as part of a

²⁹ Arena Theatre Company produced my translation of the play, which ran from May through June of 2003 in Los Angeles and Burbank, California. The audience had a discussion with the author on May 30, 2003, after the performance at UCLA's Northwest Campus Auditorium.

³⁰ For example, see Zhenya Kalantaryan's *Urvagtser ardi hay grakanut'yan* and Herand Markarian's *Contemporary Armenian Drama: Voices of Change*.

unified school. Like Ayvazyan, they stressed the importance of paying attention to the particular questions propounded by their individual plays. By making a statement that resists categorization, Ayvazyan prompted the audience to consider the unique qualities of this play and the historical context that informs it.

In a preface to the English translation of *Props*, Ayvazyan reveals an entirely singular, historically-grounded inspiration for the play: “The earthquake created this play, but this play is not about the earthquake” (qtd. in Markarian 61). In December 1988 an earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale struck northwest Armenia, taking the lives of 25,000 people, leaving 500,000 homeless, razing the entire town of Spitak, and causing considerable destruction in Leninakan, Kirovakan and Stepanavan (BBC). Although the play’s plot does not deal directly with the earthquake, in the first few lines, the First Man conjectures that “Maybe this was a city... And then there was an earthquake,”³¹ thereby suggesting that the action of the play represents the aftermath of the earthquake.³² In this way, the play reads like a metaphor for the times in which it was written. That is to say, in addition to death and destruction, the aftermath of the earthquake encompasses major watersheds in Armenian history: the continuation of Gorbachev’s reforms,³³ Karabagh’s movement for self-determination and unification with the Armenian SSR (already underway in 1988),³⁴ Armenia’s eventual war with Azerbaijan, the independence movements in the republics of the USSR, and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. It becomes clear

³¹ «Գուցէ այստեղ քաղաք էր... Ու երկրաշարժ եղաւ:» (4)

³² All translations of the play are my own (edited from my published version in Markarian’s anthology).

³³ For a brief overview of the period of Gorbachev’s reforms in the late 1980s, including democratization, *glasnost*, and *perestroika*, see Robert Service’s *A History of Modern Russia: From Nicholas II to Vladimir Putin*.

³⁴ For a study of the Karabagh Independence Movement starting in 1988, see Mark Malkasian’s “*Gha-rabagh!*”: *The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia*.

that the play concerns itself with these complex connections early on, when the Second Man describes the characters' location: "a former place" ("nakhkin tegh") (4), metaphorically the former Armenian SSR. In addition, one of the play's motifs, the four men's syllabified chants for freedom and change, allude to mass demonstrations that took place in Yerevan and Stepanakert during the independence movement. This combination of references creates an intrinsic link between the earthquake and Armenia's progression toward independence. As a result, the play represents the uncertainty and disillusionment associated with both the earthquake and the moves toward Armenia's independence.

By posing abstract questions about his characters' existence and their geographic location, Ayvazyan conveys a sense of disillusionment with the hopelessness of man in the face of a natural disaster. At the same time, he connects the problem of the impossibility of human action against a greater natural force to the lack of agency among Armenian subjects in the wake of the national movement in the Armenian SSR and the Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Oblast. The relationship between the earthquake and ethnic strife remains a rather salient one, even in historic memory: Gorbachev, during his visit to the towns devastated by the earthquake in Armenia, expressed surprise when he found that the Armenians "were agitated more about the politics of Karabagh than about the effects of the earthquake" (Service 469). At the time of the earthquake, Karabagh and national liberation occupied the minds and efforts of an impressive majority of Armenians.

Given this historical background to the play, the disillusionment expressed in *Props* relates to the death and destruction that resulted from the earthquake and the position of Armenia as a Soviet Socialist Republic in the wake of independence movements. In drawing a parallel between its concern for existential problems and political reform movements, the

play conveys a sense of anxiety at the prospect of Armenia's independence. It articulates the impossibility of establishing individual and ethnic freedoms under the auspices of the overwhelmingly authoritarian Soviet center. It questions the efficacy of protests and conflict with authority in defense of the rights of Armenians in the USSR. Whereas a play like *Rhinoceros* by Ionesco forebodingly warns against conformity and the spread of totalitarianism, written in an era of independence movements and completed in the post-independence years, *Props* warns against the futility of the moves toward democratization and, ultimately, freedom. In this way, the play's mode of the absurd addresses an entirely unique politics – as viewed from the vantage point of the fringes of the Soviet empire.

An analysis of the historical references and highly elusive allusions in the play serves to distinguish *Props* as a statement on the late Soviet and post-Soviet years in Armenia. These references occur through a combination of elements: the setting of emptiness and the lack of a specific time; the uneven power dynamic in the relationship between the Prop Manager and the four men; the use of language that draws upon and distorts Marxist-Soviet rhetoric; the motifs of madness and confinement; and the characters' problem of perception. Though like the plays of the absurd, *Props* makes use of a seemingly arbitrary plot with an unlocatable place and underdeveloped characters, the stylistic and thematic details in the play allude to the position of Armenia as a political entity. Read allegorically, the play portrays the Soviets' imposition of dominance on the Armenian SSR, and it addresses the negative repercussions of the dynamics of this relationship on a newly independent, post-Soviet Armenian nation-state.

The concept of a push and pull between dependence and independence in theories of postcoloniality speaks to the power dynamic that exists between the characters in the play:

“According to a rough consensus, the cultures of postcolonial lands are characterized by tensions between the desire for autonomy and a history of dependence” (Moore 112). While the four men in the play make demands for freedom, they are bound to the Prop Manager, to whom they must appeal in order to meet their needs. The characters position symbolizes Armenia’s history of dependence on the Russian center, which, in turn, functions as a formidable hurdle to independence. Through the repeated failure of his characters’ attempts “to create a place,” Ayvazyan expresses a critique of the Soviet system, if not a downright statement about its failure, and, at the same time, he conveys a wariness of independence. In this way, the play’s action represents the idea that a break from the Soviet system does not result in freedom from the past and from the longstanding dynamics of the Russo-Armenian relationship - that is to say, a relationship in which Russia dictates Armenia’s course and provides for its livelihood as a nation.³⁵

The characters interpret the emptiness on stage as the absence of place, and their struggle to change the setting – “to create a place” – becomes the central conflict of the play. The text emphasizes the concept of place so much so that the word “place” (*tegh*) and words with this root, “where, here” (*ortegh, ēsdegh*), are repeated twenty-four times in the first twenty-three

³⁵ Indeed, Russia’s impact on and manipulation of Armenia’s postcommunist nationhood is well documented. For example, McGinnity notes: “The stark condition of the Armenian economy underscores the serious flaws in the Armenian government’s logic of making short-term concessions to Russia that curtail Armenia’s long term economic freedom. These concessions have occurred for several reasons, including the general lack of a foreign policy process, the consolidation of power at the top of the Armenian government, submission to substantial Russian pressure, and dismal domestic economic conditions. Since former president Robert Kocharyan took office in an election marred by fraud in 1998, large concessions have resulted in Russian dominance of the economy, placing Russian interests in control of Armenia’s transportation, telecommunication, banking, mining, and energy sectors.” Similarly, Kim Iskyan concludes, “Russia is the gray cardinal of the Armenian political scene, in contrast to the meager influence it exerts on domestic politics in most other CIS countries, with the exception of Georgia, Moldova and Belarus.” For an autobiographical account that details Russia’s participation in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, see Tatevos Paskevichyan’s translation of Sergey Ambartsumian’s *Three Years on the Threshold between Love and Death*. For an historical study of Russia’s influence on Armenia’s affairs, particularly in the Nagorno Karabagh conflict, see Kenneth Wayne Pope Jr.’s “Russian Imperialism: The Past That Haunts the Future.”

lines of the play. The opening stage directions highlight the contrast between the two concepts, emptiness and place, that trouble the characters: “Only the center of the stage is lit. The surroundings are dark, creating an illusion of infinite emptiness. The First Man stands center stage, looking around. He gropes at the surroundings with his hands, but finds emptiness. He moves forward, moves left, moves right, gropes at the surroundings again and again, and keeps finding emptiness.”³⁶ The description of the First Man’s search for something to grasp in emptiness immediately creates the effect of his displacement. The characters’ dislocation in emptiness corresponds with their lack of identity: they are named by number – First Man, Second Man, Third Man, and Fourth Man - and they lack distinguishable traits. The play’s focus on a spatial problem – emptiness – as it relates to individual identity suggests that greater forces control both the characters’ and, so too, the nation’s fate. The themes of identity and place, then, allow the play to broach the subject of politics.³⁷

The characters frequently connect place and politics in their utterances. As the Fourth Man explains, “We don’t need anything else: just a floor and a ceiling... And also freedom.”³⁸ In this connection, Boyarin concludes that states’ ideological manipulation of space and time eventuates governmental control of individuals and their identities:

Statist ideologies involve a particularly potent manipulation of the dimensionalities of space and time, invoking rhetorically fixed national identities to legitimate their

³⁶ «Լուսավորումը է միայն բեմի կենտրոնը: Չորսըսուրը մուր է՝ անասիման դատարկության պատրանք ստեղծելով: Առաջին մարդը կանգնած է բեմի կենտրոնում և դիտում է շուրջը: Փորձում է ձեռքերով շոշափել շրջապատը ու հանդիպում է դատարկության: Շարժումն է առաջ, շարժումն է ձախ, շարժումն է աջ, նորից ու նորից շոշափում է բոլորքը, և կրկին՝ դատարկություն:» (3)

³⁷ Michael Urban has gone so far as to conclude: “Politics in post-communist societies is in large measure a politics of identity” (733).

³⁸ «Ուրիշ բան պետք չէ. Հատակ և առաստաղ... Ու մեկ էլ՝ ազատություն:» (23)

monopoly on administrative control. The creation of state identities has largely to do with the assertion of temporal origins and spatial boundaries, but these are not rigidly separate from each other. States may be said to map history onto territory. (15-16)

His observation applies to both a physical and psychological imposition of spatial and temporal ordering. The statist structuring of time and place establishes the legitimacy of the grand narrative of the nation, as envisioned by governmental authorities. In this way, Boyarin charts states' construction of history vis-à-vis space and time.

In the case of *Props*, the characters strive for a self-determined ordering of place; however, they fail miserably. All four attempts at the creation of a place result in the formation of settings of confinement: a jail, a "madhouse," a couch with a woman on it (Not only is there not enough room on the couch for everyone, the men must submit to the demands of the woman.), and the ultimate confinement of the ceiling crushing the four men. The four men's sense of place relies on an authority, namely the Prop Manager, to whom they beg and plead in order to escape emptiness and establish a place. Ayvazyan suggests that the central (Soviet/Russian) authority, symbolized by the Prop Manager, will always control the terms and conditions of governance, or, literally, the characters' place. As Foucault explains, "Space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (*Power* 361). This idea recurs in the dialogue that demonstrates the four men's notion of place as dependent upon a relationship with Soviet authorities. For example, after the first set change and the delivery of white walls and white furniture per the request of the characters, the First Man, frustrated with their inability to determine their location, complains that if they had requested a photo of a leader for the wall the place would be a local Soviet committee office. The Second Man points out that if they had a permit from the Soviet committee office they would know that

the place is in fact a sanatorium (9). In another scene, the characters fail to “imagine a place” (15) – they can never form an imagined community, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term. Even in the reformed place, the newly independent nation, established by the will of the characters, the Soviet/Russian statist power defines the individual, his/her space, and his/her political relevance.

The lack of time in the play complements the role of emptiness as political commentary. Just as the manipulation of space indicates the wielding of power, so, too, does the control of temporality. Fabian asserts this point in his book, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, which demonstrates that the study of anthropology has resulted in the application of a “politics of time” (60). He identifies both the temporal and spatial distancing involved in the anthropologist’s discourse and treatment of the Other in order to conclude that “temporal concepts” have an “ideological nature” (92). While Fabian uses the concept of the “politics of time” in order to expose anthropologists’ biased and uneven treatment of their subjects, his conclusions have resonances in historical and political narratives that manipulate time in order to serve particular ideologies. Specifically, the Soviets, like the anthropologists Fabian discusses, wove together the uses of political ideology and time. Stalin’s rapid and violent institution of the First Five Year Plan resulted in a forced historical acceleration (*uskorenie*) and progress: “the pace imposed suggests a race against time, as if those responsible for the country’s destinies felt they were running out of history” (Buck-Morss 37).³⁹ Ayvazyan’s complete obliteration of time suggests that, in dealing with

³⁹ Other scholars have also noted the importance of acceleration to Soviet conceptualizations of time: “Everyone wanted to speed up time – from Mayakovsky, promising to “ride to death the old mare of history,” to Gorbachev, who began perestroika with a call for “acceleration.” In order to make time march faster, it was made even more compact, packed into five-year plans” (Genis “Paradigms” 418).

Soviet history, there needs to be a type of reckoning with a lost (accelerated) past. For the Soviets, “the nationalization of time” meant that the head of state controlled time and represented the present as an obstacle to be overcome for the sake of a bright future (Buck-Morss 37). Armenians encountered another statist acceleration of time with the implementation of shock therapy (the method of abrupt and rapid economic reform) and, in general, Armenia’s haphazard privatization in the post-Soviet era.

In *Props* we find the opposite: a refusal to mimic the time of the nation. The play’s static, repetitive plot indicates a deliberate retardation of an otherwise planned progression of time that yields material results. No semblance of a bright future remains in the time of *Props*: viewers simply witness worsening renditions of the same scenario, without any positive outcomes. While the portrayal of the characters’ inability to manipulate their own space represents a weariness of independence, the play’s lack of time offers a counter-narrative to past Soviet constructions of history, contemporary notions of democratic progress, and, in the broadest sense, the employment of time in the service of any political ideology. As a result, the characters remain suspended, stuck in a bind – between the past and the future, with neither place nor time.

The tension between the Soviet past and the possibility of independence manifests itself in the characters’ penultimate attempt at establishing a place, which begins with the arrival of a couch with One Woman on it. The four men, intimidated by her presence and distraught by the fact that there is not enough room for them on the couch, discuss how to divide the woman and the couch amongst themselves. The conversation reads like a parody on the logic of collectivization, and the woman’s inclusion as property creates an utterly comical discussion. The subtle connection to the Soviets’ treatment of property might be lost,

had it not been for the Fourth Man's conclusive declaration: "We must reach the great future through sacrifice. We must begin with self-sacrifice..."⁴⁰ The play ridicules the Soviet rhetoric of time, exposing it as ideology that cannot be implemented. More disturbingly, the play renders the characters' chants for "freedom" equally ridiculous. The characters' rebellion results in the arrival of a woman who repeatedly commands them to move the couch around. The woman, never satisfied with the results of the men's efforts, has them work until they collapse as a result of fatigue. The characters cannot function in the unfamiliar space – emptiness – and are thus crushed by external forces. In this way, the action of the play symbolizes the Great Game, the power-play between the Russian and Euro-American powers for control over the Transcaucasus, and particularly Russia's maneuvers in the game. Each scene change represents the promises of a new order, but ultimately all changes bear the same futile results: the characters remain uncomfortable and subservient in their existence and constantly look to the figure of authority in order to situate themselves in their place and time. Armenia's voice, represented by the unnamed characters and their ridiculous threats to revolt, cannot be heard.

The characters' inability to act also bears the marks of Soviet power inequalities: their position as puppets on the stage (as in the classical tradition of the absurd) parallels the political position of Armenia in relation to its big brother, the Russian SFSR. They lack psychological depth and agency to the extent that they function like props on the stage, being moved around and manipulated as a result of factors outside of their control. It makes sense, then, to read the title of the play as a double entendre: it refers to both the stage props and the four puppet-like characters. The four men are detrimentally powerless: instead of acting, they

⁴⁰ «Մենք պէտք է գոհողութեան գնով հասնենք մեծ ապագային: Պէտք է սկսել ինքնագոհողութիւնից...» (18)

are repeatedly acted upon. These non-entities' attempts at making demands for reform only produce comical effects. In contrast to the four men, the Prop Manager, labeled according to his duty, possesses definite power. Similarly, the minor characters, the stage hands, Tonapet, Jrpet, Marzpet, and Hapet all have the ability to implement instructions – that is, to make things happen. Their names indicate leadership, with the termination *-pet*, the equivalent of *-arch* in English: Marzpet means regional governor; Hapet is the name of Noah's second son (the ancestor of the legendary founder of Armenia, Hayk); Tonapet is the head of a clan; and Jrpet means the head of water distribution. Their position in the play – subservient helpers of the Prop Manager, but at the same time the literal implementers of change – further verifies the play's concern with authority, governance, and agency. Here, Foucault's definition of governing proves useful: "to govern [...] is to structure the possible field of action of others" (*Power* 341). The function of the Prop Manager, as the only source of hope for the four men, is to ensure their complete dependence on him. He only makes an appearance when the four men need him, and the characters' spatial positioning with respect to their all-mighty neighbor off-stage determines both the continuity and the eventual termination of their existence. While he seemingly enables their progress, he manipulates their "field of action" in order to ensure their failure in their attempts to establish themselves in a comfortable place. After all, the stage directions confirm the Prop Manager's complicity in crushing the four men with the ceiling in the play's final scene: after expressing the idea that the men attempt to establish a place in vain, he simply smiles to himself. The Prop Manager's position embodies the dual nature of power that Foucault describes: his role is at once repressive and productive (*Power* 120). The parallel to Armenia's situation becomes obvious:

the governmental authority, who has the power to grant freedom, also has the ability to crush the people.

In addition to their lack of agency, the characters suffer due to problems of perception and memory, as they fail to grasp the pattern that becomes clear early on in the plot: they will not be able to create a place. They do not recognize the repetition in the events and do not realize that they cannot rely on the Prop Manager as a source of help. They simply call on him, repeating the same mistake over and over. The characters' inability to perceive the Prop Manager's repeated failure to facilitate the establishment of a place demonstrates their greatest flaw: they lack the ability to see the connection between the present moment and the chronic problem of the past. Once again, the play suggests that, in order to survive, the new and reformed Armenian state should recognize its Soviet past and be cautious of the rule of power dynamics that constitute the potential era of freedom.

The play's references to madness also emphasize the four men's role as subjects. These references allude to Soviet practices of oppression and systems of control. The Fourth Man makes his first appearance in a straight jacket; shortly after this point, the three men realize that what they believed to be a sanatorium is in fact a madhouse. This moment in the play refers to the common practice of using false diagnoses of mental illness in order to enable politically motivated incarceration. "Psychiatric internment, the mental normalization of individuals, and penal institutions [...] are undoubtedly essential to the general functioning of the wheels of power," as Foucault writes (*Power* 117). The Fourth Man explains to the three others that he was placed in this madhouse so that he would no longer be able to express himself. These images of madness and confinement almost instantly conjure up the Soviet era, a time when state psychiatric oppression was institutionalized and implemented

disproportionately in Soviet Armenia (Smith 81). These allusions to Soviet realities do not merely hearken to past injustices; rather, they affirm the idea that the socio-political inequities of the past complicate the characters' present demands for reform and independence.

In addition to the political commentary that it presents, *Props* also theorizes about spirituality. Its introduction resembles that of creation myths, like *Genesis* and Hesiod's *Theogony*, that begin in nothingness. The play's conclusion suggests a further connection with *Genesis* and the fall of man. After the ceiling has been installed, the four men begin to wax philosophical in a state of elation. The Fourth Man says, "Human thought consists of the meaning of life..."⁴¹ He uses the word *banakanut'awn*, which implies thought, mind, thinking, and judgment. Its root, *ban* - word or logos - appears again later when the men begin to utter their own renditions of quotes from the Bible. Significantly, as the Fourth Man expresses the idea that *banakanut'awn* is at the core of life, the ceiling starts to come down on the men, unnoticed. In his last utterance, the First Man says that if he were to write the Bible, he would begin, "In the beginning there was righteousness."⁴² All of the characters proceed to repeat this idea. On some level, the conclusion of the play suggests a revision of the Bible. The idea that "in the beginning there was righteousness" replaces the idea from the Book of John that "in the beginning was the word." The word has clearly failed the four characters in their quest for a place, and perhaps it needs to be replaced by the more abstract, spiritual concept of righteousness. After all, the men's speech includes several portmanteau words with the root *ban* – true thought (*chshmartaban*), study of correct thought

⁴¹ «Մարդկային բանականությունը իր մէջ բովանդակում է ապրելու իմաստը...» (24)

⁴² «Ի սկզբանէ էր հեմարտությունը:» (26)

(*shitakabanut 'iwně*), and harmony of thought (*hamabanut 'iwn*) (24-25). The words sound comically awkward, and, as a result, logos creates absurdity.

Although seemingly nonsensical at first, read together, their individual exclamations highlight the characters' unawareness. This concluding disjointed conversation suggests that the men's problem does not stem solely from an uneven power dynamic, but that their lack of perception contributes to their current position: after all, the ceiling - the very object they believed would allow them to "have a place" and to enjoy freedom - comes down on them, and they do not even notice. Furthermore, the stage directions make it a point to mention their unawareness three times throughout this last section of the play. Even in the end, as the ceiling crushes them, they remain entirely oblivious to the fact. Ayvazyan's turn toward religion, especially in his later works, could potentially serve to bolster a reading that would place *Props* among that group of texts. The men's exclamations about the greatness of God at the end of the play could be read as an indication of what they are missing throughout its action, namely spiritual sustenance. However, the dialogue proceeds with an entirely absurd style – the characters' statements are unrelated to each other; no conclusion is reached; and their words flow like an endless train of illogical speech. Furthermore, the Fourth Man claims that the common way in which man seeks help from righteousness is absurd (25). As a result, it would be rather difficult to prove that the play makes a clear statement about religiosity.

Instead, we might simply say that, very much like *Waiting for Godot*, *Props* is concerned with the possibility of the existence of a higher power. In *Waiting for Godot* the spiritual references occur throughout the work. The men wait for Godot because they asked him for "nothing very definite... a kind of prayer... a vague supplication" (Beckett 14). In

this quote, Godot *seems* to represent the source of salvation, yet the notion of salvation and what it would entail is as vague as the identity of Godot. Esslin also points out that *Waiting for Godot* “is concerned with the hope of salvation through the workings of grace” (*Theatre* 56). His interpretation of Lucky’s speech furthers this point: “In other words, God, who does not communicate with us, cannot feel for us, and condemns us for reasons unknown” (56). On the one hand, Ayvazyan’s turn toward religion can be read as a resistance against the atheism of the Soviets, but, on the other hand, this precise moment of religiosity is coupled with destruction. The spiritual alternative does not offer any hope. As Esslin describes it: “the Theater of the Absurd expresses the absence of any such generally accepted cosmic system of the ways of God to man” (*Theatre* 402).

Furthermore, the fact that these references to God and the Bible preface the moment when the ceiling crushes the four men does not support a positive interpretation of religious ideology. On the contrary, the conclusion reaffirms the idea that all ideologies – religious and spiritual - and the types of rhetoric they espouse are flawed. The men, in their final attempt at establishing a place, turn to the rhetoric of humanism and religion, but just as the rhetoric of Marxism, independence, and democracy failed them, it, too, proves ineffective. All attempts at subscribing to the value of words, meaning, and ideas produce increasingly detrimental results for the four men. The play demonstrates that words (in this case, the words of the characters) do not correspond with reality (their demise): thought and action constitute realities that are diametrically opposed and unresolvable. Throughout this last thematic shift in the characters’ blabbering, they remain fixated on the politics of reform that characterized the late-Soviet era. Certainly, the words the Fourth Man utters, speaks to the spirit of Gorabachev’s reforms: “Freedom, free-speechness, open speech, open voice, freedom of

thought, poly-voiceness, dialogic...”⁴³ The rhetoric of *glasnost*, the late-Soviet equivalent of freedom of speech, is rendered absurd, useless. With the Fourth Man’s conclusion that “freedom signifies place and existence,”⁴⁴ the play reiterates the parallel between lack of place and lack of freedom even in the very end, as it simultaneously explores and subsequently rejects the existence of a higher order.

The familiar failure of language in *Waiting for Godot* becomes the central focus of the conclusion of *Props*:

Despite much critical commentary that insists upon it, *Godot is not* the absent god of traditional bourgeois drama; it might be more accurate to say that he is the name for an unspecified absence. In the lacuna of this absence language loses its central role in the service of the master plot; it no longer uncovers for us any metaphysical or ideological center which might serve our understanding. Beckett decenters the ‘Word’ in the quest for a center which never appears, except through the reiteration of the promise of its occurrence (the coming of Godot). (McGlynn 139)

The parallel situation in *Props*, with the repetition of the characters’ need for a place, bears some important distinctions. While Godot remains in the abstract, – he is unidentified and unidentifiable – the notion of place in *Props* is certainly concrete, at least in the minds of the audience. In other words, there is a “place” in all of the scenes of the play, but the characters’ inability to see the place points to a problem in their perception, which remains questionable throughout the play. This problem of perception combined with the physicality of place

⁴³ «Ազատութիւն, ազատաբերանութիւն, բացախօսութիւն, բացաձայնութիւն, ազատամտութիւն, բազմախօսութիւն, բազմակարծիքութիւն...» (24)

⁴⁴ «Տեղի է լինելութեան իմաստը ազատութիւնն է» (24)

ground the play as much in the politics of the time as in the dialogue about metaphysical, “universal” ideas.

The play combines its exploration of the idea of an unknown, higher power that governs the characters’ world with its explicit concern for the implementation of oppression by Soviet power structures. The four men’s conversation upon the arrival of the Fourth Man in a straightjacket demonstrates the interplay between the two themes:

Second Man: What are you doing here?

Fourth Man: They’ve decided that this is my place.

First Man (*perplexed*): Who decided?

Fourth Man (*pointing upward*): Up there.

Third Man: God?

Fourth Man: Higher up.

First Man (*exchanging a look of bewilderment with the second and third men*):

Who is there higher up?

Fourth Man: Those who can even bring God here.⁴⁵

The conversation continues, and the Fourth Man explains that those who put him in a straightjacket want to limit his ability to express himself. They are also the ones who are higher up than God. The Soviet governmental authorities are the god-like source of order, authority, and truth. Ayvazyan’s play offers a symbolic representation of the late Soviet era:

⁴⁵ «Երկրորդ Մարդ. – Այստեղ ի՞նչ էս անում:

Զորրորդ Մարդ. – Որո՞ւն է, որ իմ տեղը սա է:

Առաջին Մարդ (տարակուսանքով). – Ո՞վ որո՞ւն է:

Զորրորդ Մարդ (մատը տնկելով վեր). – Վերեւում:

Երրորդ Մարդ . – Աստուած...»

Զորրորդ Մարդ . – Ասելի վերեւում:

Առաջին Մարդ (զարմանք փոխանակելով երկրորդի և երրորդի հետ). – Ասելի վերեւում ո՞վ կայ:

Զորրորդ Մարդ . – Նրանք, ովքեր Աստուծուն էլ կարող են բերել այստեղ:» (9-10)

it compares the characters' helplessness to the Armenian Republic's political position of subjugation in order to suggest that "nothing is more dangerous than a political system that claims to prescribe the truth" (Foucault *Power* xl). Language fails the characters; the play conveys no positive applicable message; and the situation resembles Foucault's characterization of history as determined by "relations of power, not relations of meaning" (*Power* 116).

Ayvazyan wrote *Props* between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. However, it was neither published nor produced before 1999. When it was published in a collection of his plays, Ayvazyan had already been living in an independent Armenia for eight years. Despite this fact, his aesthetic vision finds no hope in the possibility of independence; at the same time, it offers no alternative. The dynamics of Soviet rule plague the characters as much as the prospect of independence. The absurdist lack of an answer remains frustrating for a critique of the play that engages in socio-political dynamics. Nevertheless, practically speaking, Ayvazyan's contribution to the discourse on Armenia's independence runs parallel to actual post-Soviet moments in the nation's contemporary existence. In other words, independence brings with it new forms and burdens of dependence. In this regard, the message of *Props* remains entirely relevant today.

“After the war and the dark and cold years from 1988 to 1990, the Armenian man’s spirit was broken. But instead of uplifting that spirit, the government began its plunder” (Gurgen Khanjyan in an interview, 2012).⁴⁶

Chapter 4

Gogol’s Madman in Perch Zeytuntsyan’s *Born and Died* (Tsnvel ē u mahats’el):

A Metatheatrical Critique of the Armenian State

Synopsis of Born and Died: The text presents the enactment of a play within a play at the Hrachya Ghaplanyan Dramatic Theater in Yerevan, Armenia. The characters in Born and Died, the Actor and the Director, rehearse in preparation for the staging of Nikolai Gogol’s short story, “The Diary of a Madman.” Throughout the Actor’s enactment of his role as Gogol’s madman, Poprishchin, the Director and Actor acknowledge that they are also performing in Born and Died. The latter consists of a self-reflexive commentary on the staging of Gogol’s text as well as the contemporary issues that inform the staging of Born and Died. The plots of “The Diary of a Madman” and Born and Died intersect as the Actor and Director have conversations about the absurdist aesthetics of Zeytuntsyan’s play, the role of the actor as the author’s mouthpiece, Gogol’s madman, and Armenia’s politics. Among the multiple narratives at play, the central question of the performance becomes one that deals with the Actor’s agency: can he ever speak lines that are his own?

Unlike the subtler, metaphoric portrayal of national concerns in *Props*, Perch Zeytuntsyan’s *Born and Died* explicitly engages with contemporary Armenian issues, while at the same time offering a theoretical commentary on the theater of the absurd. The script presents two characters, the Actor and Director, rehearsing a production of Nikolai Gogol’s short story, “The Diary of a Madman.” As a result, it consists of the intersecting enactment of two plays, *Born and Died* and “The Diary of a Madman.” Throughout the performance, discussions on art, the individual, the community, and the nation intersect in the multiple layers of this text, creating connections between the implications of Armenia’s independence, the war in Nagorno-Karabagh, the economic blockade on Armenia, censorship, poverty, and the attitudes of Armenian audiences.

⁴⁶ «1988-90 թուականների հայ մարդու ոգին, պատերազմից եւ ցուրտ ու մութ տարիներից յետոյ լրիւ կտորուէց, իսկ իշխանութիւնը, փոխանակ այդ ոգին բարձրացնելու, սկսեցին իրենց ալան-թալանը»: (Hrapark)

The play's metatheatrical premise most obviously evokes Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in which the arrival of six characters abandoned by their author interrupts the rehearsal of Pirandello's *Mix It Up*.⁴⁷ The intersecting plots in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* – the painful family history of the authorless characters and the actors and director trying to stage a play – offer “a double-pronged challenge: to bourgeois social values, and to the accepted mode of naturalist theatre-making” (Lorch 1). Furthermore, the play asserts the aesthetic argument that because “the characters’ truth is too complex for actors” (Baumrin 184), the theater is incapable of portraying them fully. Alongside the challenge to dramatic content and form, the liberation of the characters from the influence of the author, actors, and director is one of Pirandello’s main objectives.

Similarly, Zeytuntsyan does away with the conventions of Realist theater through a self-reflexive exploration of the absurd; however, while Pirandello’s play asserts that characters have an independent, “real” life, Zeytuntsyan’s play examines the dependent position of an actor, the recipient and enactor of lines and directions, as a metaphor for the impossibility of independent thought and action. This text, then, is characteristic of Zeytuntsyan’s oeuvre: “At the core of [his] artistic focus lies the role of the individual in society and his or her relation to the authority of the state” (Cowe “Introduction” ii). In *Born and Died*, the question of the Actor’s (lack of) authority symbolizes the problem of individual will as it relates to external pressures and forces, including state control. This exploration of individual will in turn alludes to Armenia’s cultural and political position vis-

⁴⁷ In terms of its incorporation of a substantial amount of material from Gogol’s work verbatim, stylistically, *Born and Died* resembles Tom Stoppard’s use of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. As for the play’s self-reflexivity, it recalls Ionesco’s oeuvre in its use of “the various mirror effects in which the play itself becomes an object of discussion within the play” (Esslin *Theatre* 196).

à-vis world powers. In this way, the play creates a connection between post-Soviet politics and the absurdist aesthetic:

Zeytountsyan has provided a masterly portrayal of social life in Erevan at the height of the war in Nagorno Karabagh under the destabilizing effects of the transition to democracy and a market economy as reflected in his absurdist play *Born and Died*. It problematizes established theatrical conventions, highlighting the issue of self-censorship and the actor's desire to escape the oversight of the director and playwright. (Cowe iii)

The play is both self-reflexive and metaliterary, and, as a result, it presents the layering and intersection of multiple narratives and symbols. The Actor explains that “there’s a triple, quadruple play at work in this piece” (15). One layer of meaning is in the title itself. In a discussion about the performance of “The Diary of a Madman,” the Director explains that the most important thing about Gogol is his birth and death, simply the fact that he lived:

Actor: Following convention you should say a few words about Gogol as a lead in to the first rehearsal.

Director: He was born in 1809 and died in 1852.

Actor: That’s it?

Director: I’ve stated the most basic fact. He was born and died. If you ask me, the dates are secondary. (4)⁴⁸

⁴⁸ «Դերասան- Հստ ընդունուած կարգի, դու պէտք է մի քանի խօսք ասես Գոգոլի մասին: Որպէս առաջին վերջին նախաբան: Ռեժիսոր- Ծնուել է 1809 թ., մահացել է 1852 թ.:

Դերասան- Յետո՞յ:

Ռեժիսոր- Ես ասացի ամենամեծ հեռաբառերը: Նա ծնուել է ու մահացել: Եթէ կ’ուզես հիշտն իմանալ, տարբերութիւն էլ այնքան կարեւոր չեն:» (199)

The discussion minimizes the role of the author, thereby indicating part of the play's project: the liberation of the actor from the powerful grip of the author. Whereas *Six Characters in Search of an Author* liberates the characters, *Born and Died* concerns itself with the liberation of the actor and links this personal freedom to the possibility of national and cultural freedom. Beckett's heroes occupy a comparable position: "Didi and Gogo are not unlike Artaud's enslaved actors stuck on a stage without a text, awaiting the master director/author who will tell them what to do" (McGlynn 139).

While in *Props* the position of the characters is metaphorically likened to that of props on a stage, in *Born and Died* the characters as actor and director occupy the literal position of subjectivity. By using the characters' subject position literally, the play reverses the conventional absurdist representation of characters. Oftentimes, the characters in the plays of the absurd are seen as acting without motivation, for they are not in control of their actions. As Vladimir puts it in *Waiting for Godot*, "One is not the master of one's moods" (64). Zeytuntsyan finds a parallel between this type of absurd character and the position of the actor on the stage. The actor is given lines to memorize, a personality, and a frame of mind to internalize. Although he must exercise a tremendous deal of control in order to portray the character, in doing so, he temporarily loses the ability to declare his own words; he becomes a "mouthpiece" for the writer. Furthermore, the actor, without his director, would be lost, in a situation without direction, much like that in which Vladimir and Estragon find themselves. Zeytuntsyan depicts the literal version of Beckett's metaphoric characters. The Actor explains that he wants to break free from this master-slave dynamic: "I want to discover my own, to be myself... myself...(11)."⁴⁹

⁴⁹ «Ես եմ ուզում գտնել... Ի՛նքս... Ի՛նքս...» (209)

Furthermore, like *Props, Born and Died* explores the spatial dynamic of confinement, but it also addresses the confinement imposed by restrictions on speech and identity formation. Explicit mention is made of the actors being confined by the script and a room, which is off limits, and the script and the Director's instructions doubly confine the Actor. The plot of the play suggests, though not entirely convincingly, that the two characters may be able to break away from this confinement. This suggestion, in turn, applies to the possibility of Armenia moving from a pseudo-independent nation to a fully independent one.

Whereas the references to nationhood in *Props* require interpretation, *Born and Died* announces itself as an Armenian play concerned with Armenian art and politics. The Director describes the historically-grounded reality of the characters: "We're alive with flesh and blood, a Erevan address and bread stamps...(5)." ⁵⁰ Similar assertions throughout the play make explicit references to Soviet limitations on freedom as well as the difficulties Armenia has encountered during the period of independence. In this way, stylistically, *Born and Died* does not simply conform to all of the trends of the absurd: instead of using an unfamiliar or vague setting and context, Zeytuntsyan incorporates specific, Armenian references in order to render absurd effects. The interaction between the absurd characters and their social concerns results in the breakdown of language that occurs when it comes to addressing these socio-political realities in ways that can produce results.

For example, the Director continually forgets where he is. It is as though the setting of the play, the Hrachya Ghaplanyan Dramatic Theater near the "Youth" subway in Yerevan, is mentioned as a Realist technique; however, the fact that it is repeated with such exactitude in the play also undermines its significance. Ultimately, the repeated announcement of the place

⁵⁰ «կենդանի մարդ[իկ եմ], միս ու արիւնով, երեսնեան հասցեով, հացի կորսնցերով...» (200)

indicates a sense of futility. This effect can be likened to instances in *Waiting for Godot*, when Estragon forgets what he and Vladimir are doing. Vladimir must remind him continually of their hopeless activity, waiting for Godot. As the forgetting of the action produces absurdity in *Godot*, so, too, does the place become a tool for producing absurd effects in *Born and Died*.

Furthermore, not only does the Director forget the place, once the Actor reminds him, he immediately changes the subject, connecting the notion of the concrete place to an abstract concept in physics. The historical sign becomes a viable source of distortable material (3). The Director then returns to a so-called Armenian topic, namely the cliché that he utters, “Nevertheless, Armenians are a talented people.” He continues by providing an isolated, illogical source of support, “Napoleon’s adjutant was an Armenian” (3).⁵¹ The proof is in fact a historically verifiable statement, yet the illogical deductive reasoning renders the otherwise interesting fact laughable. As seen in the case of the setting, the Director once again mentions the historically locatable, in this case the Armenian people, only to negate its relevance yet again. When the Actor adds the more commonly cited fact as further support - namely that “Aram Khachaturyan’s also Armenian” - the Director undermines this statement with another lapse in memory: “Khachaturyan? Never heard of him.”⁵² This admission is then followed by another change in subject (3).

The Director also forgets about the war between Azerbaijan and Karabagh (9). He says, “Karabagh? War? National liberation?... I’m going abroad... I can’t carry that sort of

⁵¹ «Մենք, հայերս, տաղանգաւոր ժողովուրդ ենք: Նապոլեոնի համհարզը հայ է եղել:» (198)

⁵² «Դերասան- Արամ Խաչատրեանն էլ է հայ: Ռեժիսոր- Խաչատրեան: Չեմ լսել:» (198)

baggage around. The flight allowance is only twenty kilos” (9).⁵³ In comparison to *Godot*, where Estragon continually forgets what happened the previous day and that he is waiting for Godot, the absurdity is in fact less believable. In *Born and Died* the character forgets something real, namely the Karabagh War. Godot, on the other hand, may or may not be real: he is an unidentified and unidentifiable character. Similarly, in *Godot* the question is usually, “What are we doing?” And the answer metaphorically indicates the static and hopeless nature of life. Here, slightly more elaborate questions - “Where are we?” and “What are we doing?” - convey a sense of disillusionment with the location, post-Soviet Yerevan, and the events that take place there. The Director’s inability to remember the facts produces absurd effects through the incorporation of historical information.

Time, which regulates life, creates order and a sense of purpose, and thus is ambiguous in *Godot*. In *Born and Died* the reverse situation produces the same effect. The Director repeatedly announces the time and reminds the audience that he needs to get to an appointment. As in *Props*, the ordering and purpose-producing power of time is undermined by the fact that with each announcement the Director indicates a different destination: “the visa office to collect [his] passport,” “meeting with some Pakistanis at the Armenian Organization for Overseas Cultural Links,” “the Armenian Lifeguards’ Association to meet the electoral board,” “Actor’s Equity,” “track down a pane of glass to repair [his] windshield,” and “the theater, for a rehearsal” (3, 4, 7, 10, 21).⁵⁴ In Zeytuntsyan’s depiction of the absurdity of life, it is no longer that the context or the material for the babbling is

⁵³ «Ի՞նչ Ղարաբաղ, ի՞նչ պատերազմ, ի՞նչ ազգային-ազատագրական պայքար... Ես արտասահման եմ մեկնում... Ես ոնց պայքան հոգս, պայքան բեռ տանեմ ինձ հետ... Քսան կիլոգրամից աւել չեն թողնում...» (206)

⁵⁴ «Օվիլը՝ անձնագիրս ստանալու», «ԱՕԿՄ՝ պակիստանցիների հետ հանդիպման», «Հայջրփրկիչեղդ վարչություն՝ ընտրողների հետ հանդիպելու», «Թատերական միութիւն», «ավտոյիս համար ապակի փոխելու» և «Թատրոն, փորձի» (198, 199, 203, 207, 223)

arbitrary, like the carrots and turnips or the unfamiliar words that comprise the philosophizing in *Waiting for Godot*. Rather, the material is understandable with a blurred referent. In this way, there is a reversal of the blurring. With *Godot*, the meaning of the signs presumably perplexes the audience; in *Born and Died* the audience presumably understands the signs, but the artist refuses to have his characters make sense of their referents. In this way, Zeytuntsyan frames his text as politically relevant, but, in the classic tradition of the absurd, unwilling to commit to a definitive solution to the problems it raises. The play's treatment of the possibility of cultural and political freedom is consistent with its ambivalent attitude toward the politics of the time.

The play's demands for political and cultural freedom are further complicated by the metaliterary commentary that stems from its conceptual premise. By choosing "The Diary of a Madman" as the play within the play, Zeytuntsyan categorizes Gogol's play as a forerunner of the absurd. The two characters in the play, the Actor and Director, acknowledge themselves as such and also explain that they are acting in two plays, *Born and Died* and a dramatic adaptation of Nikolay Gogol's "The Diary of a Madman." Throughout the course of the Zeytuntsyan play, the Actor rehearses his part as Poprishchin in "The Diary of a Madman," while the Director guides him. Between scenes from the "Diary" they perform their parts as the Actor and Director in *Born and Died*. The performance within the performance, namely that of Gogol's nineteenth century text, serves to categorize the different levels of the absurd. As Esslin points out, the conventions of the absurd are derived from age-old dramatic and literary devices, such as verbal nonsense, dream and fantasy, clowning and circus scenes. Though Zeytuntsyan places "The Diary of a Madman" within his absurdist play as an example of one of the forerunners of the tradition, what separates "The

Diary of a Madman” from the absurd is that the narrative voice, the author of the diary, Poprishchin, is purportedly mad. All of his mad actions are caused by his insanity. “The Diary of a Madman” portrays the workings of an irrational, mad mind, and is thus believable because the diary articulates a cause for the absurdities or unbelievable aspects of the work. This is why the Director of *Born and Died* claims that the audience will understand the “real madman in Gogol” (5). In contrast to his confidence in the believability of the character of Poprishchin, the Director worries that the audience will not understand the unrealistic absurdist play, *Born and Died*.⁵⁵

In its engagement with “The Diary of a Madman” and the subject of absurdism, the play Orientalizes its Armenian viewers by insisting on their cultural belatedness and inferiority. In one scene, the Actor wonders what audiences will think of the play: “What do you think? Will an Armenian audience like our performance? I mean, they’re not familiar with the rules it’s played by. They’ll swallow Gogol one way or another and stomach his phantasmagoria. But will they make the connection between Gogol and the absurdities of everyday life? (14)”⁵⁶ The perception of the European canon as superior to Armenian literature creates an anxiety for the play, which manifests itself in self-Orientalizing. When the Actor, in performing Poprishchin’s part, begins to relate the story about the dogs writing letters to each other, the Director cuts him off, because of the unbelievable nature of the script: “Stop, stop. We’re Armenian. We need traditional theater. Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett are for nations with

⁵⁵ *Six Characters In Search of an Author* also makes the claim that the use of absurdity is in fact realistic. The Father explains: “Oh sir, you know well that life is full of infinite absurdities, which, strangely enough, do not even need to appear plausible, since they are true [...] I say that to reverse the ordinary process [of drama] may well be considered a madness: that is, to create credible situations, in order that they may appear true” (location 113).

⁵⁶ «Ի՞նչ էս կարծում, մեր ներկայացումը դուր կգա՞յ հայ հանդիսատեսին: Զե՞՞ որ այս խաղի օրէնքները խորք են նրան: Գոգոլը մի կերպ կու՛կ կտայ, մի կերպ կմարսի նրա ֆանտաստագործիան: Իսկ առօրեայի աբսու՞րդը: Իսկ այս երկու աբսուրդների գուգախե՞՞ղը:» (213)

full stomachs. But we, thank God, are not full yet (7).”⁵⁷ In another scene, the Director points to a painting on the wall, while the Actor explains that it depicts “a painter, a nude model, and a canvas.”⁵⁸ He continues to show that this painting symbolizes the multiple layers of text in the play: “The painter and the model are blurred and deformed, but the nude on the canvas is extremely realistic and lifelike.”⁵⁹ The Director asks the Actor why he describes the painting to him. The Actor responds, “I didn’t say it for your benefit. There are people out there in the dark who don’t have a clear view” (4).⁶⁰ This explicit metaphor about the inability of the audience to perceive the work of art and, by extension the play, embodies the play’s tone toward its audience – one that questions their mental capacity. This tone blurs the potentially positive message of hope that the play offers – breaking out of the “slave” position for the Actor and, by extension, independence for Armenia. Nevertheless, it is reinforced throughout the play. As the Director laments, “They’ve been listening to us, haven’t they, and haven’t understood a thing. I’m sure they haven’t understood a thing (5).”⁶¹ *Born and Died* assumes that Armenian audiences are either ill-equipped or unprepared to accept the absurdist play as a meaningful and understandable art form.

The play provides definitions of the absurd and in this way the self-reflexive function also becomes self-Orientalizing. One of Beckett and Pinter’s major concerns was the impossibility of ever attaining certainty (Esslin *Theatre* 44-45). Pinter describes the difficulty

⁵⁷ «Ստոն’պ, ստոն’պ... Մենք հայ ենք, մեզ աւանդական քառորոն է պէտք: Բրեխտը, Ինգեսկոն, Բեկետը կու՛զու ազգերի համար են: Իսկ մենք, վառք Աստծոյ, դեռ կու՛զու չենք:» (203)

⁵⁸ «Նկարիչը, բնորդուհին ու կտաւը» (198)

⁵⁹ «Նկարիչն ու բնորդուհին աղաւաղուած են ու դեֆորմացուած: Իսկ կտաւի վրայ բնորդուհին խիստ իրական է ու հօգրիտ:» (198)

⁶⁰ «Ես քեզ համար չսասցի: Այստեղ մթան մէջ ինչ-որ մարդիկ կան:» (198-99)

⁶¹ «Նրանք լսում էին մեզ, այնպէս չէ՞, ու ոչինչ չէին հասկանում: Ես վստահ եմ, որ ոչինչ չէին հասկանում:» (200)

of verification that the Actor refers to: “There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false” (206). The Actor complains about precisely the same problem in describing his life. By putting these concerns into the Actor’s mouth, Zeytuntsyan introduces one of the purposes or concerns of absurd drama. He does this several times throughout the play, as if trying to teach the Armenian audience, unaccustomed to this convention of theater. Zeytuntsyan expresses his own worries about the audience through the words of the Director, “But they’re taking us for madmen. I’m wearing a warm coat, you a thick shirt. Yet we’re not pulling a stunt. I’m shivering and you’re boiling. Who gave them the right to suspend [dis]belief? Who gave them the right to take us for madmen?”⁶² Zeytuntsyan practically feeds the information to the audience. He tells them that the play is not supposed to mirror reality, and that they should not seek literal truth in it. Then he criticizes the Armenian audience for their inability to comprehend such characters as the Director and Actor in contrast to their willingness to embrace the madman in Gogol’s “The Diary of a Madman” (3). This critique continues throughout the play with language that views Armenian cultural production, and, in turn, Armenian society, as belated.

As in the play, the workings of orientalist discourse have their resonances in post-Soviet Armenia. Although many acknowledge Armenia’s in-between position with regard to Asia and Europe, like Eastern Europe, post-Soviet Armenia has struggled to earn the designations “European” and “Western,” both politically and culturally.⁶³

⁶² «Բայց նրանք խելագարի տեղ են դնում մեզ: Ես՝ տաք վերարկուով, դու՝ քեթե վերնաճապիկով: Բայց մենք հո չէ՞նք կեղծում: Ես մրսում, դու՝ շոգում: Ո՞վ է իրաւունք տուել մեզ չհաւատարու: Ո՞վ է իրաւունք տուել մեզ խելագարի տեղ դնելու:» (200)

⁶³ The question of Armenia’s Europeanness has occupied the minds of Armenian intellectuals for centuries.

Eastern Europe, in this latest attempt to “modernize” and catch up with the ever-elusive Western prosperity and civilization, cannot negotiate the rules of the game: it must satisfy the EU, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank criteria prescribed for achieving “democracy,” “privatization,” “capitalism,” “diversity,” “human rights protection,” and many others in order to become emancipated as “European.”” (Kovačević 2)

Evidence of a similar struggle in Armenia appears in literary debates about the link between European and Armenian literature: Aghasi Ayvazyan self-Orientalizes Armenian literature, claiming that it has not caught up with the West; Azat Yeghiazaryan claims that Armenian literature bears Asian and European qualities and that scholarship has tended to neglect the Asian elements in Armenian literature; a minority of critics, like Sergey Sarinyan, criticize the Eurocentrism of Armenian intellectuals and the “tyranny” of Western culture (Kalantaryan 196-198). Armenia’s urge to become culturally European finds a parallel in its political agendas, which resemble those of Eastern Europe: having to answer and adhere to criteria imposed by the US, Russia, the OSCE Minsk Group, the EU, the IMF, and the World Bank.

While the play point out Armenia’s fragile position on the global stage in the era of independence, in *Born and Died* a self-Orientalizing rhetoric develops and is maintained throughout the play. In other words, the play reinforces the orientalist perspective, which, in the briefest terms, can be defined as “the construction of cultural distance that legitimates political domination and economic exploitation” (Etkind 23). Paradoxically, *Born and Died* affirms the idea of Armenia’s cultural belatedness with respect to Russia and Europe, while it questions the involvement of the US in Armenia’s politics. It is unclear whether the play

recognizes the fact that the notion of cultural inferiority legitimates the exercise of political domination.

By introducing the theme of censorship, a concern that is immediately related to the question of cultural belatedness, the play, much like *Props*, suggests that some of the same Soviet problems remain relevant in the era of independence. The Director tells the Actor that he cannot go into a particular room, and the stage directions indicate that the entrance to this room is invisible: “([The Director] interrupts his lecture in mid course. He becomes somewhat enervated. His arms droop from his shoulders involuntarily, and he slowly descends to the auditorium and goes up to a closed door, which isn’t there and is not visible.)

(6)”⁶⁴ The Director explains his relationship to the door, which links spatial division to authority, as in *Props*: “When they appointed me artistic director, the people at the ministry told me I had the right to enter every nook and cranny except... except this door” (6).⁶⁵ The door, a symbol of censorship, links the Soviet past to the nation’s independent present. While censorship was a visible, explicit part of literary publication during the Soviet period, it has become something more subtle and masked in contemporary times. In the era of independence, the Writers Union and the state serve as the primary sources of funding for literature. Furthermore, censorship becomes an individual consideration for authors, who must take the reading market into account. At a different point in the play, the Director says, “No darkness, no force can kill art. No regime, no censorship, no freedom can stand in the

⁶⁴ «(Կիսատ է թողնում խօսքը, մի տեսակ խեղճանում, թեւերը անկամ կախում են ուսերից, եւ նա դանդաղ իջնում է դահլիճ, մօտենում փակ դռանը, որը չկայ, չի երևում:))» (201)

⁶⁵ «Երբ ինձ գլխաւոր նշանակեցին, նախարարութիւնից ասացին, որ իրաւունք ունեւ թատրոնի բոլոր ծախուծուկերը մտնելու, բացի... բացի այս դռնից...» (201)

way of talent” (17).⁶⁶ While *Born and Died* resists the potential threats to art posed by both totalitarianism and freedom, it asserts that these threats are very real in the era of independence. The Actor asks him if he has a problem with the restricted door, and the Director responds: “At first I was resentful and would fly off the handle, writing petition after petition to the first secretaries Andropov, Chernenko, and Gorbachev, and then after Armenian independence to the Supreme Council, the Commission on Human Rights, always eliciting the same response, “It is not advisable”” (6).⁶⁷ The Director’s response indicates that one bureaucracy replaces another in the post-Soviet era. Unfortunately, though, the play makes no reference to the relationship between cultural belatedness and the problem of censorship - a connection that might serve to emphasize the importance of considering socio-political contexts when comparing one national literature to another. As a result, the play’s attitude toward its Armenian audience remains problematic.

The understanding of the characters as a literal embodiment of the absurdist metaphor combined with the incorporation of historically-grounded realia in the text functions to connect the characters’ position – “lacking independence” – to the socio-political position of the nation. The play’s script highlights the connection between individuals and the nation during the interlude, when the Director addresses the audience, “If any of you wants to come forward, please step onto the stage. Don’t you have anything to say? Why, surely there’s no

⁶⁶ «Ոչ մի մքուրիւն, ոչ մի ուժ չեն կարող արուեստը սպանել... Ոչ մի բռնատիրութիւն, ոչ մի գրաքննութիւն, ոչ մի ազատութիւն չեն կարող տաղանդի հանապարհը վաւիել...» (218)

⁶⁷ «Սկզբում ըմբոստանում էի, կատաղում, գիմում գիմումի ետեւից գրում, Անտրոպովին, Չերնենկոյին, Գորբաչովին... Իսկ անկախութիւնից յետոյ՝ Գերագոյն խորհուրդ, Մարդու իրաւունքների պաշտպանութեան յանձնաժողով... Միշտ նոյն պատասխանը. խորհուրդ չի տրուում...» (202)

other country that has as much to say for itself?” (13-14)⁶⁸ The play takes the problems of the characters – memory loss, hunger, an inaccurate perception of time, and the lack of independence – and integrates them with the material from “The Diary of a Madman.” In the very last scene in the performance of “The Diary of a Madman,” the Actor transitions from Poprishchin’s lines, beseeching his mother for help, to a lamentation about his inability to express himself independently and then on to a monologue on the current economic and political realities in Armenia. The lengthy speech juxtaposes Poprishchin and the Actor:

No. I’ve no more strength. God, how you treat me. They pour cold water on my head. They don’t listen, they don’t see, they don’t listen to me. What have I done to them? Why are they torturing me? Save me, take me away in a troika as swift as the storm. Sit down, driver, ring, bell, up on your hind legs, trusty steeds, whisk me away from this world. Far, far away, where there’s no sign of life. [...] A dark blue mist spreads below my feet. Look, the Russian cottages have already come into view. Isn’t that our house, which stands out against the blue in the distance? That’s my mother sitting by the window. (*Completely self oblivious.*) Mother! What mother? The windowpanes are frosted up. How could I see my mother? It’s a lie. It’s all lies. Who thought it up? Who contrived this sick joke. I’m suffocating. Momma, I can’t go on. Someone else’s words have got stuck in my throat. All my life I’ve repeated other people’s words. I want to speak for myself, at least once, just once. In my own words, even though they’re unsophisticated, though they lack eloquence. At least they’ll be my words, my ideas. Don’t haul the actor off

⁶⁸ «Եթէ ձեզանից որեւէ մէկը նայնպէս ուզուն է ներկայանալ, խնդրեն, բեմ բարձրացէ՛ք: Միթէ՞ բան չունէ՛ք ասելու: Զէ՞ որ աշխարհ ասելիք ոչ մի երկրորուն չկայ:» (213)

stage, don't stone him, don't hiss at him, don't degrade him. I'll be taking the same bus home with you. As yesterday's believer who played the pipe and cymbals for the new political forces, who listened to their fiery speeches in Liberty Square with teary eyes, and breathless enthusiasm, it is with the deepest pain and regret that I say all this is pointless. (22-23)⁶⁹

The Actor's remarks do not resemble the generally short, vague, and cut-off nonsensical philosophical ponderings of other absurd characters. Instead, the placement of the stage directions - "*(Completely self oblivious.)*" - marks the clear transition from Poprishchin's plea to his mother to the expression of the Actor's wish to speak his own words. The parallel placement of the two scripts establishes the link between Poprishchin and the Actor: both characters share the problem of being defined by externals as well as the problems of language, expression, and communication.

Poprishchin's psychological instability stems from his profession: "Both the form and the progress of Poprishchin's madness clearly indicate its origin as a crisis of identity and of status. His very name suggests 'career' (i.e. *poprishche* = 'career,' 'arena of activity') but although he claims that he can gain promotion through service, and that he is capable of

⁶⁹ «Ո՛չ, ես այլևս ուժ չունեմ: Աստուած, ինչպէս ես վարուում ինձ հետ: Նրանք սառը ջուր են լցնում գլխիս: Նրանք չեն ունկնդրում, չեն տեսնում, չեն լսում ինձ: Ես նրանց ինչ եմ արել: Ինչի համար են տանջում ինձ: Փրկեցէ՛ք ինձ, վերցրէ՛ք ինձ, տուէ՛ք մրրիկի պէս սըընրաց ձիերի մի ետեակ: Նստի՛ր, կառապանս, զըընգա, զանգալս, ծառս եղէ՛ք, նժոյզներ, տարէ՛ք ինձ այս աշխարհից: Հեռու՛, հեռու՛, որ չերեւայ ոչինչ: [...] Ոտերին տակ թխակապոյտ մշուռ է վառում: Ահա երեսացին ուսական խրհիթները: Այն հո մեր տունը չի՞, որ հեռուում կապոյտին է տալիս: Այն մա՛յրս է նստած պատուհանի առաջ... (Լրիւ վերացած, ինքնամոռաց, հանձնուած տարերբին:)

Մա՞յրս... Ի՞նչ մայր... Պատուհանի ապակիները սառցակալած են, ես ինչպէ՞ս կարող էի մօրս տեսնել... Սուտ է, սուտ է այս անկը... Ո՞վ հնարեց, ու՛մ մտնով անցաւ այս չար կատակը... Խեղդու՛ւմ եմ, մա, էլ չեմ կարող... Ուրիշի խօսքը դէմ է անել կոկորդիս... Ամբողջ կեանքում ուրիշի խօսքերն են կրկնել... Ես ինքս եմ ուզում խօսել, գոնէ մի անգամ, ընդամենը մի՛... Իմ բառերով, թէկուզ անվարժ, թէկուզ անհարակ, բայց իմ բառերով... Բայց իմ անունից... Դերասանին մի՛ իջեցրէ՛ք բեմից, մի՛ ֆարկոճէ՛ք նրան, մի՛ սուլէ՛ք, մի՛ արհամարհէ՛ք... Այր ես ձեզ հետ նոյն ավտոբուսով եմ տուն վերադառնում...

Ես, երեկուայ հաւատաւորս, նորերի համար շեփոր ու ձեճոյայ հնչեցնողս, Ազատութեան հրապարակում նրանց բացվառ ճառերը արցունքոտ աչքերով ու ոգեւորութիւնից շնչակտուր ունկնդրողս, խորագոյն ցառով ու տառապանքով եմ ասում, որ փուչ է այս անկը...» (225-26)

becoming a colonel, his incompetence as a copy clerk suggests quite the reverse” (Peace 129). The Actor, similarly defined by his career, battles with the fact that he must take on various identities. In this sense, the play’s exploration of the Actor’s position is in accord with the absurdists’ general concern regarding questions of loss of identity and individuality. The Actor’s struggle to establish an independent identity represents the need for this type of struggle against the widespread acceptance of slogans and ready-made ideas (as in the case of the “fiery speeches” the Actor mentions).

Furthermore, the theme of writing plays a crucial role in “The Diary of a Madman”: “Not only does the verb *pisat*’ appear nineteen times during the course of the story and its derivatives (e.g., *pisatel*’, *pis*’*mo*, *perepisat*’, *podpisat*’) another twenty-two times, but such semantically related words as quill, paper, handwriting, punctuation, scribbling and book recur on thirty-six occasions” (Gregg 439). Poprishchin’s character struggles with communication and with writing as a reflection of himself and his social status. Similarly, language confines the Actor: his identity is based on the writing and words of others. In this last improvised portion of the monologue, the Actor attempts to express himself in his own words, without the restrictions imposed by the author or director. This part of the script, then, marks the Actor’s liberation. Poprishchin’s final outcry, at the apex of his madness, is also liberating: “[He] has now broken out of everything that provisionally bounded him: his nationality, his job, his rank, his geography, and his language” (Maguire 64). All of these factors also confine the Actor, though Zeytuntsyan’s play emphasizes the effects of his nationality, job, and language (in terms of scripted lines, words that are not self-derived). And, finally, despite the flight from everything that restrains him in this final diary entry, Poprishchin’s very last line – the question about the bump under the nose of the Dey of

Algiers - indicates his ultimate inability to escape his fixations (status, rank, and a sense of sexual inferiority). “The recapitulative function of this last line,” demonstrates that “Poprishchin is doomed to repeat, endlessly, the obsessions that have moved him throughout [-] sex, power, rank” (Maguire 65).

Almost formulaically, the Actor experiences a similar recapitulation: after the Director says that the Actor was actually quoting from an article that Perch Zeytuntsyan had published, the Actor denies ever having read such an article. He then begs the Director to admit that the words were in fact his own. The Director confirms that the words belong to the Actor, but only after the Actor promises to idolize him. The suggestion that the words were taken from an article by Zeytuntsyan and the necessity of this promise cast doubt on the question of the source of the Actor’s words. More importantly, the conversation ultimately resituates the Actor as subject to the whims of the Director, to his authority. As a result, the possibility of the Actor’s complete independence remains tenuous at best. Furthermore, although the Director ultimately agrees that the words belonged to the Actor, he adds the following caveat, “But [the words are] the sort of thing that has a butterfly’s existence. Today they resonate tomorrow they won’t” (25).⁷⁰ The Actor’s liberation becomes anti-climactic: his ability to speak his own words is inconsequential.

The second thematic shift in the monologue occurs when the Actor transitions from an articulation of his personal problem of self-expression to an explanation of the disillusionment brought about by the nation’s initially welcomed independence. Here, the same method of juxtaposition creates a new parallel - between the position of the Actor and Armenia’s position as a fledgling state. After expressing his wish to speak his own words, the Actor notes that he is just an average citizen, one of the many people who had high hopes for

⁷⁰ «Այդպիսի բաները թիթեռնիկի կեանք ունեն, այսօր հնչում են, վաղը կարող է չհնչեն...» (229)

the “new political forces” of independence. As mentioned previously, the play later casts doubt on the authenticity of the Actor’s words, while the content of the lines questions the sincerity of the political speeches of the leaders of the independence movement. The Actor’s concerns as an individual resemble those of the Armenian people and the Armenian state. After a brief interruption from the Director, who objects to the improvisation in the Actor’s lines, the Actor continues with an elaborate speech about all of the failed expectations involving Armenia’s move toward independence:

I debate something in my mind and erase it, debate and erase. I speak to myself in the thick Erevan darkness, smash my head against wall after wall, and wear myself out. Don’t despair, this is liberty, your long cherished dream has come true. What more do you want? My dream, the one I was born and grew up with... yours, his, hers. These difficulties are temporary. They’re days, they’ll fade away, they’ll pass. I get out of my skin, I use violence against myself. I force myself. I beg and implore myself on bended knee. Can you imagine? I will myself to live, yes me, with our symbols, our tricolor flag, red, bright red, and blue deeper than the infinity of sky, and orange richer than the actual fruit, our coat of arms, our national anthem, Armenian embassies, sympathetic Clinton, smiling at us lovingly with sweet words in praise of our democracy. But what can I do? Tell me what to do, when I bang my head against the real, the oh-so real, the sur-real wall which is my life, my everyday, my struggle to make ends meet, my bread stamp, my bit of the darkness, the chain of immorality churning around us, which strikes right at my heart. And do you know how accurate the aim is? Any sniper would

dream about such success. There were snipers around before, sure there were, and how. Loads of them, but it wasn't my country then. But this *is* my country, that's why the bullet pierces me and hits me right in the heart. So how can I not search for real meaning behind these sacred symbols? How can I stop the canker of doubt from gnawing at me, stop myself from asking what's real, what's right, what's true. Our homeland free and independent, or our homeland suffering and leaderless? Judge me, lynch me. Maybe I really don't have the right to live among you, because my weak mind and lack of vision prevent me from seeing, although I want to see, what you see, or many of you, or some of you. Those who know me as an Armenian, a son of this land, consider I am being disparaging. But against whom? Or what? Are you aware how ridiculous it would be to censure me for that. Enough, enough. I'm turning myself over to you for judgment. Don't show me any mercy – or yourselves either – though I want, want very much for you to triumph. You and only you, because my victory would be my worst defeat.⁷¹ (23-24)

71 «Մտնումս ասում եմ ու ջնջում, ասում ու ջնջում, երեսնեան քանո՞ր խավարում խօսում ինձ ինձ, պատէպատ խփում, ծուռտում, քրքրում իմ անձը, քէ ախր անկախութիւն է, ախր իրականացել է քո վաղեմի երազանքը, էլ ի՞նչ ես ուզում, ինձ հետ ծնուած, ինձ հետ մեծացած երազանքը, քո՛, միւսի՛, միւսի՛... Ժամանակաւոր դժուարութիւններ են սրանք, օրեր են, կմրկեն, անց կկենան... Մաշկիցս դուրս եմ գալիս, բռնանում ինձ վրայ, սախլում ինձ, հարկադրում, ինձ ինձ խնդրում ու ծնկաջո՞ղ պաղատում, պատկերացնո՞ւմ է՛ք, ինձ եմ աղերսում, ի՛նձ, ապրել մեր խորհրդանիշներով, եռագոյն դրոշակով, կարմիր, շա՛տ կարմիր, երկնի անհունից էլ աւելի կապոյտ, նարնջից էլ աւելի նարնջագոյն, մեր զինանշանով, պետական հիմնով, հայոց դեսպանատներով, համակրելի Քլիմբոնի՛ մեզ ուղղուած սիրառատ ժպիտով ու մեր ժողովրդավարութիւնը գովերգող անուշ խօսքերով... Բայց ես ինչ անեմ, ասէ՛ք, ինչ անեմ, եթէ հակառակ բախում եմ իրական, շատ իրական, գե՛րիբական պատիւն, որ իմ կեանքն է, իմ առօրեան, իմ կենցաղը, իմ հացի կտորը, իմ բաժին խաւարը, մեր շուրջ ալեկոծուող անբարոյութեան շղթան, որ խփում է ուղիղ իմ սրտին, եւ գիտէ՞ք ի՛նչ դիպուկ նշանաւորեամք, ամէն մի սնայպեր կերպգեր... Առաջ էլ այդ սնայպերները կային, կայի՛ն, կայի՛ն, այն էլ ոնց, այն էլ ինչքան, բայց դա իմ երկիրը չէր, իսկ սա ի՛նչ երկիրն է, դրա համար էլ զնդակը խոցում, կպչում է արդէն ուղիղ սրտիս... Ուրեմն, էլ ո՞նց կարողանամ այդ սուրբ խորհրդանիշների ետեւում իրական բովանդակութիւն չփնտրել... Ո՛նց կարողանամ արգելել, որ կասկածի որդը չկրծի ինձ, որ ինձ ինձ հարց չտամ այլեւս, քէ ո՛րն է իրական, ո՛րն է ճիշտ, ո՛րն է ստոյգ՝ մեր հայրենիք ազատ, անկա՞խ, քէ՞ մեր հայրենիք քեռառ, անտէր... Դատեցէ՛ք ինձ, կախեցէ՛ք, գուցէ ես, իրոք, իրաւունք չունեմ ձեր մէջ ապրելու, որովհետեւ իմ կարճամտութեան, իմ կարճատեսութեան, իմ անհնորհութեան պատճառով չեմ տեսնում, ուզում եմ ու չեմ

The lines describe the familiar dream of Armenians living in both the Diaspora and the former Soviet republic: the creation of an independent Armenian nation. Armenians eventually got what they wished for, but were left disillusioned by the hardships of forming a democracy on empty stomachs. The “everyday struggle” described here does not by any means refer to a universal human condition, but rather it applies to Armenia (and it can be relatable to the situation in the other former Soviet republics or any newly decolonized nation). Similarly, “the chain of immorality” alludes to the corruption that gave way in many of these new polities, Russia included, on their rocky paths to democracy. On the whole, the long monologue conveys a type of ambivalent optimism with regard to Armenia’s independence – as with the text’s attitude toward the Actor’s ability to forge his independence. The Actor expresses the idea that the dream of liberty was an illusion, but he also tries to convince himself that the everyday difficulties he faces are temporary. Ultimately, the Actor doubts the possibility of a bright future, but he hopes that he will be disproven. The Actor’s earlier complaint about his profession - “All my life I’ve repeated other people’s words” (23) – applies to the “leaderless” Armenia, repeating the slogans of the times, not entirely in control of its path. As the reference to Clinton indicates, the US defines democracy for Armenia. As in the case of the four men in *Props*, the superpower outside the nation determines its status.

The Actor’s questions with regard to reality and truth explain the reason why the absurd speaks to post-Soviet Armenian reality. The absurdist style, concerned with exposing the inefficacy of words and communication, oftentimes explores situations in which the

տեսնում այն, ինչ դուք էք տեսնում, կամ ձեզանից ոմանեմ... Նրանք, ովքեր համարում են, որ ես, հայ մարդս, այս հողի, այս երկրի գաւախս, չարախօսում եմ... Բայց ո՞ւմ դէմ, ինքս իմ դէ՞մ, իմ հակառակը՞, իմ կեանքի՞, ո՞ւմ դէմ, ինչի՞ դէմ... Դուք հասկանո՞ւմ էք ձեր հնարաւոր մեղադրանքների անհեթեթութիւնը... Վե՛րջ, վե՛րջ, ես ինձ հանձնում եմ ձեր դատին... Անողորմ եղէք իմ նկատմամբ... Բայց նաեւ ձե՛ր, ձե՛ր նկատմամբ... Թէև ուզում եմ, շատ եմ ուզում, որ յաղթողը դուք լինէք, ոչ թէ ես... Դուք եւ միայն դուք... Որովհետեւ իմ յաղթանակը իմ մեծագոյն պարտութիւնը կլինի...» (226-27)

words do not correspond to the actions of the characters. Famously, in the last lines of *Godot*, the characters say they are going, but they do not move. This familiar device is analogous to the failure of independence to produce freedom. Instead, as the Actor explains, independence has brought economic constraints and hardships and the imposition of the judgment of superpowers on the nation. Accordingly, among the Armenian absurdist plays, *Born and Died* engages with politics in the most explicit way, using it as a consistent thematic and conversational focus as well as a device that renders absurd effects.

The conclusion of this play deviates from the types of conclusions found in the contemporary Armenian theater of the absurd and the theater of the absurd in general. At the beginning of the play the Director claims that the Actor and Director's conflicting views "will be reconciled in the end" (3).⁷² The conclusion does suggest a type of resolution, symbolized by the characters' stripping off their clothing. Whereas most writers of the theater of the absurd present a pessimistic viewpoint, Zeytuntsyan ends his play with a suggestion of the possibility of change. In contrast, many of the plays of the theater of the absurd have a circular plot, beginning in the same way that they end, as in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. Another common alternative is an ending that gives the sheer sense of hopelessness as in Mrozek's *Striptease*, which concludes with the characters Mr. I and Mr. II leaving the stage handcuffed and blinded by hoods put over their heads. In contrast, *Born and Died* has a certain progression and a sense of positive resolution. The Actor and Director undressing and exiting the stage "as newborns" (*mōremerk*) can be contrasted with the static, motionless situation at the end of *Waiting for Godot*. In this case the nudity is suggestive of the characters' freedom from their respective roles. It also envisions the future with a rebirth,

⁷² «մեր հովասական խօսքերի մէջ ի վերջոյ մի մեծ հաւատարմութիւն կայ:» (197)

a fresh start. More significantly, however, if we take the nudity to signify the Actor and Director's literal stripping off of their social status, as controllable mouthpieces for an author, they can now simply be seen as two human beings. The stripping equalizes the Actor and Director; it undermines the accidental circumstances of their social position or historical context in order to portray man as did Beckett according to Esslin: "as having the duty of facing the human condition as a recognition that at the root of our being there is nothingness, liberty, and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices." *Waiting for Godot* does not tell a story, but instead explores a static situation in which nothing happens; in *Born and Died* the Actor and Director's opposing views are resolved with the stripping of their clothes. Moreover, in terms of resolution, the Actor and Director complete both their performances, "The Diary of a Madman" and *Born and Died*.

However, in line with all of the other elements of ambiguity in the play, its last line emphasizes a constraint. The Director looks at the door and says, "It's off limits. Totally off limits" (26).⁷³ The stripping of the Actor and Director certainly contradicts these lines; however, as the last words spoken in the play, they remain a strong presence that makes the possibility of a truly positive outlook difficult.⁷⁴ *Born and Died* remains distinct from other Armenian absurdist plays as probably the most positive representation of the era of independence. Yet despite its generally optimistic outlook, ultimately, the play treats its main concerns with ambivalence – the possibility of the Actor and Director's true independence and Armenia's cultural and political independence.

⁷³ «Այստեղ չի կարելի... Այստեղ անհասարակ չի կարելի...» (230)

⁷⁴ Interestingly enough, though Zeytuntsyan's plays are among the most staged contemporary works in Armenia, *Born and Died* has yet to be performed. Perhaps this fact further verifies the existence of the invisible door.

"'When we were part of the Soviet Union, we had no voice or vote,' said Vahan Barseghian, 47, a shepherd who lives outside of the capital but often comes to the bustling central market to sell his meat. 'The point of independence was really to give us the right to live the way we want. Now we have an Armenian leader who treats us like the Russians did. I don't really know if that is better or worse than before'" (Specter, 1997).

Chapter 5

The 'Soviet' in Post-Soviet and the Interchangeability of Authority in

Gurgen Khanjyan's *The Guards of Ruins* (Averakneri bahaknerë)

Synopsis of The Guards of Ruins: The play is set next to the ruins of an unidentified building, where three homeless characters, Sirak, Matsik, and Luso, go about their daily routine – begging for money, smoking cigarettes, and arguing with one another. All of a sudden, a self-proclaimed guard appears among them, forcing them to abide by his rules: he is going to train them to follow his lead in protecting the area of the ruins, which they are not allowed to leave. The guard has Sirak, Matsik, and Luso repeat take part in "military" exercises and clear the area until they are all exhausted. After he has gone for the night, the homeless trio attempts to escape, but they are unable to: they all willingly return to the guard post, because they have grown to like the guard and the authority that he represents. During the next day's training, in a surprising turn of events, Sirak ousts the guard and takes his place as the leader of the guards of ruins.

Like *Props* and *Born and Died*, Gurgen Khanjyan's *The Guards of Ruins* engages with the themes of space and place, post-Soviet politics, identity, and authority. These themes intersect in order to create an entirely pessimistic attitude toward Armenia's independence, its post-independence leadership, and its position as a nation. The play politicizes three essential features of the theater of the absurd. First, its action explores a new rendition of one of Harold Pinter's favorite concepts, "the room as territory to be conquered and defended" (Esslin *Theatre* 258). As in the case of *Props*, the play's setting functions as a metaphor for the nation. Second, its characters, rather than acting independently, are acted upon. (Beckett's puppets, Ionesco's rhinoceroses, the four men in *Props*, and the Actor in *Born and Died* all come to mind.) As in the other Armenian absurdist plays, the characters' lack of self-determination and their inability to act run parallel with the concepts of nationhood and

national identity. The play's circular plot further politicizes the characters' position of subjectivity by depicting the overthrow of one implausible oppressive ruling figure, the Guard, by a new, equally oppressive ruler, Sirak. Third, its premise – that a guard should be assigned to protect an abandoned, useless territory of ruins and the three homeless people who inhabit it – is entirely removed from realistic possibilities. As a result, like the plays of the absurd, it should be read as an image; and, more specifically, like *Props*, it should be read as an allegory for the early post-Soviet era.

The Guards of Ruins appropriately combines the function of metaphor, a technique dominant in *Props*, with the incorporation of historically-grounded realia that renders absurd effects, as in *Born and Died*. Although couched in humorous banter that makes it seem irrelevant, the play's opening dialogue about world politics is intrinsically linked to the action of the play so that the plot reads like a metaphor for the political observations made by one of the main characters, Matsik, in the first scene. We first encounter Matsik when he enters the stage carrying a toilet. He finds Sirak frustrated, desperately looking for a cigarette. After Sirak explains that he is waiting for Luso to return with cigarettes, noticing the toilet, he complains that Matsik tends to hoard useless things. Matsik sits on the toilet and begins to read the newspaper. The following comedic dialogue ensues:⁷⁵

Matsik (*reading the newspaper*): No, no, no, no, it can't be. This time it really can't be. No, that thing won't allow that other thing... for us to that other thing... for us to do that... that, you know...

Sirak: Eh, stop speaking nonsense, so I can understand you. That, that, that...

Matsik: That thing, you know, that bear.

Sirak: The Himalayan?

⁷⁵ All translations of the play are my own.

Matsik: No, the Northern one, white.

Sirak: Have you lost your mind again?

Matsik: Come on man, you know, that big country... Yeah, Russia. I'm telling you, America won't let us unite with Russia, it wouldn't serve America's interests. Do you get it now?

Sirak: You're one lucky guy.

Matsik: But Russia really needs us too. Eh, there's that too, huh.

Sirak: I want to smoke. I can tell you've smoked. That's why you're talking about America and stuff.

Matsik: The only way to get from Russia to Iran is by way of Armenia. Do you understand, you idiot?

Sirak: Humph...

Matsik: Sirak my dear, you know, you're a completely apolitical being, it's as though you're not from these parts.

Sirak: Stop it, I said I want to smoke. Man, have they left it up to you to worry about America and Russia? Are you the decision-maker, Mr. Matsik? Take a look at yourself, the chair you're sitting on... Let me see that paper.

Matsik (*disdainfully*): Don't tell me you're going to read it.

Sirak: No, I'm going to use it for the right purpose. Give it to me.

Matsik: Find another paper, I'm reading this one.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ «Մացիկ – (Թերթը կարգալուծ) Ձէ, չէ-չէ-չէ, լինող բան չի: Էս մէկը որ իսկի լինելու բան չի: Ձէ, էն բանը չի թողնի, որ էն միւս բանը... որ մենք էն միւս բանին... էն անենք... էն, էլի...»

Սիրակ – Դէ կարգին խօսի հասկանա՞նք, էն, էն, էն...

Մացիկ – Էն բանը, էլի, էն արջը:

Սիրակ – Հիմալաեա՞նք:

Մացիկ – Ձէ, Յիւսիսային, սպիտակ:

While *Props* reads as a metaphor for Armenia’s political position vis-à-vis world powers, *The Guards of Ruins* opens with an elaboration of this position, describing Armenia as a pawn in the power play between Russia and the United States. The absurdity of this scene lies in the style of its delivery: Matsik struggles ridiculously to articulate his concerns clearly, and the common knowledge he eventually expresses about Armenia’s crucial geopolitical location is embedded in a conversation that begins and concludes with a discussion about a toilet and cigarettes. In fact, the text associates the political with cigarettes again after the arrival of Luso. Sirak, pleased with the cigarettes she has obtained, comments: “These are real American Marlboros.”⁷⁷ The reference to America reminds Matsik of the previous conversation: “America? Yes, so, America’s the one that won’t allow us and Russia...”⁷⁸ Sirak’s refusal to engage in this conversation immediately negates its relevance: “You hold off with your political statements. (*To Luso.*) The lighter.”⁷⁹ As with *Born and Died*, these details make the historically-grounded realia of the play seem

Սիրակ – Էլի ուղեզոգ փուխը թողե՞ց:

Մացիկ – Այ մարդ, դե էն մեծ երկիրը, էլի... Հա, Ռուսաստանը: Ասում են՝ Ամերիկան չի թողնի, որ մենք միանանք Ռուսաստանին, Ամերիկային դա ձեռնատու չի: Հիմա իմացա՞ր:

Սիրակ – Երանի՜ քեզ:

Մացիկ – Բայց մենք Ռուսաստանին էլ շատ ենք պէտք, է՛, էդ էլ կայ, բա:

Սիրակ – Ծխել են ուզում. Դու երեւի արդեն ծխել ես, որ Ամերիկայից-բանից ես խօսում:

Մացիկ – Ռուսաստանից Պարսկաստան միակ համփէն մեր վրայով է անցում, հասկանո՞ւմ ես, դմբօ:

Սիրակ – Ի...

Մացիկ – Սիրակ ջան, ախր դու լրիվ ազաբազաբաբան երեւոյր ես, է՛, ոնց որ էս տարածաբանից չլինես:

Սիրակ – Ձեռ քաշի, աւեցի՜ ծխել են ուզում: Այ մարդ, Ամերիկայի ու Ռուսաստանի դարզը քեզ են տուե՞լ, դո՞ւ ես որոշողը, այ պարոն Մացիկ: Մի քեզ նայի, հստածդ արողին նայի... Էդ թերթը տուր տեսնեն:

Մացիկ – (Հեզմանալով) Զլինի՞՞ կարդալու ես:

Սիրակ – Չէ, հիշա նշանակմամբ են օգտագործելու: Տուր:

Մացիկ – Ուրիշ թերթ գտիր, սա կարդում են:» (274-75)

⁷⁷ «Սա իսկական ամերիկեան Մարլբորօ է:» (276)

⁷⁸ «Ամերիկա՞յ... Հա, էդ Ամերիկան, ուրեմն, թողնողը չի, որ մենք ու Ռուսաստանը...» (276)

⁷⁹ «Սպասիր դու էլ քո քաղաքական սենտենցներով: (Լուսօին) Լուցիլին:» (276)

arbitrary, absurd. After all, the character delivering the message is laughable, and, overall, the action of the play revolves around activities that are unrelated to Matsik's political concerns: smoking, drinking, and negotiating with the Guard. (In fact, the forty-four-page script makes thirty-seven references to smoking, twenty-five references to cigarettes, and fifty-one references to drinking and alcohol.) Furthermore, after this initial scene, the script never revisits the subject of international politics. On the one hand, then, the political content reads like an aside, simply additional laughable material. On the other hand, however, the placement of this conversation at the very beginning of the play highlights its importance. It frames the play so that the ensuing action, the Guard asserting his power over the homeless characters, is a representation of Armenia's political reality, both on the national and the global level. In other words, the plot of *The Guards of Ruins*, which depicts homeless, depraved characters ruled by a power-hungry "guard," runs parallel to the course of Armenia's post-Soviet nationhood with its corrupt leadership, whose actions are complicated by the demands of global powers.

Historical realities also inform the characters' backgrounds, perhaps more so than most other absurdist plays. The cast of derelicts bears the marks of the recent traumas of history, connected to the early years of Armenia's independence. They own nothing and have no family. They are part of a larger homeless community that has made begging an organized vocation: Sirak demonstrates to Matsik how to beg in order to achieve the best results (277); he also explains that another one of the local beggars, Shoghik, has a fake cast (302); and the beggars have divided up the territory – each one works at a specific intersection (302). The Guard calls them "stray dogs" (*antēr shun*) (280), and their socio-economic status realistically conjures up the early post-Soviet period, when nearly a quarter

of Armenia's population was homeless (Suny 386). Each character represents a different category of the homeless population. Sirak is a member of the class of educated people who became jobless shortly after Armenia gained its independence. Though jobless and homeless, he is an engineer by trade. The play also suggests that he has served in the army (280, 295). Luso, a refugee, represents the victims of the Karabagh War. Matsik represents the survivors of the 1988 earthquake: he does not remember anything before 1988, and he does not remember anything "of substance" after 1988. He has no last name, no home, no family, and no friends (281). The audience later learns that he is an earthquake survivor, whose name was Serob. The Guard does not represent an immediately distinguishable group. He is described as "a strange man, probably formerly a soldier and participant in the Karabagh War."⁸⁰ He is in uniform and carries a gun and a club. Although the Guard exerts control over the other characters, the play suggests that all four of them are socially equal. Matsik, fed up with the Guard's presence, asks him, "My dear Mr. Guard, don't you have your own home, family, friends, relatives?"⁸¹ He repeats the same question later, and the absence of a response suggests that, like the other characters, the Guard is homeless. The characters also share a climactic nightmare about the Guard, who terrorizes them and then begins to beg for money (312). The shared dream reveals that despite the Guard's power and authority, he is as pathetic as the homeless characters. The specific details about the characters' identity combine with elements of vagueness: the Guard "probably" served in Karabagh; Sirak has probably done some type of military service, but the play does not undeniably verify this fact; Matsik's real name is suppressed for the sake of his sanity. This technique – clearly connecting the characters to reality and then removing them from that

⁸⁰ «տարօրինակ մի տղամարդ, երեւի՝ նախկին զինուորական ու դարաբաղեան պատերազմի մասնակից» (273)

⁸¹ «Պարոն պահակ ջան, դու տուն-տեղ, ընտանիք, ազգ-բարեկամ չունե՞ս:» (298)

very reality – makes them function as symbols of a larger picture, a picture of the nation. Collectively, as an entirely inconsequential unit engaged in a pointless activity (guarding ruins), they represent the endeavor of nation building as flawed, and, perhaps even more radically, as futile.

The play's setting – a dilapidated house, rubble, pieces of wood, an industrial rubbish bin, trash, pipes - complements the notion of the characters as representative of the nation. In other words, the play's setting represents the spatial equivalent of the characters' position. In terms of effect, the setting of *The Guards of Ruins* bears a striking resemblance to the setting of *Props*. The space of ruins, to which the characters become confined, symbolizes the destruction of the past, the crumbling of an era, and the present problem of nation building. The Guard's reference to the guard post of ruins as a representation of the nation demonstrates this point. When the three homeless characters cannot endure the supposedly rigorous training, the Guard complains, "I don't understand... Who's going to defend this nation? Me? Me again? (*Sees Luso sleeping*) This woman's asleep. (*Pushing her.*) Get up, hey, up! You're sleeping with your ass in my face."⁸² The Guard equates the defense of the ruins with the defense of the nation, but the sleeping Luso detracts the attention from the potentially serious parallel, rendering it absurd. The play's aesthetic remains consistent when it comes to politics – the dialogue hints at the problems of the defenseless nation in ruins, but its action focuses on the immediate, and often trivialized, problems of the homeless characters. Furthermore, the characters' dialogue about the adjacent territory they survey during their training reveals that symbols of capitalist consumption have replaced former places of learning and education. Luso observes the casino across the way, where the

⁸² «Զհասկացայ... Բա ո՞վ պիտի էս հանրապետութիւնը պաշտպանի, ե՞ս. նորից ե՞ս: (Տեսնելով, որ Լուսօն քնեց) էս կի՞նը քնեց: (Հրելով) Վեր կաց, էյ, վեր, քամակդ տնկել-քնել էս:» (286)

bookstore used to be; Matsik looks out onto a Bingo hall, formerly a kindergarten; Sirak observes the goings on at a gaming hall, formerly a library (301-302). Through its focus on place and space, the play highlights the detrimental impact independence has had on the nation's cultural institutions.

The premise of the play – the idea that the guard post and its function do not have to make sense – also symbolizes the dysfunction of the post-Soviet nation. Sirak asks the question, “This building is destroyed. Why do we need a guard for these ruins?”⁸³ The Guard angrily responds by saying that he does not owe them any explanations: if he says that it is a guard post, then it is. Later, when the Guard says that he has been ordered not to allow anyone to enter or leave the area, Sirak protests again, “Normally, entering is prohibited, but exiting...”⁸⁴ The Guard simply responds by saying that norms do not interest him. Finally, while the Guard eats during the lunch break, he elaborates on the purpose of the guard post:

[(*Chews.*) Listen to me. A guard post is the sort of thing that... (*Chews.*) A guard post is the sort of thing, that, say, you took a look, yesterday it wasn't there, today suddenly you take a look, and it's there, yup, that's the sort of amazing thing a guard post is. Even in emptiness, even in thin air, a guard post can suddenly be assigned, because you ordinary mortals never know and never can know what there is anywhere and what there will be. A guard post is something else. The important thing is to find the right spot, a single good guard post can put an end to the world's disobedience. Give me a guard post and I'll create order out of universal chaos. Just like that. Therefore, if I say that this is a guard post, you must quietly accept this reality. And whoever

⁸³ «Սա վիճումն է՛նք է, էս աւերակներին ի՞նչ պահակ:» (277)

⁸⁴ «Սովորաբար ներս չեն թողնում, բայց դուրս...» (278)

doesn't accept it will be subject to punishment. It's no time to *silly-billy* around with this matter. As they say, if you don't know, I'll teach you, if you don't want to learn, I'll force you. Got it?⁸⁵

Physical antics (the Guard chewing his sandwich) and exaggeration (the idea that a guard post can appear anywhere and bring order to the world) combine with the serious implications of the Guard's words in order to render absurd effects. The Guard explains that the sudden, inexplicable appearance of a guard post is normal. Though Matsik, Sirak, and Luso cannot understand the need for it, they must simply accept it. The characters find themselves in a situation that resembles Armenia's post-independence position with the appearance of unfamiliar, "great" realities: the new, illogical bureaucracies of democracy; "freedom" that brought widespread poverty with it; and the rise of the class of oligarchs. The processes of the transition to independence, such as the disastrous voucher program that facilitated privatization, were imposed on the people. Here, the Guard imposes his authority over the homeless characters, and they are forced to accept it, whether they understand it or not. As with *Born and Died* and in the classic absurdist sense, words do not correspond with actuality. The play's action indicates countless examples of this problem: the guards survey the area for assassins, but they observe harmless homeless people and commoners in the street (303); a paper bag explodes, scaring the Guard, but it turns out to be a gag orchestrated by the children on the block (304-305). For the Armenian absurdist, the state of affairs of

⁸⁵ «(Մամեղով) Ինձ լսե՛ք: Պահակակետն էնպէս բան է, որ... (Մամուն է): Պահակակետն էնպէս բան է, որ, ասե՛նք, նայում ես՝ երէկ չկար, էսօր հանկարծ նայում ես՝ կայ, բա, էսպէս զարմանալի բան է պահակակէտը: Հենց դատարկ տեղն էլ, հենց օդի մէջ էլ կարող է հանկարծ պահակակէտ նշանակուել, որովհետեւ դուք՝ հասարակ մահկանացուները, երբեք չգիտէք ու չեք կարող իմանալ, թէ որտեղ ինչ կայ ու ինչ է լինելու: Պահակակէտն ուրիշ բան է. կարելուրը՝ ճիշդ կէտը գտնելն է, մի ճիշդ պահակակէտը հերիք է՝ որ աշխարհի անկարգութեան դեմն առնես: Տուէ՛ք ինձ պահակակէտ և ես կարգի կը բերեմ համատիեզերական բառը: Այսպէս: Ուստի, եթէ ձեզ ասում եմ, որ սա պահակակէտ է, պիտի սուսուփուս ընդունէ՛ք սոյն իրողութիւնը: Իսկ ով չի ընդունում՝ ենթակայ է պատժի. այս հարցում սիլի-բիլի անելու ժամանակ չի, ինչպէս ասում են՝ չգիտես՝ կը սովորեցնեն, չես ուզում՝ կը ստիպեն: Հասկացա՞ք»: (282-83)

post-Soviet Armenian politics resembles that of Soviet times – words do not reveal anything about reality, and, oftentimes, they directly contradict it.

The play further casts doubt on the actuality of Armenia’s independence through the character of Orpheus, a roaming bard, who during his brief appearance, claims that there is true freedom in roaming and not having any physical attachments (306, 307). While seemingly the embodiment of independence, Orpheus proves to be a hypocrite. When he makes his entrance he explains that he rejects property, money, and family. Later, during a toast, he says, “Let’s toast to the home, let’s toast so that everyone in the world will have a home.”⁸⁶ Sirak notices the contradiction in the ideas Orpheus expresses, and asks what this toast says about his earlier advocacy of roaming the world (310). Orpheus responds, “Have a home, lock the door and then go roam the world comfortably.”⁸⁷ Through the example of Orpheus’ character, the play reaffirms the idea that independence is useless when it means homelessness and financial instability.

Like Orpheus, the homeless characters are caught in a paradoxical bind. Though they complain about the Guard’s exertion of power over them, they masochistically crave his presence, his authority. After a full day of enduring his orders and the training he imposes, the characters decide not to return to the ruins on the following morning. They clearly have the opportunity to escape; however, all three of them return. Embarrassed at their inability to stay away, they make excuses for being there. Finally, Sirak says, “Let’s admit it, we want to see our guard, it’s like we miss him.”⁸⁸ The characters’ relationship to the Guard functions

⁸⁶ «Եկէ՛ք խմենք տան կենացը, այն բանի կենացը, որ ամէն մարդ այս աշխարհում տուն ունենայ:» (310)

⁸⁷ «Տուն ունեցիր, դուրը փակիր ու յետոյ գնայ հանգիստ թափառի աշխարով մէկ:» (310)

⁸⁸ «Եկէ՛ք խոստովանենք, որ ուզում էք տեսնել մեր պահակը, կարօտել է՛ք՝ այսպէս ասած:» (295)

among a set of parallel contradictions: Orpheus' example presents the opposition between home and roaming; the main characters resist the Guard, while at the same time being attracted to him; the nation is both independent and dependent. Like Matsik's description of Armenia in the opening lines of the play and much like the characters in *Props* and *Born and Died*, the guards of ruins are caught between the desire for independence and the inescapability of dependence.

By the conclusion of the play, the characters are no longer indistinguishable in terms of their dependence on the Guard. Sirak eventually overcomes his position of subservience. Early on, he has his eye on the Guard's position: he begins to admire the Guard's uniform; he cleans the uniform and shines the Guard's belt; he becomes his assistant for the duration of a few scenes; and he pretends to be him. In the end, in a disturbing twist, Sirak ousts the Guard by hitting him over the head. He then exchanges his clothes with those of the Guard. The Guard awakens to find his post taken, and the play concludes with Sirak's declaration: "Now it's my turn. Now I'm the guard of the ruins."⁸⁹ As one homeless guard of ruins replaces the other, the play questions the validity of both the function of authority and the authoritarian figure. In this way, its plot resembles that of *Props* – it presents a pessimistic view of the nation's leadership (the Guard) and state of affairs (the ruins), taking issue with every new order, past and present.

The play also suggests that Sirak represents Russian rule, while the Guard represents post-independence leadership. When the Guard asks the three characters to sing, Sirak, nostalgic for the Soviet past, begins to sing a Russian military song. The others try to join

⁸⁹ «Հիմա հերթը իմն է: Հիմա ես եմ աւերակ տան պահակը:» (316)

him, when the Guard cuts them off: “Forget that foreign language, xenophiles! Armenian!”⁹⁰

The characters then begin to sing “Ardyok‘ ovk‘er en,” a nationalistic song about the Armenian freedom fighters’ movement of the late 1890s. The Guards’ insistence that the group sing an Armenian song aligns him with Armenian leadership, independent of Russian influence. From this point on, the guards in training choose “Ardyok‘ ovk‘er en” whenever the Guard asks them to sing. The song’s chorus repeats throughout the action of the play, creating a hilarious image of the weak freedom fighters of the new era. In this way, the song’s juxtaposition with the training of the guards suggests the ineffectiveness of post-independence leadership and defense of the nation. In another scene, when Sirak asks to polish the Guard’s belt, he admires the hammer and sickle on it, and then reminisces about the Soviet Union: “You see the hammer and sickle on the star? They shine so. What a country it was, eh. No one could mess with it. And the people were satiated and fortunate.”⁹¹

In this conversation, the Guard, who bears the symbol of the past and the marks of the old ways, represents the new leadership that promotes the ideology of freedom, as evinced by his response: “Don’t spread ideas that are anti-independence, stray dog.”⁹² The action of the play demonstrates that he only differs from the old Soviet leadership in terms of his rhetoric; his other characteristics – tone, method of ruling – remain in line with the Soviet style. The metamorphosis of these two characters, their interchangeability, indicates that the two forms of leadership and their outcomes - Soviet (Sirak) and post-independence (the Guard) - are one and the same.

⁹⁰ «Օտար լեզուն բողբոջ, օտարամուկներ: Հայերէն»: (280)

⁹¹ «Մուրճն ու մանգաղը աստղի վրայ տեսնու՞մ է՞, ոնց էն պսպղում: Ի՛նչ երկիր էր, է՛, դէմը խաղ չկար, ժողովուրդն էլ կուտա ու բախտաւոր»: (300)

⁹² «Հակամակախական գաղափարներ չտարածել, անտէր շուն»: (300)

Eight years after its first publication, in 2008, *The Guards of Ruins* appeared in a collection of Khanjyan's plays entitled *Theater 301*. At the behest of the publisher, the Armenian Writers Union, Gurgen Khanjyan was compelled to revise the play's conclusion drastically. The book's inside cover indicates that the governmentally funded publication includes some works that might be familiar to readers, but that "they have been rewritten and revised by the author."⁹³ The note instructs readers and directors to use only the versions in this publication. Unfortunately, the original version of *The Guards of Ruins* was a significantly more powerful work. The revision of 2008 lacks the political critique and haunting message of the first edition. In the last scene, the Guard experiences chest pain and collapses. The homeless characters try to help him, although Sirak does so reluctantly. Then, Orpheus realizes that he knows the Guard: he has seen the Guard on the battlefield, where he performed at a concert for the soldiers of Karabagh. The Guard explains that the shrapnel lodged in his heart caused the pain. Here, the dialogue emphasizes the Guard's participation in the Karabagh War, something that the first edition only suggests. The specific mention of his battle wound gives him heroic status, and the characters and audience begin to sympathize with him. Orpheus calls an ambulance for the Guard, and before they take him away he assigns Sirak to the position of chief guard. The characters promise to defend the guard post well, and Luso encourages the Guard by telling him that she is sure he will return. The play concludes with the characters carrying the Guard off to the ambulance, while singing "Ardyok' ovk'er en." This new conclusion reads like an ill-conceived idolization of the oppressive leader-figure. The song, which throughout the rest of the work creates irony and absurdity, creates pathos in the conclusion of the later version. In the first edition, the

⁹³ «Գրքանք հեղինակի կողմից նորովի վերամշակուած են և վերախմբագրուած»

characters sing “Ardyok‘ ovk‘ er en,” while Sirak seals his position as the new guard of ruins. The traditionally celebratory song is combined with the disturbing reality of the takeover of authority: the replacement of one pathetic guard with another creates an unsettling conclusion, critical of all types of leadership. The revised conclusion, in line with statist ideology, advocates nationalism and affirms the position of the authoritarian figure. Read metaphorically, the revised conclusion indicates that though post-independence Armenian leadership may be ailing, it is heroic and will endure. Strangely enough, thirteen years after the publication of *Born and Died*, with the revision of *The Guards of Ruins*, we find an undeniable example of the censorship that Zeytuntsyan criticizes. The Armenian government with its version of democracy and freedom demonstrates that Khanjyan’s critique expressed in the original version of the play along with the political anxieties in *Props* and *Born and Died* are still valid in the present day.

These three plays, Ayvazyan’s *Props*, Zeytuntsyan’s *Born and Died*, and Khanjyan’s *The Guards of Ruins* carve out a unique space for themselves in the subgenre of the theater of the absurd. In the most immediate sense, they articulate the problems of dependence in the era of Armenia’s independence: they present the absurd as a means of confronting the Soviet legacy, exposing the machinations of empire in both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, and challenging the socio-economic and political developments in post-Soviet Armenia. All three texts, though each in its own way, propound a power struggle as it relates to the play’s setting. Their action revolves around the spatial questions of power: What will the characters make of their setting? Can they set and govern the terms of this setting? And who has agency in this setting? It follows, then, that the place (or stage) building that takes place in these plays functions as a metaphor for Armenia’s post-Soviet nation building. The political

message of these three plays speaks to the vulnerable position of the tiny nation of the Transcaucasus for centuries – well before the Soviet period, during, and after it. At the same time, informed by the Euro-American tradition that preceded them, these plays create occasion for a rethinking of the trends in the scholarship on the absurd. They offer a clear indication of the in-betweenness that characterizes the absurd as a unified category – between tragedy and comedy, between existentialism and the spiritual, between ideology and the apolitical, between politics and the metaphysical.

PART III: THE POSTMODERN NOVEL AS PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Chapter 6

The Hospital as Post-Soviet, Postmodern Chronotope

Synopsis of The Hospital: The Hospital consists of three notebooks that portray the uncanny experiences of a young man named Grigor. The first notebook provides a third-person account of Grigor's experiences at a remote, fortified institution that seems to resemble a hospital. Grigor believes that he is at the hospital for a job interview, but he soon finds himself trapped there. He undergoes treatments, takes drugs that are prescribed to him, and witnesses rapes and bestiality. This first part of the novel details Grigor's time at the hospital, the physical and mental deterioration he undergoes, and his eventual escape. In the second notebook the reader learns that Grigor wrote the first notebook in the form of a novella a few months after his escape from the hospital. The second and third notebooks offer a first-person narrative in the form of diary entries, written by Grigor after his escape: it is full of sexual escapades and hallucinatory scenes. The text weaves multiple narratives from two points of view – a third person narrator and Grigor's narrative "I." To complicate matters further, Grigor's hallucinations and his schizophrenia repeatedly cast doubt on the action of the novel. As Grigor tries to free himself from the influence and memory of the hospital after his escape, he attempts to forge a normal life. Ultimately, he finds that suicide is the only escape from the haunting presence of the hospital in his life.

Synopsis of Chapaev and Pustota: Also in the form of a journal, the novel features a schizophrenic hero, Pyotr Pustota, who is undergoing treatment at a psychiatric hospital in post-Soviet Russia. Pyotr has difficulty adjusting to post-Soviet Russian reality, and, as a result, he does not acknowledge his contemporary identity. Instead, he believes he is actually living in Civil War era Russia as Petka, the assistant to the semi-mythical, legendary war hero, Chapaev. Pyotr's unreliable perception makes it impossible to distinguish the factual from the fictive in the novel: it is never entirely clear which portion of the novel is actually real, the scenes in the mental institute, Petka's experiences during the Civil War, or neither of the two. The narrative time of the novel navigates between Russia's past and present, as Pyotr, along with his fellow schizophrenics, tries to define himself and find a sense of belonging in contemporary Russia. Pyotr's quest is informed by the Buddhist teachings that Chapaev offers him during the Civil War scenes.

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, *Props*, *Born and Died*, and *The Guards of Ruins* use absurdist aesthetics in order to explore the problems of dominance in the Soviet era and new manifestations of these problems in the era of independence. Place and space in these plays have been intrinsically linked to sources of confinement: in *Props* an empty space becomes a jail and then a madhouse; the theater in *Born and Died* is the space where the

Actor must recite his lines and refrain from expressing his own ideas; the Guard in the *Guards of Ruins* confines the other characters in the play to the area of the ruins, where they are forced to obey his rules. The settings of the plays function as a metaphor for the nation, so that, ironically, confinement represents the period of independence. This sense of confinement is informed by the looming presence of a now crumbled Soviet past.

Along similar lines, this chapter moves on to a consideration of the setting of the hospital as chronotope in two post-Soviet postmodern novels that are framed as psychological journals. Published just two years apart, Gurgun Khanjyan's *The Hospital* and Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev and Pustota* explore the dynamics of the post-Soviet era through representations of the (psychiatric) hospital and its patients. Khanjyan and Pelevin, while contemporaneous authors,⁹⁴ write from very different locales that belonged to the former Soviet Union: Khanjyan, writing in Armenian, represents the literary culture of the smallest and, currently, least populous former Soviet Socialist Republic, while Pelevin, a Russian writer, comes from the center of the former Soviet world and the present-day Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The imbalances in power between geopolitical spaces often run parallel to imbalances in the comparative evaluation of literary capital. In fact, such comparisons have been virtually non-existent in the case of Russian and Armenian literature, except from the perspective of a unidirectional influence, that of the center on the periphery.⁹⁵ The surprising stylistic and conceptual similarities that *The Hospital* and *Chapaev and Pustota* share necessitate a comparative analysis that does away with the

⁹⁴ Khanjyan is Pelevin's senior by twelve years.

⁹⁵ This type of comparative work follows Franco Moretti's line of thinking in "Conjectures on World Literature," which presents the argument that cultures of the "core" or center have the agency to alter the literature of cultures of the periphery. Moretti's grand-scale theory received much well deserved criticism from scholars like Efraim Kristal and Shu-mei Shih, among others.

rhetoric of influence. In their representation of the post-Soviet world, the approaches of the peripheral, minor literary text and the central, Russian model overlap in terms of four key elements: their setting, the use of a postmodernist aesthetic and outlook, the depiction of the schizophrenic hero as national allegory, and the search for spiritual sustenance. These two works raise questions about the place and role of the post-Soviet individual with respect to the nation: Is it possible for the individual to be free, physically and mentally, from state control? How does individual freedom relate to post-Soviet nationhood? What national, socio-political anxieties does the character's mental disorder reflect? In exploring these questions, both novels affirm that the Soviet past haunts the present of the independent, "democratic" nation state and that this past remains a key component of the contemporary moment.

"Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" Foucault compellingly asks in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (228). He draws clear connections between these "disciplinary institutions" through the relatedness of their oppressive functions: they produce docile subjects with docile bodies, create dependencies among subjects, ensure conformity and uniformity, and correct their subjects based on their respective definitions of normalcy (183). Foucault's account of the birth of the French penal system provides both an historical record of this institution and a model for the disciplinary workings of any oppressive, controlling apparatus or institution as it relates to the network of state power:

'Discipline' may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy'

of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by ‘specialized’ institutions (the penitentiaries or ‘houses of correction’ of the nineteenth century), or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end (schools, hospitals), or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power [...]; or by apparatuses that have made discipline their principle of internal functioning (the disciplinarization of the administrative apparatus from the Napoleonic period), or finally by state apparatuses whose major, if not exclusive, function is to assure that discipline reigns over society as a whole (the police). (215-16)

As institutions that discipline, the settings of *The Hospital* and *Chapaev and Pustota* function in Foucault’s terms; however, as both literal, historical references and symbols of instruments in the complex system of power, the Soviet context informs their particularities. As an historical allusion, the setting of the hospital/madhouse allows these novels to straddle the line between metaphor and reality: “The madhouse was an institution in Soviet life, a central part of the brutal treatment of individuals. And the literary use of the madhouse reflected a real institution that did real and barbaric things to real and broken people” (Brintlinger 47-48). Although at the same time creatively distinct in their fictional details of representation, the post-Soviet literary portrayals of the mental institution force readers to remember the relationship between psychiatry and political incarceration under the Soviet regime. The distinction that Foucault draws between the hospital as an institution and the police as state apparatus was much less clear during this period: “The use of psychiatry as part of the apparatus of an oppressive state had already been formalized in 1959, when Nikita Khrushchev defined any kind of dissent or social deviation as mental illness. [...] He] gave

carte blanche to psychiatric panels working under the aegis of the KGB” (Brintlinger 48).

The historical reference to the Soviet penal system represents the presence of the past in the dynamics of the present.⁹⁶ In other words, the institution of the past becomes the defining symbol of the post-Soviet era, thereby complicating notions of independence and liberty. One of the paradoxes of the Enlightenment – “which discovered the liberties [and], also invented the disciplines” – repeats itself in the restrictions of post-Soviet freedom (Foucault *Discipline* 222).⁹⁷

The hospital in *The Hospital* and the madhouse in *Chapaev and Pustota* are not only settings in terms of place and time, but chronotopes – fictional spaces inextricably linked and continually interacting with and affected by time. These institutional chronotopes facilitate the movement between past and present and between periods of dreaming and wakefulness. In the case of *The Hospital*, Grigor’s time in the Hospital⁹⁸ creates a clear temporal division in the narrative: Grigor before the Hospital, Grigor during his time in the Hospital, and Grigor after his escape from the Hospital. His experiences in the Hospital inform his present perspective; read allegorically, the Hospital represents the Soviet past, while everything after

⁹⁶ In the Russian context, the use of “psychiatric diagnosis as a political instrument” has a much longer pre-Soviet history, starting with the rule of Peter the Great (Brintlinger 50).

⁹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the madhouse has been a frequent setting in post-Soviet Armenian and Russian fiction and film, including, most notably, Anahit Aghasaryan’s *Madmen of the World, Unite!* (Khelagarnere bolor erkrneri, miatsek) (1992), Vladimir Sharov’s *Before and During* (Do i vo vremia) (1993), Vladimir Makanin’s *Underground, or A Hero of Our Time* (Andergraund, ili Geroi nashego vremeni) (1998), Vigen Chaldanian’s *Symphony of Silence* (Lroutean simfonia) (2001), and Andrei Konchalovsky’s *House of Fools* (Dom durakov) (2002).

⁹⁸ Three hospitals play a role in this narrative: the first one, where Grigor finds himself trapped; the second one, where his hemorrhoids are treated; and the third, where Grigor’s grandfather stays after he begins to experience mental deterioration. For the purposes of clarity, I capitalize the first hospital in order to distinguish it as the central one.

The multiplicity of hospitals in the text furthers the notion that disciplinary institutions punish and reproduce that which they purport to correct. Just as the penal institution continues to follow the convict even after reforming him, the Hospital follows Grigor even after he escapes it (Foucault *Discipline* 272, 277-78).

Grigor's escape represents the era of independence – an era still under the shadow of the Soviet Hospital. Similarly, the psychiatric institute allows Pyotr Pustota in *Chapaev and Pustota* to move between the Soviet past and contemporary Russia. Pustota's delusional memory – his belief that he is Chapaev's assistant⁹⁹ - creates a parallel between the era of the Russian Civil War and the post-Soviet era. While the hospital defines Pustota's present, post-Soviet reality, it represents the past for Grigor. In both cases, however, the chronotopic divisions prove superficial as the intersections between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods blur the lines between past and present.

In theorizing the post-Soviet present through a postmodernist lens, both novels demonstrate that the contemporary period “must be perceived in terms both of continuity and discontinuity.” On the one hand, these narratives are comprised of ruptures in time and chronology; on the other hand, they create parallels between the very spatial-temporal (chronotopic) borders that they draw: in the case of *The Hospital*, spatially, we have the Hospital vs. the outside world and, temporally, the Soviet vs. the post-Soviet era; similarly, in the case of *Chapaev and Pustota*, spatially, there is the madhouse/the outside world and, temporally, the Russian Civil War era/the post-Soviet period. These overlapping distinctions present history and changes in history as “spatial, mental structure[s] and as [...] temporal, physical processes” (Hassan 3-4). In a word, the stories of the protagonists are narrated as postmodernist conjunction and disjunction; therefore, allegorically, the history of the nation simultaneously involves change and sameness.

As a dual symbol – both an historical allusion and a metaphor for the present – the (psychiatric) hospital becomes a device that enables the fact-fiction perspectivism of

⁹⁹ Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev was a Russian Civil War hero, whose legacy was perpetuated by the publication of Dmitri Furmanov's Soviet Socialist Realist novel, *Chapaev* (1923) and the 1934 filmic rendition of the novel. Petka was the name of Chapaev's orderly (Barrer 68).

postmodernism: it blurs the line between reality and fiction. These two novels reject the various historical and fictional realities they present, asserting the constructedness of all perception and representation: both narratives repeatedly cast doubt on the events that take place. As a result, though stylistically and formally in a different category, they resemble the plays of the absurd in their resistance to interpretation or in “the postmodern tendency, the tendency of indeterminance” (Hassan 6).

The narratives focus on the character’s neurotic mind, thereby revealing reality as a mental construct:

In all [neuroses] what determines the formation of symptoms is the reality not of experience but of thought. Neurotics live in a world apart, where, [...], only 'neurotic currency' is legal tender; that is to say, they are only affected by what is thought with intensity and pictured with emotion, whereas agreement with external reality is a matter of no importance. What hysterics repeat in their attacks and fix by means of their symptoms are experiences which have occurred in that form only in their imagination — though it is true that in the last resort those *imagined experiences go back to actual events or are based upon them*. (Freud *Totem and Taboo* 100-101, italics mine).

The protagonist has delusional thoughts, removed from “external reality.” In fact, thoughts, not events, are the primary focus of both texts. At the same time, however, these thoughts are connected to “actual events,” making it difficult to distinguish between imagined, delusional thoughts and reality. Grigor’s neuroses are based on his experiences as a Soviet subject (a former patient in the Hospital), while Pustota’s neuroses are based on his reaction to Russia’s

transition from a Soviet state to an independent one: the Soviet experience informs both characters' neuroses.

The portrayal of a mad protagonist allows these novels to propound two key socio-political issues that link the Soviet past to the post-Soviet present. The first involves the age-old connection between madness, freedom, and rebellion. In the Russian literary tradition alone, mad characters have been rebellious, free thinkers, starting with Pushkin's Evgeny in *The Bronze Horseman* and throughout the 19th and 20th centuries: "The mad individual in the Russian tradition has always been an independent thinker. Perhaps his madness, then, lies precisely in his lack of respect for authority and his search for asylum, and inspiration, beyond the reach of civil society" (Brintlinger 50). And, this literary connection was manifested in real terms in the Soviet era, when a significant number of dissidents were "subjected to psychiatric evaluation and incarceration" (47). Khanjyan's Grigor transgresses the norms of economic productivity and sexuality, while Pelevin's Pustota describes his memoirs as a "flight of free thought." But what is the purpose of transgression, dissidence, and freedom of expression in the post-Soviet era of independence?

Feelings of dissatisfaction with the current state of independence answer this question at least in part: "Having hoped and fought for the end of socialism and the socialist state, intellectuals are confused about their role within the present state of collapse under "capitalism." (Brintlinger 65). The rebellious, mad characters challenge the notion that independence has been attained. In the case of Russia in *Chapaev and Pustota*, this lack of independence stems from the specter of the past as well as the constraints imposed by the neocolonial desires of the new state. Historically speaking, social change in Russia has

involved major difficulties in eradicating the norms of the past, and Pelevin's novel asserts that this problem repeats itself in the post-Soviet era:

A tradition of autocracy and a lack of social cohesion have been constant factors in Russia's history since the demise of Kievan Rus' – first coming into force under the Mongol yoke and continuing under Muscovy, Tsarism and Soviet communism. Russia's autocratic tradition continues in the post-Soviet era, where Russia's 'democratic' leaders have continued to overtly exhibit strong autocratic habits.

Russian history is one of sudden and unfulfilled revolutionary change. Attempts by rulers to mould the Russian cultural psyche have not managed to fully eradicate elements of the preceding era, a prime example being the incorporation of pagan traditions into Orthodox Christianity. Forced reforms in Russia have never been entirely successful in eradicating past traditions and have proven in some cases to be a complete failure: a fact to which the Soviet attempt at implementing communism bears grim testimony. The failure to eradicate the past is a crucial point when one analyses the present cultural condition because it continues to bear many residual elements of the preceding Soviet culture. Hence, when analysing the post-Soviet present it becomes necessary to understand the dominant social and cultural traits of the Soviet past. (Barrer 3)

In the case of Armenia in *The Hospital*, the problem of being dominated in the Soviet period carries over to the period of independence. With the collapse of the Soviet Union comes the destabilization of the power structure – something that the dominated come to

crave. In fact, as Foucault sees it, domination determines and defines existence: “One should have a master, be caught up and situated within a hierarchy; one exists only when fixed in definite relations of domination” (*Discipline* 291). Grigor’s madness comes with the uncertainties brought about by the disintegration of Soviet hierarchy and domination. He finds himself disoriented and literally unable to exist without his master. Furthermore, like *Chapaev and Pustota*, *The Hospital* suggests that Soviet dynamics are still very much at play in the contemporary period, as the Hospital continues to follow Grigor in his independent life.

This brings us to the second idea associated with madness: the problems of being and self. Both novels feature a schizophrenic protagonist (Grigor often talks to himself and his narrative “I” gradually develops into two distinct voices; Pyotr Pustota has a split personality and believes he is Chapaev’s assistant). The designation of schizophrenic applies to these two characters in terms of the word’s etymology, literally signifying a “split mind,” as well as the symptoms associated with schizophrenics: delusions and hallucinations.¹⁰⁰ The character’s struggle with his identity and his freedom as an individual symbolizes the difficulties in self-definition that the nation experiences in the era of post-Soviet independence. What appears here as the literary symbol of schizophrenia, ethnographers have identified as the problem of negotiating between two or more identities in the post-Soviet era. A study surveying almost 200 college-aged Russians concludes that their sense of self derives from “a certain feeling of being caught *in-between*: between two classes (poor/rich), between two times (past/future), between two systems (Soviet/non-Soviet)” (Oushakine 995). Depictions of schizophrenia in these novels, then, suggest that the post-Soviet character, like the interviewees, lacks the

¹⁰⁰ It is no coincidence that Hassan lists schizophrenia, in contrast to the paranoia of modernism, among the list of terms he associates with postmodernism.

“language to describe his/her situation,” lacks a paradigm for the present (1007, 1011).

Grigor and Pustota “in a situation of permanent transition, instead of struggling with the decoding of the new reality [...] retreat into the ‘realm of illusion’ using the already familiar objects [of the past] as points of such a retreat” (Oushakine 1010). The characters’ condition, being caught in between places, times, and ideologies, symbolizes the greater national problem of shaping and defining the post-Soviet nation state.

Though both novels depict a delusional character, Pelevin’s essentially ends on a positive note, with the emancipation of the protagonist, while Khanjyan’s ends on an ambivalent one, at best. The differences in the outcomes attest to Pelevin’s confidence in a certain system and Khanjyan’s lack of any such confidence. The notion of being saved in the Christian sense recurs in *The Hospital*, while the Buddhist concept of emptiness informs Pustota’s path toward enlightenment in *Chapaev and Pustota*. According to the Buddhist underpinnings of the novel, “Achieving freedom of the soul through enlightenment is the key message in *Chapaev and Pustota*” (Barrer 69). *The Hospital*, on the other hand, ultimately rejects the possibility of Grigor being saved, and therefore, the possibility of his independent and integrated existence in society. Read allegorically, Grigor’s development and eventual suicide present Armenia’s independence as non-independence: the novel and the Armenian absurdist plays share an ambivalent attitude toward independence. In contrast, *Chapaev and Pustota* suggests that the cure to Pustota’s schizophrenia (and, by extension, Russia’s schizophrenia) lies in Buddhist philosophy. While most readers find that “a certain cynical solipsism dominates *Chapaev i Pustota*” (Brintlinger 65), any analysis of the text that pays close attention to its Buddhist convictions cannot miss its empowering and overridingly positive message, despite its critical attitude toward the current state of Russian affairs. In

this way, the novel departs from the postmodernist tendency not to offer solutions: “Pelevin’s Tibetan cure for Russia is to be summoned up from the depths of the individual soul, or rather from the absence thereof, that is, from the essential emptiness of every society and of its every member” (Pavlov 92). In this sense, Russian postmodernism differs from Western conceptions: “Russian postmodernism is not content to merely deconstruct (*sic.*) social realities, but seeks to create an organic culture from the deconstructed simulacra. This mystical search for meaning implicates Russian postmodernism as a continuation of the modernist tradition rather than its negation” (Barrer 7). The Russian novel ultimately affirms the post-Soviet hero’s ability to overcome the Soviet legacy, while the hero in the Armenian novel is unable to arrive at a sense of self without his oppressor. It is as though the novels’ conclusions reaffirm their geopolitical positions: the one being from the center, the other from the periphery.

Chapter 7

The Soviet Past and the Anxiety of Independence in

Gurgen Khanjyan's *The Hospital* (Hiwandanots')

As a psychological journal, the subgenre of *The Hospital* places it among works like Gogol's "The Diary of a Madman," Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, and Zamyatin's *We*. Indeed, *The Hospital* shares the primary characteristic of this lineage: an engagement with and critique of contemporary socio-political dynamics through the portrayal of a narrative voice that struggles with his own identity; and, like Gogol and Dostoevsky's texts, it portrays the mind of a deranged character.¹⁰¹

The novel further recalls the aforementioned works by Gogol and Dostoevsky, because it is organized based on its own extraordinary fictional reality - one that is at once familiar and unfamiliar to the reader. The narrative begins with the incomplete sentence, "It's strange..." (9),¹⁰² and it concludes with the same assertion in the past tense, "All of this was strange..." (314).¹⁰³ From the outset, Grigor hears strange sounds and he feels like he is being followed (12-13); the narrator conveys the idea that things are out of the ordinary and events occur unexpectedly (9, 12, 13, 18, 23). Strangeness pervades this text, as it does "The Diary of a Madman," which begins with a declaration about the strangeness of the events in the short story: "Today an extraordinary adventure took place." Similarly, in *Notes from Underground* the Underground Man "is aware of his own marginality – of the strangeness of his character, his relations with others, and the life he has carved out for himself in his

¹⁰¹ In my conversation with the author he admitted the influence of Gogol and Dostoevsky's madmen on his work. Surprisingly, however, he said that he had not read Zamyatin's novel.

¹⁰² «Տարօրինակ է...»

¹⁰³ «Տարօրինակ էր այս ամէնը...»

subterranean hovel” (Roberts 1-2). The strangeness of the events that take place in these works makes them at once completely fictional and undeniably linked to contemporary reality. The editor of *Notes from Underground* conveys this idea best: “Both the author of the *Notes* and the *Notes* themselves are, of course, fictitious. Nevertheless, such persons as the author of such memoirs not only may, but must, exist in our society, if we take into consideration the circumstances which led to the formation of our society” (263). Like Gogol’s Poprishchin and especially like Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, Grigor’s deranged mind reflects the socio-political anxieties of the time. His neuroses, though in varying degrees, remain with him even after he escapes the Hospital: in this way, the symbol of the Soviet past maintains a presence in the period of independence, thereby creating a link between the two periods.

Almost immediately, the narrative makes clear that the Hospital symbolizes the Soviet Union. A massive wall surrounds the building, making it impossible for Grigor to find a way out. The high wall not only signifies the Soviet Union’s isolation from the West, it also represents the totalitarian state’s “power to punish” (Foucault *Discipline* 116). The novel further frames the Hospital as a symbolic place rather than a literal one: no details in the first notebook verify that the Hospital is, strictly speaking, a hospital. Mary, one of the staff members on Grigor’s floor, comes closest to confirming that this place is in fact a hospital, but even her words are not entirely convincing:

“It seems to be a hospital.”

“Seems?”

“Seems. Actually, it resembles a hospital. How am I supposed to know?” she justified herself. “I don’t have anything to do with the other floors and I never have. They don’t like nosey people here.”¹⁰⁴

The indeterminate nature of the Hospital allows it to function like an oppressive state that exerts power over “the entire social body” through the transference of penitentiary techniques onto all parts of society (Foucault *Discipline* 298).

Grigor is lured into this institution after a telephone conversation with the head of the Hospital, the Professor. Having suggested that he might have a job for Grigor, the Professor convinces him to come in for a physical exam. The conversation further demonstrates that the Hospital is comprised of a complex network that coerces individuals through the production and maintenance of information:

“You’ve got things confused,” [said Grigor].

“I haven’t got anything confused. Didn’t you almost get into the school of journalism this year?”

“Yes.”

“There, see?”

“But what does that have to do with anything?”

“It has to do with our decision to include you in a very interesting expedition.”

“Are you from the university?”

“No. Although we’re in constant contact with them. We got some of your

information from them. In a word, we need to meet, it’s impossible to discuss

¹⁰⁴ «- Երեւի հիւանդանոց է:

- Երեւի⁶:

- Երեւի: Աւելի շատ հիւանդանոցի է նման: Ի՞նչ իմանամ,- արդարացաւ Մարին:- Միւս հարկերի հետ ես գործ չունեմ ու երբէք էլ չեմ ունեցել: Այստեղ հետաքրքրատերերին չեն սիրում:» (53)

everything over the phone. If you successfully complete the physical exam, and I have no doubt you will...

“Why don’t you have any doubt? What if I’m a sick person?”

“My dear, your health report from the regional clinic is on my desk.”

“Then what’s the exam for?”

“This is a different kind of exam, a specific one, so to speak.”¹⁰⁵

Based on the Professor’s sources of information, an interlinked system exists between the Hospital, the university, and the local clinic. The Hospital consolidates the various knowledge-producing, normalizing apparatuses of society. The Hospital’s function and workings, then, resemble those of a totalitarian state – it is a central location that monitors and controls “patients” by producing data and knowledge about them. The examination the Professor requires (once Grigor arrives at the Hospital he is subject to a series of examinations) highlights the Hospital’s role as an institution that wields power over individuals: these examinations involve a process of unidirectional observation that functions to coerce Grigor - to make him a compliant subject (Foucault *Discipline* 170-71).

¹⁰⁵ «- Հստ երևոյթին ինչ-որ բան շփոթում է՛:»

- Ոչինչ էլ չենք շփոթում: Այս տարի ընդամենը մէկ միաւոր չպակասե՞ց, որ ժուրնալիստական ընդունուէ՛ք:

- Այո:

- Հիւր, տեսնու՞մ է՛ք:

- Բայց ի՞նչ կապ ունի:

- Այն կապը, որ ձեզ որոշել ենք ներգրուել մի անշափ հետաքրքիր արեւախմբի մէջ:

- Դուք համալսարանի՞ց է՛ք:

- Ոչ: Թէև նրանց հետ սերտ կապերի մէջ ենք: Տուեալների մի մասն այնտեղից վերցրինք: Մի խօսով, հանդիպել է պէտք, ամէն բանի մասին հետախօսով խօսել անհնար է: Եթէ բժշկական ստուգումն էլ բարեյաջող անցնէք, որ ես համարիա չեմ կասկածում...

- Ինչն՞ է չէք կասկածում, գուցէ հիւանդոսի մէկն են:

- Իմ սեղանին շրջանային կլինիկայից տեղեկանքն է ձեր առողջութեան մասին, սիրելիս:

- Էլ ինչի՞ համար է ստուգումը:

- Սա մի փոքր այլ կարգի ստուգում է՝ սպեցիֆիկ, այսպէս ասած:» (15)

Soon after his arrival at the Hospital, Grigor learns that the Professor abuses, tortures, and oppresses the patients and employees. The Hospital creates patients: characters enter it feeling normal, but their experience there transforms them, making their sense of security depend on the Hospital. For example, when Grigor asks Mary if she wants to leave the Hospital, she says that the thought has never crossed her mind. She says that this place offers her safety, which is better than freedom (53). Grigor then asks her how she can tolerate the Professor's sexual aggression – he rapes her after he has his assistants rape her. Mary simply replies that safety has a cost. She also says that she does not remember how she got there (53). The Hospital has come to define normalcy for Mary to the extent that she cannot imagine a life without it; the Hospital has rendered her completely dependent upon it, so much so that she cannot imagine an independent life.

Similarly, Grigor gradually becomes a patient in the Hospital. A feeling of comfort replaces his initial resistance to the confinement of his room: he begins to crave the Hospital's oppressive environment. He feels confused, because he is simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to the Hospital. The more he tells himself that he is going to leave the Hospital, the more trapped he becomes. He begins to develop a double personality, and his alter ego taunts him:

When he entered his room, he felt a familiarity, resembling the ordinary experience of opening the door to one's own home after a tiring day of running around. At first this surprised, then also enraged Grigor. "Tomorrow, precisely, tomorrow, when the damn test results are ready, I'll leave this place and never come back," he thought as he approached the window. And

suddenly it seemed that someone was softly laughing at him. A moment later, to his surprise, he realized that the “someone” is inside him.

It was windy outside. [...] He opened the window and took in a deep breath of fresh air, the free air that blew in. But was it really free? Didn't it conform to the various laws of nature? The cold drops of rain that began to fall hit his face. “Precisely tomorrow,” Grigor thought to himself, and then repeated his words in order to suppress the inner sneer. It was cold; he closed the window and went into the shower.¹⁰⁶

Just as the prison perpetuates delinquency by reproducing that which it purportedly corrects, the Hospital successfully produces patients (Foucault *Discipline* 266, 278). The novel, then, is about the production of subjects and subjectivity.¹⁰⁷ Though Grigor affirms his desire for freedom, he has also bought into the logic of the Hospital – its oppressive examinations, its test results. Grigor's confinement in the Hospital facilitates an “intimate exchange between [himself] and the power that is exercised over him” (Foucault *Discipline* 237). This intimacy, in turn, produces in him an emotional ambivalence, which becomes further amplified by the development of a split in his personality. As Freud observed in defining the Oedipal

¹⁰⁶ Սենեակ մտնելիս ունեցաւ հարազատութեան այն զգացողութիւնը, որպիսին սովորաբար լինում է հոգնեցուցիչ վազվզոցից յետոյ սեփական բնակարանի դուռը բացելիս: Դա սկզբուն գարմացրեց, ապա նաեւ զայրացրեց Գրիգորին: «Վաղը, հենց վաղը, երբ պատրաստ լինեն անիծեալ անալիզների պատասխանները, ես վերջապէս կը հեռանամ այստեղից ու էլ երբէք չեմ վերադառնայ», - պատուհանին մոտենալով մտածեց նա: Եւ հանկարծ թուաց, թէ ինչ-որ մէկը կամացուկ ծիծաղում է վրան: Քիչ յետոյ գարմանքով կռահեց, որ այդ «ինչ-որ մէկը» իր մէջ է:

Դրանում քամի էր: Անպերն այնքան ցածր էին, որ հեռուն տատանուող սաղարթների կատարներն ասես փակուում էին ուռած-կախ ընկած ֆուլաները: Պատուհանը բացեց եւ խոր շնչեց ներս խուժող թարմ օդը, ազատ օդը: Սակայն ազա՞տ էր որ: Մի՞թէ այն չէր ենթարկուում բնութեան ինչ-ինչ օրենքների: Դեմքին խփեցին սկսուող անձրեւի սառը կարիւնները: «Չենց վաղը», - մտնում ասաց Գրիգորը, ապա կրկնեց, որպէսզի խեղդի իր ներսից եկող ֆոֆիճաղը: Յուրա էր. Փակեց պատուհանը եւ մտաւ լոգարան: (48)

¹⁰⁷ One distinction between this text and Foucault's project is that while Foucault demonstrates that the “carceral network” renders people docile and economically useful, *The Hospital* depicts the complete dysfunction of the individual after being exposed to such a network.

complex, the “simultaneous existence of love and hate towards the same object” also occurs with regard to “many important cultural institutions,” including “religion, morals, society and art” (*Totem and Taboo* 182). It is precisely because Grigor experiences conflicting feelings toward the Hospital – a Soviet state apparatus - that it successfully dominates him. It later becomes evident that, like the wind’s conformity to the laws of nature in the passage, neither Mary nor Grigor can ever break free from the Hospital’s grip, even after escaping from it. The novel demonstrates that the Soviet Union’s production of dependent subjects does not miraculously disappear in the post-Soviet world.

On one level and in the most general sense, the metaphor of the “free wind” indicates that conformity is part of everyday life, even if it is not readily apparent; on the allegorical level, it suggests that the Soviet Union produced a type of conditioning that will always remain a part of Armenia’s identity. Throughout the text, the Hospital is related to the problem of conforming to norms: one of the motifs in the novel is a painting of sheep with human faces - faces of patients that Grigor meets in the Hospital. The painting also depicts Grigor as one of the sheep, who refuses to join the rest of the herd. The artist explains to Grigor that this young, stubborn sheep will eventually join his clan (109-110). The Hospital conditions individuals, robbing them of their identity, essentially rendering them sheep-like. This phenomenon can be extended and applied to the fate of the Armenian nation: the conditions of the Hospital symbolize the uniformity and conformity that resulted from Soviet era oppression. The impossibility of psycho-social escape from this dynamic suggests that the Soviet workings of government are a state of mind that endure long after independence. Thus, Simon, one of the inhabitants of the Hospital grounds, tells Grigor that he cannot leave the Hospital, although he will escape physically (126). Furthermore, Grigor explains that he

suspects that all hospitals are related to the Hospital and so are many other things (135). It is an institution that infiltrates Grigor's independent life (194, 196), and he wonders if he will ever be rid of its memory (212-213).

The second and third notebooks comprise Grigor's life after his visit to the Hospital. The temporal divisions in the narrative of before (i.e. Grigor's time in the Hospital) and after (his life after experiencing the Hospital) metaphorically represent the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, respectively. When his friend asks whether it has been two years since they last saw each other, Grigor tells him it has been closer to four years. He then thinks to himself about his notion of time: "It was easy for me to keep track, because I oriented myself according to a "pre-Hospital" and "post-Hospital" timeline."¹⁰⁸ This division indicates that Grigor's past haunts his present: the Soviet past haunts Armenia's present position of independence. The second and third notebooks open in a hospital, where Grigor is being treated. The transition from the Hospital to the outside world indicates that there is no real difference between the two. Just as the penal institutions that Foucault describes follow the delinquent after he has been reformed and acquitted (*Discipline* 272), the Hospital follows Grigor in his socialized, "independent" life. Once Grigor leaves the Hospital, it begins to function as an all-pervasive mechanism of power: "The disciplinary power [is] absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade and constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising; and absolutely 'discreet', for it functions permanently and largely in silence" (Foucault *Discipline* 177).

¹⁰⁸ «Ինձ համար հաշուելը հեշտ էր, որովհետև ես կողմնորոշում էի նաև «մինչևՀիւանդանոցային» եւ «հետՀիւանդանոցային» ժամանակների կարգով:» (168).

The novel begins by introducing a young Grigor, just out of high school. He attends Mariam's party celebrating her acceptance to medical school. They flirt and he wants to spend the night with her, but she tells him to wait and that she will call him first thing in the morning. The next day, as Grigor waits for her phone call, the narrative reveals that he has been getting prank calls for the last month, and, as a result, he feels like he is being followed everywhere he goes. The text only suggests, but does not categorically confirm, that Grigor imagines being followed: "... the ever-growing, unpleasant feeling in Grigor that they were following him everywhere: the entryway, the street, the coffee shop, even at home. The strange daily phone calls probably gave him this feeling, and, in reality, there was no pursuit. Probably, yes."¹⁰⁹ The ambiguity created by Grigor's "superstitious neuroses" against his better judgment persists throughout most of the text (Freud *Totem and Taboo* 100-101), thereby casting perpetual doubt on the events that take place: it is never entirely clear if Grigor imagines them or if they actually occur.

The stylistic and content-based indeterminacy of the text corresponds with its ideological ambivalence. Khanjyan began writing the novel before the collapse of the Soviet Union. When he completed it in 1992, he was unsure whether or not the Soviet Union would be reconstituted.¹¹⁰ Reflecting this uncertainty, though the novel makes an unforgiving statement against totalitarianism, it does not envision a system outside of it: after all, Grigor is not better off after his escape from the Hospital. The text not only presents Grigor's schizophrenia as a theme, but as an organizational device, mirrored on multiple thematic and structural levels throughout the narrative. Accordingly, the novel is organized as a series of

¹⁰⁹ «Գրիգորի մէջ աւելի ու աւելի անոյ այն տհաճ գաղտնիքները, թէ իրեն ամենուրեք հետեւում են՝ շփամուտում, փողոցում, սրահարանում, նոյնիսկ տանը: Հրնարաւոր է, որ ամէնօրեայ այդ տարօրինակ հեռախօսագրերն էին նման գաղտնիքեան ծնունդ տուողը, եւ իրականում ոչ մի հետապնդում էլ գոյութիւն չուներ: Հնարաւոր էր, այո:» (12).

¹¹⁰ Khanjyan related this information to me in a conversation on 7 July 2011.

negotiations between several sets of oppositional motifs – freedom/dependence, reality/imagination, wakefulness/dreaming, self/other self, submission/transgression – and that conspicuously lack the value judgments of good/bad customarily associated with binary oppositions. The novel also plays with dualities and multiplicities – the hospital days vs. the post-hospital days; the three hospitals featured in the novel; the two narrative voices (the third person in the first notebook and the first person in the second and third notebooks); the split in Grigor’s character (the use of first and second person); the two Marys, Mary and Marie, and their inadequate counterparts, Mariam and Merlin. The splits in self, splits in ways of being, and splits in perspective build the narrative and contribute to its ideological uncertainty, its inability to embrace the era of independence.

Along these lines, the highly sexualized narrative - rape scenes with Mary;¹¹¹ the bestiality that Grigor witnesses between a dog and one of the patients; rape in the film Grigor watches; the suggestion that his father molested his sister when they were growing up; Grigor’s promiscuity; his flirtation with a minor; and his copulation with his sister - represents deviant sexual acts as both liberating and as a reflection of Grigor’s neuroses. The narrative depicts these transgressions, these taboos with an unmistakable ambivalence: “The meaning of 'taboo', as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, 'sacred', 'consecrated', and on the other 'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden', 'unclean'” (*Totem and Taboo* 21).¹¹²

¹¹¹ Whereas the rape scene in Ken Kessey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* problematically affirms Randle McMurphy’s triumph over the establishment, Mary’s rape by the Professor signifies the establishment’s complete control over her.

¹¹² I use Freud’s ideas about incest with caution because he insists that incest is an innate human desire, but the only support he offers for this claim is the idea that “savages” organized their clans in order to prevent incest and that people have been engaging in incest since time immemorial to the present-day (144). At the same time, he asserts that these “savages” were more inclined to engage in incest, and that is why they had rules that

Among the taboo interactions in the novel, the “great emotional ambivalence” associated with Grigor’s incestuous relationship with his sister, Marie, is as an emblematic example: it is at once the most beautiful, passionate, and liberating relationship in the novel and the most disturbing one (78). Marie is portrayed as an alternative to a life in which the Hospital controls the individual: her refusal to go to the doctor to treat her headaches attests to this idea (157). She is also the one who initiates sex with her brother: she is first and foremost a symbol of transgression. However, in the end, she chooses to get married and move to Canada. The alternative she offers fails, as she has no freedom in her new life (245); she simply works “like a horse.” The dualistic nature of this relationship is mirrored in the other taboo sex acts, all of which correspond with the novel’s ideological ambivalence: they are a metaphor for the text’s ambivalent attitude toward the post-Soviet present. In the end, incest turns out to be an ineffective act of transgression - although Grigor defies this sexual prohibition, he cannot sustain the momentary freedom he achieves through it. With the suggestion of the impossibility of an effective rebellion, the novel casts doubt on the sustainability of post-Soviet independence.¹¹³ Through the portrayal of the complex, rhizomatic connections between madness, sexual transgression, and freedom, Grigor’s life represents an allegory for the independent nation state. In this way, sexual transgressions in the novel function as postmodernist “perversions” in that they create connections “affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, [and] the individual psyche” (Hassan 6).

prohibited it. If the latter is true then it challenges the idea that incest is in fact an instinctual desire. In the end, both claims lack substantiated evidence.

¹¹³ The ambivalence of the taboo of incest is paralleled in Grigor’s life choices related to his attempts to attain freedom through rebellion. For example, he seeks individuality and freedom in self-destructive ways like smoking (148). The novel’s ironic attitude toward freedom comes across in a number of additional ways: it has characters that prefer not to be free (Mary and Simon); it presents the idea that being enslaved is easier than being free (238); and, at his lowest point, Grigor sarcastically praises his freedom (240).

These four elements– the body politic,¹¹⁴ the body cognitive, the erotic body, and the individual psyche – come together through the portrayal of Grigor’s gradual corporeal deterioration. At the beginning of the novel he is a strong, athletic, healthy twenty-year-old man. By the end, he is an aged smoker and drinker with an emaciated body. In this sense, the plot depicts the “decomposition” with which “postmodernist indeterminacies” have been linked (Hassan 6). Metaphorically, Grigor’s bodily deterioration represents both the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dysfunction of the newly independent nation. Grigor’s body evokes a “political technology of the body in which might be read a common history of power relations and object relations” (Foucault *Discipline* 24). The first notebook foreshadows Grigor’s eventual demise, the eventual subjection of his body: he sees body parts stored in jars as he tries to escape from the Hospital; and, as he escapes from the trash chute, a bloody hand falls on him. Through his escape, Grigor overcomes the Hospital, the symbol of Soviet oppression. On the one hand, his transgressive act undoes the Hospital. However, after his escape, like the body parts in the Hospital, Grigor slowly falls apart. It becomes apparent that the Hospital overwhelms him, even in his post-Hospital existence: although he has escaped physically, psychologically he remains enchained. Grigor’s physical deterioration, culminating in his suicide, corresponds with his psychological and mental struggles: his post-freedom hallucinations gradually become more vivid and more frequent. At the same time, the series of failed erotic encounters that dominate the plot – failed in the sense that Grigor finds no lasting solace in them – run parallel to Grigor’s inability to integrate his independent life with the society around him. In fact, because of the “asocial

¹¹⁴ Foucault defines the body politic: “One would be concerned with the ‘body politic’, as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge” (*Discipline* 28).

nature” of his neuroses by the end of the third notebook, Grigor has no friends: he has completely rejected all of the social institutions that constitute reality (Freud *Totem and Taboo* 85-86). In this way, the perversions of the self, the mind, and the body are intrinsically linked to the perversions of the state.

The novel further cements the relationship between Grigor’s seemingly apolitical and detached existence and the socio-political turmoil of the early post-Soviet era. It includes two protests that Grigor happens upon. By a strange turn of events and although he does not know the specific demands of the protesters, Grigor manages to stir up the crowd by giving a speech. While this scene indicates Grigor’s potential to affect change, it bears no results. With no real agency, Grigor just passes through events that are larger than him. In the description of the second protest, the narrator suggests that the people are being crucified and that the enemy is an internal one (273). The image of the internally split nation creates a parallel between the people/the nation and Grigor – they all undergo a type of unavoidable, self-imposed crucifixion that results from the impossibility of independence. Grigor’s actual self-imposed crucifixion takes place at the very end of the novel with his suicide (314). And, even this final act has two readings that extend in opposite directions: his suicide represents the utter hopelessness of his situation (the impossibility of living independently), and yet it is also an empowering instant in which he exercises his agency (an affirmation of the absolute necessity of independence). Grigor actually escapes from the Hospital by committing suicide.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Grigor’s ultimate act of transgression, the rebellion of suicide, reads like Antigone’s suicide: in defiance of the powers that determine his circumstances, Grigor takes his own life in order to gain freedom.

The lives of Grigor and his two closest partners, Mary and Marie, indicate that these characters are products of the Soviet Union; they emerge from the metaphorical hospital of the USSR:

The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an ‘ideological’ representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power [...] called ‘discipline’. We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, ‘it represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault *Discipline* 194)

Grigor exists only in terms of the disciplinary apparatuses of the past. His madness and suicide draw attention to the often-ignored reality that independence and democracy do not immediately do away with the effects of Soviet power structures.

The novel, then, ends on an overwhelmingly pessimistic note. Although Grigor’s suicide suggests his freedom, there is no feasible option for life after the Hospital. Ultimately, Grigor’s options are dismal: live under domination or die free. Furthermore, although at various points the novel suggests the possibility of Grigor being saved by a female figure, it ultimately exposes this literary cliché as impossible. Early on in the plot, when Grigor calls Mariam, he gets a strange man on the phone. This man tells him that no Mariam can save him: “The enormous waves of life crash into you, and no Mariam can save you from that. Actually, the Mariams weigh down on you like a rock that makes it difficult to

swim. You should seriously take this into consideration.”¹¹⁶ All of the female characters with whom Grigor interacts sexually have the potential to save him, but, ultimately, they all fail. (Their names, all derived from Mary – Mary, Marie, Mariam, and Merlin – reflect this very potential. Even in the case of the prostitute Tamar, she reminds Grigor of Mary.) They, too, have difficulty finding their place in the world. And, in this regard, they resemble Grigor. Mary, in particular, shares a great deal in common with Grigor: they have an identical scar on their heels – a reminder of their stay at the Hospital (284-85); she, too, escapes from the Hospital, but she is uncomfortable in public places. Grigor takes her home and hopes to create a life with her: in order to do this he must “take Mary out of her shell” (290) and “establish an independent system with her” (284-85). The failure of Grigor’s attempts to unite with Mary – she abandons him and returns to the Hospital – further emphasizes the novel’s pessimistic attitude toward the nation’s independence. The crumbling of the social relations in Grigor’s world and the impossibility of his being saved are a disturbing allegory for the crumbling of the Soviet state and the anxiety caused by Armenia’s independence in the early post-Soviet period.

¹¹⁶ «Կեանքը վիթխարի ալիքներով գալիս է ձեզ վրայ, եւ ոչ մի Մարիամ դրանից փրկել չի կարող, ավելին՝ Մարիամները ոտից ֆարկապով կախուած ֆարի նման ցած եւն ֆառում՝ դժուարացնելով լսողալը: Այս մասին լրջօրէն մտածէ՛ք:» (11).

Chapter 8

Russia Reimagined: Reading Schizophrenia and Emptiness in

Victor Pelevin's *Chapaev and Pustota* (Chapaev i Pustota)

Victor Pelevin's madhouse in *Chapaev and Pustota* alludes to all of the Soviet associations connected to Gurchen Khanjyan's hospital. The novel's hero, Pyotr Pustota highlights the oppressive function of the madhouse, recalling the politics of hospitalization in Soviet history: "The atmosphere of a madhouse obviously must instill submissiveness into a person" (105)¹¹⁷. In featuring schizophrenic characters, the novel recalls the importance of schizophrenia, "or the split personality" as "the most common diagnosis made by Soviet psychiatrists" in the state-mandated procedures of "punitive psychiatric practice" (Brintlinger 47). Furthermore, the madhouse symbolically functions as a critique of the contemporary, post-Soviet world. Because of their dissatisfaction with the present, like Grigor, everyone in the madhouse has problems with their identity and with self-orientation: "For the patients, Pelevin's psychiatric ward is [...] a refuge from the insanity of newly capitalist Moscow" (51). The problems of the past and the problems of the present intersect in the chronotope of the madhouse. In this way, as in *The Hospital*, Pelevin's madhouse becomes a place of transitional place and time, representative of being caught in between two intersecting realities. This intersection serves to demonstrate the superficiality of the changes in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union: "The port wine still tasted exactly the same as it had always done – one more proof that reform had not really touched the basic foundations of

¹¹⁷ «Видимо, атмосфера сумасшедшего дома рождает в человеке покорность.» (132)

Russian life, but merely swept like a hurricane across its surface” (154)¹¹⁸. Soviet history remains very much a part of Russia’s present and continues to shape its socio-political systems. History repeats itself as the contradiction in the Bolshevik revolution for freedom – it actually causes terrible, oppressive times – is replicated in the post-Soviet era.

Despite the basic traits Pelevin’s madhouse shares in common with Khanjyan’s, it departs from Khanjyan’s project in a fundamental way. While Khanjyan’s novel has been read as never having taken place or having taken place in Grigor’s head, *Chapaev and Pustota* “takes place “nowhere” (*nigde*): within the head of the individual, and therefore outside time and space” (Brintlinger 54). Pelevin himself claims, “it is the first novel in world literature whose action takes place in absolute emptiness” (qtd. in Brintlinger 54). The ideological puzzle of the novel lies in its understanding of emptiness, of nowhere. As the central concept of the novel, emptiness facilitates the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and postmodernist indeterminacy through the assertion of the constructedness of reality. And the primacy of emptiness in the text overshadows all of post-Soviet Russia’s socio-political problems.

The setting of the madhouse in *Chapaev and Pustota* first and foremost perpetuates indeterminacy in the novel, because the story is actually set in emptiness. The entire text sets out to explain the complexities of this apparent paradox in philosophical terms. The madhouse facilitates the fluid movement between narratives set in the past, in Civil War era Russia and in the present post-Soviet, “capitalist” world. The novel’s hero, Pyotr Pustota, a

¹¹⁸ «Портвейн оказался таким же точно на вкус, как и прежде, и это было лишним доказательством того, что реформы не затронули глубинных основ русской жизни, пройдясь шумным ураганчиком только по самой ее поверхности.» (187-88)

patient in the madhouse, believes he is Chapaev's assistant in the Civil War.¹¹⁹ The madhouse, then, becomes the place where madness meets historical memory; it allows the narrative to alternate between Pustota's experiences in the mental institute (initially framed as real) and his imagined experiences in the Civil War:

Pelevin, in pairing the traditional hero Chapaev with a new, postmodern hero, Petr Pustota, emphasizes the connections between postrevolutionary and post-Soviet Russia. In the immediate aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, as after the October revolution, writers found themselves searching for a new literary hero. Soviet literature invented the socialist realist positive hero and took Chapaev as one of its models; Pelevin introduces "emptiness" (Pustota) into the paradigm. (Brintlinger 49)¹²⁰

In this way, like *The Hospital*, this novel asserts the undeniable influence of the past on the present as well as the need for an understanding of the past in determining a place for the contemporary, post-Soviet self: "The historical complexities confronted by the characters – like those facing Russians generally – have set them adrift in contemporary life, and their search for a mooring leads them to lunacy" (52). Marked by "expressive aphasia" the characters in these novels represent the post-Soviet subject's inability to identify and define what it means to be an individual living in the contemporary, post-Soviet world (Oushakine 999-1000).

¹¹⁹ In this sense, the novel belongs to the category of "magical historicism" – its plot is inspired by history and shaped by magical events (Etkind).

¹²⁰ It is important to note here that Pelevin's introduction of the void, Pustota, is not to be understood in negative terms or in terms of a lack. I will elaborate on my interpretation of Pustota as a positive hero in my reading of his character later in this chapter.

In fact, *Chapaev and Pustota* emphasizes the connection between place and identity, so that being caught in between places, times, and different selves is one of the novel's primary motifs. The madhouse features patients like the transgender Maria, who believes s/he is a character in the Mexican soap opera *Just Maria?*, and the schizophrenic Pyotr, who has a split personality. The ruptures in time and place (soap opera scene/group therapy session in the madhouse; Civil War Russia/post-Soviet Russia) mirror the splits in identity. This set of divisions on the individual level symbolizes Russia's national problem of place and identity. The description of the location of the Japanese firm, where one of the other patients, Serdyuk, goes to apply for a job, introduces Russia's problem of orientation on a national level – its location between western and eastern identities:

This region was very unusual: if he looked to the west, where the green fence was, he saw a normal panoramic cityscape, but if he turned his gaze to the east, his field of view was entirely filled with a vast stretch of emptiness, with a few street lamps towering about it like gallows trees. It was as though Serdyuk had found his way precisely to the secret border between post-industrial Russia and primordial Rus. (158)¹²¹

The chronotope of the madhouse facilitates the narration of Serdyuk's story during a group therapy session, which in turn introduces the age-old debate about Russia's alignment with the Western world. Like the characters in the novel, Russia is caught in between two competing identities.

¹²¹ «Район был очень необычный. Стоило посмотреть на запад, туда, где зеленел забор, и перед глазами открывалась обычная городская панорама. Но стоило посмотреть на восток, и в поле зрения попадало только огромное голое поле, над которым торчало несколько похожих на виселицы фонарей – словно Сердюк попал прямо на секретную границу между постиндустриальной Россией и изначальной Русью.» (192)

Serdyuk's meeting with Kawabata provides further evidence that the "mad" characters in the novel represent the nation. When Kawabata explains that Russia needs to unite with the East, he says this needs to be done through the union of individuals: "There is nothing that happens to nations and countries that is not repeated in symbolic form in the life of the individuals who live in those countries and make up those nations. Russia, in the final analysis, is you" (177).¹²² Much like the connection Kawabata makes between self and nation, Pustota's name combines notions of space/place and identity/self. Pustota, however, suggests a radically different type of identity – one that is "empty." The novel suggests that emptiness, which is not limited by physical constraints, is the more natural type of identity. By extension, then, the text envisions an empty nation – one that does not have an inherent essence.

The notion that the novel takes place in emptiness drives home the text's challenge to national metanarratives. In an interview with Laird, Pelevin says, "Do we have any proof that the world exists? Everything we deal with is perception. It makes no sense to discuss it because it's just a matter of choice, you can choose to act as if something were true or you can choose otherwise..." (190). This idea recurs throughout *Chapaev and Pustota*: "The world in which we live is simply a collective visualization, which we are taught to make from our early childhood" (235).¹²³ In its assertion that perception and the mind create a fictitious reality and fictitious notions of place, the novel challenges physical understandings of place, and, by extension, nation and empire. In fact, the narrative is highly conscious of

¹²² «Не бывает ничего, происходящего с народами и странами, что не повторялось бы в форме символа в жизни каждого из людей, живущих в этих странах и составляющих эти народы. Россия – это ведь и есть вы.» (216)

¹²³ «Мир, где мы живем – просто коллективная визуализация, делать которую нас обучают с рождения.» (283)

the power of space, as, for example, it describes the capitalist takeover of space with advertising: “On the roofs of the familiar buildings huge electrified signs lit up with messages in some barbarous artificial language – ‘SAMSUNG’, ‘OCA- CO A’, ‘OLBI’” (324).¹²⁴ In contrast to the takeover of space, in a conversation with Pyotr, Chapaev elaborates on the notion of being nowhere: “Everything that we see is located in our consciousness, Petka. Which means we can’t say that our consciousness is located anywhere. We’re nowhere for the simple reason that there is no place in which we can be said to be located. That’s why we’re nowhere” (144). “Nowhere” resists statist and corporate manipulations of place – manipulations that occupy space by demarcating, naming, and occupying it – in order to liberate the individual from the weight of external influences.

This challenge to Western notions of the materiality of place runs parallel to the novel’s challenge to Western notions of self. The hero’s surname, Pustota (emptiness or void), embodies this parallel. The novel takes place nowhere, because, “Everything is very individual. [...] Everything depends on who is looking at it” (Pelevin 234).¹²⁵ Similarly, according to the tenets of Buddhism, “all things (not only persons) are without a self” and “nothing exists on its own” (Smith and Novak 61). Despite this definition, some readers may have the urge to associate Pustota with the negative Western perception of lack or absence: “In the postmodern world, without any meaningful collective, the hero [Pustota] is absent, an emptiness in and of himself” (Brintlinger 56). In understanding Pustota’s character it is essential to take the opposite into account: Buddhist emptiness does not signify physical non-existence; instead emptiness means “devoid of inherent existence” and that “existence

¹²⁴ «На крышах знакомых домов (их было довольно много вокруг) зажигались огромные электрические надписи на каком-то диком волапуке - „SAMSUNG“, „OCA-CO A“, „OLBI“.» (386)

¹²⁵ «Все очень индивидуально. [...] Все зависит от того, кто на это смотрит.» (282)

depends on other phenomena” (Knierim). Pustota’s character is a Buddhist lesson that demonstrates that the self is “a mental formation – a product of [the] mind [-] ... empty of inherent existence” (Knierim). Emptiness emphasizes the fact “that ultimately, our day-to-day experience of reality is wrong and [...] ‘empty’ of many qualities that we normally assign to it” (Harderwijk).

The novel’s emphasis on a reliance on the self as empty actually yields a fundamentally positive attitude: one comes to see the void by looking into oneself (234). By the end of the novel, Pustota fulfills the role of a hero, because he manages to discharge himself from the madhouse (note the agency in this act) and ride off with Chapaev. He writes, “and soon, very soon we were surrounded by the whispering sands and roaring waterfalls of my dear and so beloved Inner Mongolia” (335).¹²⁶ Pustota has managed to “ascend the throne that is nowhere,”¹²⁷ a place that the novel refers to as Inner Mongolia (233): “Inner Mongolia is not called that because it is inside Mongolia. It is inside anyone who can see the void, although the word “inside” is quite inappropriate here. And it is not really any kind of Mongolia either, that’s merely a way of speaking” (234).¹²⁸ Pustota reaches enlightenment because he lets go of the external concerns of being and takes an internal turn, toward his Inner Mongolia, his inner self, a place that challenges all social and political boundaries and constructions through self reliance.

¹²⁶ «И скоро, скоро вокруг уже шуршали пески и шумели водопады милой моему сердцу Внутренней Монголии.» (398)

¹²⁷ «взойти на трон, находящийся нигде» (281)

¹²⁸ «Внутренняя Монголия называется так не потому, что она внутри Монголии. Она внутри того, кто видит пустоту, хотя слово „внутри“ здесь совершенно не подходит. И никакая это на самом деле не Монголия, просто так говорят.» (282)

The fifth chapter of the novel introduces a metaphor for the process of turning inward through a consideration of the phrase “to come round” (*priiti k sebia*). Pyotr poses questions about this phrase and his questions can be considered the main questions the novel propounds. He finally concludes that to come round means to come round to other people’s point of view:

Ever since my childhood I have sensed in [the expression ‘to come round’] a certain shame-faced ambiguity. Round what exactly? To where? And, most intriguing of all, from where? Nothing, in short, but a cheating sleight of hand [...] As I grew older, I came to understand that the words ‘to come round’ actually mean ‘to come round *to other people’s point of view*’, because no sooner is one born than these others begin explaining just how hard one must try to force oneself to assume a form which they find acceptable. (111)¹²⁹

The narrative defines Pyotr’s turn inward toward his empty self as a break from both externally and internally constructed realities.

As a psychological journal, like *The Hospital*, *Chapaev and Pustota* is reminiscent of Gogol’s “The Diary of a Madman” and Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. Pelevin’s exploration of the relationship between literature, psychology, and spirituality plays upon earlier Gogolian and Dostoevskian models. However, the preface creates a sense of ambiguity with regard to the text’s form: according to the author it is “a peculiar flight of free thought” (*osoby vzlet svobodnoi mysli*), while, according to the editor, it is primarily “of interest as a psychological journal” (*interesn[o] kak psikhologicheskii dnevnik*) (VII, 7). The

¹²⁹ «Я с детства ощущал в [выражении „пришел в себя”] какую-то стыдливую двусмысленность: кто именно пришел? Куда пришел? И, что самое интересное, откуда? – одним словом, сплошное передергивание [...] С возрастом я понял, что на самом деле слова „прийти в себя“ означают „прийти к другим“, потому что именно эти другие с рождения объясняют тебе, какие усилия ты должен проделать над собой, чтобы принять угодную им форму.» (139)

editor further comments that the text has no artistic or literary value. In conjunction with the philosophy of Buddhism, the novel's postmodernist approach to defining itself adds to the sense of indeterminacy that it creates. Its narrative strategies complicate notions of place, time, and reality. The preface introduces the Chapaev scenes as "reality" and it neither explains nor contextualizes the contemporary scenes. This makes it confusing for the reader to determine which is the illusion, especially considering the fact that the contemporary scenes could not have been written during the Civil War era (with references to the collapse of the Soviet Union, privatization, the voucher system, new Russians, etc.). In contrast, in works like "The Diary of a Madman" and *Notes from Underground* the narrative frame serves to contradict or undermine the perspective of the mad or unconventional hero. Pelevin's narrative frame affirms that the novel takes place and was written in the past: the novel was written in Inner Mongolia in the 1920s.

Unverifiability functions as a stylistic device repeatedly throughout the text: it marries the novel's postmodernist aesthetics with the Buddhist principle of the constructedness of reality. For example, the narrative presents one of Serdyuk's experiences, which concludes with an image of the Japanese businessman, Kawabata, about to slit his head (195). The psychiatrist Timur and the other patients have a brief conversation about this incident. Timur explains that the officials found Serdyuk lying there like that with a half-broken bottle in his hand. Volodin proposes that the people Serdyuk was interacting with were spirits (195-96). The entire, lengthy story becomes questionable with the suggestion that Serdyuk imagines it. The subsequent chapter compounds the doubt, because it suggests that Serdyuk's story was merely Petya's dream.

Just as the novel creates doubts about fictional reality, it also questions Soviet and contemporary national representations of history and reality. The novel suggests that the Chapaev in this book is the real one, and Furmanov's Soviet Socialist Realist hero, Chapaev, is not real:

In fact, it is not difficult to detect behind this forgery, now more than seventy years old, the activity of well-financed and highly active forces which were interested in concealing the truth about Chapaev from the peoples of Eurasia for as long as possible. However, the very discovery of the present manuscript seems to us a clear indication the balance of power on the continent has shifted.

To conclude, we have altered the title of the original text (which was 'Vasily Chapaev') precisely in order to avoid any confusion with the aforementioned fake. (IX)¹³⁰

As the novel sets out to challenge Petya's personal understanding of his self, it also presents a challenge to the nation and national metanarratives. The novel's postmodernist aesthetic questions the possibility of a "true history." By claiming that Furmanov's Chapaev novel – a state sponsored text – has no actuality, the preface clearly indicates that accepted forms of truth stem from sources of power.

In order to foreground emptiness the narrative repeatedly and conspicuously – to the point of exaggeration – asserts the unreality of events in at least six distinct scenes. The first

¹³⁰ «За этим существующим уже более полувека подлогом несложно увидеть деятельность щедро финансируемых и чрезвычайно активных сил, которые заинтересованы в том, чтобы правда о Чапаеве была как можно дольше скрыта от народов Евразии. Но сам факт обнаружения настоящей рукописи, как нам кажется, достаточно ясно говорит о новом балансе сил на континенте. И последнее. Мы изменили название оригинального текста (он озаглавлен „Василий Чапаев“) именно во избежание пуманицы с распространенной поделкой.» (9)

involves a conversation between Chapaev and Petya: Petya explains that he cannot tell what is real – the carriage that he and Chapaev travel in or the demons in white coats that torment him at night. Chapaev tells him that he cannot know the answer to that question, “because in actual fact there is no actual fact” (205).¹³¹ He further explains that “everything that happens to you is a dream,” and “there just isn’t anything else” (206, 207).¹³² In another scene, one of Chapaev’s friends, the Baron Jungern reiterates the same idea: he tells Petya that the world of his dreams is no less real than the world in which he interacts with Chapaev in the bathhouse and that, therefore, the two worlds are equally unreal (219, 220). The third moment, in line with the novel’s style, extends Pyotr’s experience of dreaming to the nation. Pyotr says, “The Russian people realized very long ago that life is no more than a dream” (123).¹³³ With this statement, as with the other parallels it draws between Pyotr and the Russian nation, the novel claims that its Buddhist philosophical outlook is appropriate for and familiar to Russians and Russia.

The fourth scene is particularly notable: not only does it reiterate the idea that life is a dream, it represents the novel’s project – a rewriting of the Chapaev novel – through an intertextual example, on the level of the song. During one of his excursions, Petya recognizes an old Cossack song being sung in the distance. Ignat, a Cossack he has just met, tells him that the baron wrote the song. It has the same words as the Cossack song, but an entirely different meaning. The baron’s version “means, it makes no difference whether you sleep or you don’t, it’s all a dream” (228).¹³⁴ As with the novel, the “rewriting” of the song

¹³¹ «Потому что на самом деле никакого „самого дела“ нет.» (248)

¹³² «абсолютно все происходящее с тобой – это просто сон» и «ничего другого просто не бывает» (250)

¹³³ «Русский народ давно понял, что жизнь – это сон.» (152)

¹³⁴ «То есть разницы нету – что спи, что не спи, все одно, сон.» (275)

emphasizes the importance of interpretation and the self in the creation of meaning.¹³⁵ In the fifth scene, Maria says, “Under Soviet power we were surrounded by illusions. But now the world has become real and knowable” (108).¹³⁶ Serdyuk disagrees and says that it might be knowable, but it is not real. By suggesting that Soviet-era simulations of reality are not much different from contemporary simulations, the novel yet again asserts the similarities in the politics of “knowing” in both periods.

In the final scene, the first person narrator, Petya writes: “Suddenly the thought struck me that since the very beginning of time I had been doing nothing but lie on the bank of the Ural, dreaming one dream after another, and waking up again and again in the same place” (310).¹³⁷ If the reader was not convinced up to this point, this final assertion definitively insists that the entire novel is a description of dreams. In emphasizing this point further, the novel “ends where it began, almost as if the intervening Soviet years between 1919 and 1991 had no significance” (Brintlinger 55). Pelevin uses the same strategy – ending where he began - in the long short story *The Yellow Arrow* (*Zheltaia strela*). In both cases, the repetition of the same lines, word for word, undermines the entire narrative. This technique highlights the cyclicity of life – a cyclicity that bears too many interconnections that cannot be explained or represented with words. The novel conveys a theory of interdependence and interconnection that makes it impossible to isolate a single term, a single self, a single Russia, a single representation of the Soviet era, etc. By ending in the same way it began, the novel rejects conventional truths, based on appearances (what

¹³⁵ This example is certainly not unique: it most recognizably recalls the emphasis placed on interpretation by Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*.”

¹³⁶ «Это при советской власти мы жили среди иллюзий. А сейчас мир стал реален и познаваем.» (135)

¹³⁷ «Мне вдруг пришло в голову, что с начала времен я просто лежу на берегу Урала и вижу сменяющие друг друга сны, опять и опять просыпаясь здесь же.» (369)

happens, what the goal is, what the plot points are, and the concrete outcome), and instead places an emphasis on the ultimate truth as sunyata (emptiness).

This repeated rejection of the possibility of reality through an emphasis on life as a dream is not a solipsistic or nihilistic philosophical outlook. In a conversation with Petya, the cab driver articulates an objection to the novel's conception of reality: "Pretending that you doubt the reality of the world is the most cowardly form of escape from that very reality. Squalid intellectual poverty, if you want my opinion. Despite all its seeming absurdity, cruelty and senselessness this world nonetheless exists, doesn't it? And all the problems in it exist as well, don't they?" (327).¹³⁸ Through its rejection of everyday reality, the text presents two important responses to the cab driver's questions, thereby exposing his oversimplification of the novel's Buddhist perspective. First, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things in life, past and present. This idea comes across not only in content, but also in form: all of the chapters bleed into one another, creating an overlap between the end of one and the beginning of another – the parts of the novel are inseparable. In this way, the book makes it clear that its two settings, past and present, are inextricably connected. Furthermore, the multiple dreams or unrealities portrayed by its various parts, together, suggest that reality cannot be singular. This suggestion counters the cab driver's thinking, because it insists that the "world's problems" cannot be represented (let alone solved) through monological thinking. The novel's rejection of reductionist thinking is actually a liberating, politically engaged position under the guise of being an "escape from reality."

¹³⁸ «Делать вид, что сомневаешься в реальности мира – самая малодушная форма ухода от этой самой реальности. Полное убожество, если хотите знать. Несмотря на свою кажущуюся абсурдность, жестокость и бессмысленность, этот мир все же существует, не так ли? Существует со всеми проблемами, которые в нем есть?» (389)

Second, it places an emphasis on the self and the importance of self-reliance by conveying the idea that things around Pyotr exist because he exists (220). In this way, the novel presents the problem of subjectivity in conceptions of reality. As a result, it proposes letting go of ideas that rely on notions of authenticity and a disconnected “inner nature.” Along these very lines, Petya proposes a solution to the problem of politics: “Every time the concept and the image of Russia appears in your conscious mind, you have to let it dissolve away in its own inner nature. And since the concept and the image of Russia has no inner nature of its own, the result is that everything is sorted out most satisfactorily” (326).¹³⁹ By presenting the world we live in as a “collective visualization,” the novel offers a refreshing challenge to discourses of empire and authenticity – this challenge lies in the agency of the individual mind (235). In his very refusal to participate in a dialogue about Russian politics with the cab driver, Petya makes a political statement. By rejecting materialist and rationalist conceptions of knowledge and knowing *Chapaev and Pustota* offers a powerful alternative, located beyond collective, commonly accepted representations of reality. In this way, the novel’s postmodernist-Buddhist sensibility stands in direct opposition to the Russian government’s control over representations of reality through the manipulation of print and media outlets.¹⁴⁰ As manifested in this novel, the lack of political commitment commonly

¹³⁹ «Всякий раз, когда в сознании появляются понятие и образ России, надо дать им самораствориться в собственной природе. А поскольку никакой собственной природы у понятия и образа России нет, в результате Россия окажется полностью обустроенной.» (388)

¹⁴⁰ The undemocratic tendencies in post-Soviet media are well documented: “The relationship between reality and representations of reality has become a key postmodern question [in Russia] as forces of capital seek to control common social perceptions regarding reality for their own profit motives” (Barrer 26-27). For examples of the Russian government’s attempts to control information in the media in the post-Soviet era, see Hubert pp. 1-3 and 143-46 and Marsh pp. 33-34 and 59-63.

associated with Russian postmodernism¹⁴¹ actually reveals the politics of representation and refuses to tolerate its mainstream manifestations.

The impossibility of a singular reality is replicated in the psychiatric patients' "split personality" – they are unable to identify with just one sense of self. Petya's character alone embodies multiple splits in identity. He is at once Chapaev's assistant and a patient in the mental institute. To complicate things further, in the Chapaev scenes, Petya takes on Fourply's identity. (Fourply is a Chekist who also has a double identity: his real name is Vorblei.) Through representations of schizophrenic characters the novel presents problems of individual and national identity: "Questions of the self and the collective, of course, are key to post-Soviet discourse both within and outside fiction. As Russia struggles to understand what form of government and civil society will be its next incarnation, self and society have become central to the novel as well" (Brintlinger 54). The patients in the madhouse represent four types of post-Soviet identity:

the philosophical loner who imagines he is a poet (Petr); the young homosexual who has fallen under the influence of Mexican soap opera and American film culture [and who believes s/he is a character in a soap opera] (Maria); the unemployed alcoholic who has raised drinking to an almost metaphysical level (Serdiuk); and the mafia boss who experiments with psychedelic drugs (Volodin). (54)

Pyotr's problem is representative of the other patients' problems: "[He] belong[s] to the very generation that was programmed for life in one socio-cultural paradigm, but has found itself

¹⁴¹ Many scholars see Russian postmodernism as "exclusive of moralisation or political commitment" (Barrar 55). They treat it as an alternative to the traditional link between art and politics in Russian literature: "Writers in Russia have rarely accepted the Western European concept of the necessary segregation between history and imaginative literature; the close connection between history and fiction has been a widely held view in Russia, challenged only recently by poststructuralist theory and postmodernist literary texts" (Marsh 15).

living in a quite different one” (32).¹⁴² Pyotr refuses to accept the new, and he thinks he is still twenty-six years old. His split personality is depicted as a representation and outcome of Russia’s socio-political reality. Timur Timurovich’s psychiatric practice tries to understand why some individuals cannot cope with Russia’s present reality: “Why do some people actively strive, as it were, towards the new, while others persist in their attempts to clarify their non-existent relations with the shadows of a vanished world?” (33).¹⁴³ Petya’s psychological collapse directly alludes to the collapse of the Soviet Union and its cultural paradigms. The characters’ loss of a unified self symbolizes the loss of a unified culture and history with which to identify; it represents a cultural schizophrenia experienced by Russians in the post-Soviet era (Barrer 20).¹⁴⁴ The characters’ identity issues are a microcosm of the nation’s inability to define itself politically and culturally: “Post-Soviet Russia is culturally schizophrenic, possessing a cultural identity of fragments of individualism which can only form a common identity as a collage of these fragments” (22). Timurovich talks about the Chinese worldview (that the world constantly degenerates) in contrast to the European view (that the world progresses toward perfection). He acknowledges that Petya believes in the Chinese model, whereas Russia has been struggling to conform to the European idea (Pelevin 34-35). The novel manifests individual and national cultural schizophrenia on two interconnected levels: in terms of divided allegiances in the realms of time and place (Soviet vs. post-Soviet Russia) and ideology (Western vs. Eastern systems and worldviews).

¹⁴² «[Он] как раз принадлежит[...] к тому поколению, которое было запрограммировано на жизнь в одной социально-культурной парадигме, а оказалось в совершенно другой.» (46)

¹⁴³ «Почему одни устремляются, как сказать, к новому, а другие так и остаются выяснять несуществующие отношения с тенями угасшего мира...» (47)

¹⁴⁴ See Jameson’s use of Lacan’s term, “cultural schizophrenia,” in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

The novel's critique of Russia's post-independence emulation of the West, particularly the US, comes across in Maria's group therapy session, and her story, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a major role. Through the description of Schwarzenegger – the paradigmatic symbol of American popular culture – the novel conveys an ironic attitude toward things American:

His left eye was half-closed in a way that expressed an absolutely clear and at the same time immeasurably complex range of feelings, including a strictly proportioned mixture of passion for life, strength, a healthy love for children, moral support for the American automobile industry in its difficult struggle with the Japanese, acknowledgement of the rights of sexual minorities, a slightly ironical attitude toward feminism and the calm assurance that democracy and Judeo-Christian values would eventually conquer all evil in this world. [...]

Schwarzenegger smiled, and the left side of his face expressed exactly what the face of Arnold Schwarzenegger is supposed to express when it smiles – an indefinable boyish quality between mischief and cunning, immediately making it clear that this is a man who will never do anything bad, and if he should happen to kill a few assholes now and then, it's not until the camera has repeatedly revealed from several different angles what despicable trash they are. (56, 57)¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ «Его левый глаз был чуть сощурен и выражал очень ясную и одновременно неизмеримо сложную гамму чувств, среди которых были смешанные в строгой пропорции жизнелюбие, сила, здоровая любовь к детям, моральная поддержка американского автомобилестроения в его нелегкой схватке с Японией, признание прав сексуальных меньшинств, легкая ирония по поводу феминизма и спокойное осознание того, что демократия и иудео-христианские ценности в конце концов обязательно победят все зло в этом мире. [...]

Schwarzenegger's movie persona is depicted as a calculated and balanced ideological manipulation – one that bears signature American values and the hypocrisy that they often embody (belief in the rights of sexual minorities coupled with an ironic attitude toward feminism; democracy combined with the desire to impose democratic and Judeo-Christian values). Schwarzenegger's confidence represents the strength and ideological fortitude of the US: his depiction in film corresponds with the US government's justification for military aggression.¹⁴⁶ By associating death and destruction with the US vis-à-vis the chauvinist Schwarzenegger, the novel ridicules Russia's desire to follow the lead of the West.¹⁴⁷

The critique of Russia's adoption of US national paradigms comes across through Maria's individual example – through his over-identification with a Mexican soap opera character combined with his idolization of the American movie star. He derives his identity from television and film media representations – clearly spectacularized depictions of reality. In this way, his identity is a simulation of a simulation. Interestingly enough, one of the interviewees in Oushakine's ethnographic study, mentioned in the introductory chapter on the postmodern novels, observes a similar sense of self in the new Russian man – “a parody of an ‘average American’ from a cheap Western movie (f-18)” (qtd. in Oushakine 996). These examples – the one literary and the other sociological – vivify Jameson's assertions about the

Шварценеггер улыбнулся. При этом левая часть его лица выразила то, что положено выражать лицу Арнольда Шварценеггера при улыбке - что-то неуловимо-лукавое и как бы мальчишеское, такое, что сразу становилось понятно: ничего плохого этот человек никогда не сделает, а если и убьет нескольких мудаков, то только после того, как камера несколько раз и под разными углами убедительно зафиксирует их беспредельную низость.» (75)

¹⁴⁶ Edward Said makes a similar observation about Orientalist depictions in American films, in which actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger kill large numbers of Muslims. In these films, Arabs are depicted as fanatics and villains – as a “lesser breed” of people who only understand the language of force. In both Said's critical account and Pelevin's literary one, these types of films insist upon the ideological superiority of the US and thereby justify US neocolonialism and military action.

¹⁴⁷ Marsh reads the novel's critique of capitalism in much the same way: “Pelevin points to the similarity between Soviet ideological constructs and the cultural artefacts promoted by western capitalism, such as advertisements and television serials: they are nothing but simulacra, illusory cultural constructs” (265).

influence of American film culture to non-American societies. Hollywood's representations of American culture play a conspicuous, if not a downright dominant, role in the Russian social consciousness:

It is all too easy to acquaint a non-American public with a taste for Hollywood styles of violence and bodily immediacy, its prestige only enhanced by some image of US modernity and even postmodernity. Is this, then, an argument for the universality of the West—or, at least, of the United States—and its 'civilization'? It is a position which is surely widely, if unconsciously, held, and deserves to be confronted seriously and philosophically, even if it seems preposterous. ("Globalization and Political Strategy" 54)

As with Maria, Serdyuk, another patient in the hospital, draws attention to the inextricable connection between national-political and individual conceptions of self: his perspective raises the issue of the predominance of American cultural standards in Russia as a consequence of US political power. Just as Dostoevsky was wont to articulate his ideas through the voice of unreliable characters, Pelevin puts his ideas into the mouth of the drunk Serdyuk. In this way, Pelevin's style resembles Dostoevsky's in its dialogism. It is never entirely certain whether or not the mad character can be taken seriously:

The Japanese," Serdyuk thought, "now there's a great nation! Just think – they've had two atom bombs dropped on them, they've had their islands taken away, but they've survived... Why is it nobody here can see anything but America? What the hell good is America to us? It's Japan we should be following – we're neighbors, aren't we? It's the will of God. And they need to

be friends with us too – between the two of us we'd polish off your America soon enough... with its atom bombs and asset managers...” (155)¹⁴⁸

Beyond the comically exaggerated notion of wiping America out, the need for an alternative national model – in contrast to “the repulsive pragmatism of the West” (“otvratitel’nyi zapadnyi pragmatizm”) – stands as the poignant message conveyed by the portrayal of each of the mad characters in the text (164, 200).

The problems of national policy and orientation that Serdyuk laments are paralleled in problems of individual dress. Again, as with Maria’s example, Russians are depicted as second-rate simulations of Americans. Images of “Americanness” replace reality in the postmodern, post-Soviet world through Serdyuk’s eyes:

The genuine foreigners, who had multiplied to a quite incredible extent in recent years, had been trying to dress just like the average man on the street, for reasons of personal safety. Naturally enough, most of them got their idea of what the average Moscow inhabitant on the street looked like from CNN. And in ninety cases out of a hundred CNN, in its attempt to show Muscovites doggedly pursuing the phantom of democracy across the sun-baked desert of reform, showed close-ups of employees of the American embassy dressed up as Muscovites, because they looked a lot more natural than Muscovites dressed up as foreigners. (169)¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ «„Японцы, - подумал Сердюк, - великий народ! Только подумать - две атомных бомбы на них кинули, острова отняли, а вот выжили ведь... И почему у нас только на Америку смотрят? На фиг нам она вообще нужна, эта Америка? Надо за Японией идти – мы же соседи. Бог велел. И им тоже с нами дружить надо – вместе эту Америку и дождем... И атомную бомбу им вспомним, и Беловежскую пушу...“» (189)

¹⁴⁹ «Настоящие иностранцы, которых в Москве развелось невероятное количество, в целях безопасности уже много лет одевались так, чтобы ничем не отличаться от обычных прохожих. Представление о том, как выглядит обычный московский прохожий, большая их часть получала, понятное дело, из передач

Serdyuk observes two related phenomena: first, that Muscovites strive to dress like foreigners; second, that foreigners strive to dress like Muscovites. However, the description is most critical of the Russian attempt at assimilating foreign style as the foreigners simulate Russianness more believably than the Muscovites simulate foreignness. The Muscovites' problem of dress is but one factor in the grander problem of choosing an identity. And, again in this minor example, culture and politics, individual and nation are inextricably linked: American paradigms for dress and democracy are in abundance, but the Russian simulations of these things are ultimately insufficient. The novel depicts the Russian renditions of American standards as unnatural, non-existent in the case of democracy, and, ultimately, farcical.

The novel's portrayal of American cultural and political hegemony in Russian contexts could easily be brushed off as mere irony or postmodernist "play." However, a consideration of the text's definitions of freedom à la Buddhism clearly ground it as a politically engaged text. The baron urges Pyotr to reach nowhere by discharging himself from the mental home: "Just keep in mind the metaphor of leaving behind the mental home for freedom" (224).¹⁵⁰ His words reveal the madhouse and all other realities as mental constructs, which Petya learns to let go of in the end: "There is only one kind of freedom – when you are free of everything that is constructed by the mind. And this freedom is called "I do not know" (301).¹⁵¹ The emphasis on the Buddhist concept of emptiness as enabling

Си-Эн-Эн. А Си-Эн-Эн, стараясь показать москвичей, бредущих за призраком демократии по выжженной пустыне реформ, в девяноста случаях из ста давало крупные планы переодетых москвичами сотрудников американского посольства, поскольку выглядели они гораздо натуральнее переодетых иностранцами москвичей.» (206)

¹⁵⁰ «Пусть в вашей памяти останется метафора – выйти из дома умалишенных на свободу.» (270)

¹⁵¹ «Свобода бывает только одна – когда ты свободен от всего, что строит ум. Эта свобода называется „не знаю“.» (359)

freedom from one's own thoughts extends to social and political freedom. As Chapaev explains, constructed realities stem not only from the individual mind, but also from laws – social norms and state laws. He gives Petya advice about how to break from them: “All these constructs are only required so that you can rid yourself of them for ever. Wherever you might be, live according to the laws of the world you find yourself in, and use those very laws to liberate yourself from them. Discharge yourself from the hospital, Petka” (270).¹⁵² The individual must break free from self-derived as well as socio-politically derived notions of reality. Furthermore, according to Chapaev's advice, Pustota is mad because he believes he is. The conversation emphasizes Pyotr's agency in checking himself out of the madhouse, and by extension, in determining the conditions of and establishing his freedom. This push toward an individually and spiritually motivated freedom – a freedom of the mind – combines with the concern of a politically and socially grounded freedom. Thus, Pyotr asks himself, “Why, [...] why does any social cataclysm in this world always result in the most ignorant scum rising to the top and forcing everyone else to live in accordance with its own base and conspiratorially defined laws?” (278).¹⁵³ At the end of the novel, through the dissolution of the worlds his mind had created, Pyotr achieves spiritual freedom – a type of spiritual freedom that has a critique of the nation embedded in it.

The epigraph of the novel, a quote from Ghengis Khan, introduces the idea of life as an integrated, continuous whole in contrast to and overriding individual will power: “Gazing at the faces of the horses and the people, at this boundless stream of life raised up by the

¹⁵² «Все эти построения нужны только для того, чтобы избавиться от них навсегда. Где бы ты ни оказался, живи по законам того мира, в который ты попал, и используй сами эти законы, чтобы освободиться от них. Выписывайся из больницы, Петька.» (324-25)

¹⁵³ «Почему, почему любой социальный катаклизм в этом мире ведет к тому, что наверх всплывает это темное быдло и заставляет всех остальных жить по своим подлым и законспирированным законам?» (333)

power of my will and now hurtling into nowhere across the sunset-crimson steppe, I often think: where am I in this flux?” Ghengis Khan’s words highlight the insignificance of the individual with respect to the grander scheme of life. They also encapsulate the seeming paradox in the novel’s view of self: while it presents the self as completely insignificant in the grander scheme of life, it also places complete reliance on the self to realize its emptiness. However, this contradiction easily comes undone with the understanding that the novel delineates two ways of cultivating the self: the first depends on the ego and contributes to nation and empire building; the second is the empty self, a self without essence. Having presented the distinction between the two, the novel advocates a reliance on the latter. Furthermore, by choosing Ghengis Khan to represent the novel’s themes, Pelevin chooses the nemesis of Russian empire building. From the very outset, then, the novel orients its religious-philosophical positioning as a political critique – a rejection of Russian national(ist) narratives that contribute to the construction of “Russianness” as embodying inherent characteristics. For this very reason, critics with nationalist leanings have disapproved of the novel’s portrayal of Russian history, culture and identity.¹⁵⁴

According to the Buddha, the present of each individual is the direct result of the lives led by others in the past: “the present state [is] the product of prior acts.” The novel drives home this point by completely integrating the past with the present. Yet despite the influence of the past on the present, people do have free will and the freedom to shape their destinies (Smith and Novak 55). In this way, Buddhism and the novel offer a liberating worldview. Whereas the ideas in the mind have “definite lineages,” be they historical or cultural, a personal history does not bind the individual; ultimately, s/he has the freedom to change

¹⁵⁴ For examples of such critiques of the novel, see Aleksandr Arkhangel’skii, Pavel Basinskii, and Dmitrii Bykov. For more on criticism that brands the novel unethical, see Marsh p. 266.

her/his mind (56).¹⁵⁵ Therefore, it is incorrect to read Pelevin's novel as solipsistic (see Britlinger). Such readings ignore the celebrated mantra that concludes the novel's preface: "Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha" (IX) – homage to the awakened mind that has gone over to the other shore. This is precisely what Pustota does at the end of the novel. In Buddhist philosophy the one who has gone over has been enlightened: "ha[ving] done away with views, ideas, and perceptions [...], [one] looks upon reality without any obstructions of mind" (Knierim). By presenting an enlightened hero, Pelevin's novel breaks from the postmodernist suggestion that there are no overarching ideas, no great ideologies that can explain everything. Yet, somehow, perhaps because the ideology Pelevin chooses is one that asserts the inexplicability of reality and because the narrative shares so much in common with the aesthetics of postmodernism, the break is not a paradoxical one. The text manages to denounce ideology, while espousing a Buddhist philosophical outlook.

¹⁵⁵ In this sense, Pelevin's work resembles that of Dostoevsky, for whom the individual's free will was an essential factor in one's faith in divine will.

Part IV: THE INTERPLAY OF DRAMA AND PROSE IN THERAPEUTIC THEATER

Chapter 9

Vladimir Sorokin's Postmodern Absurdism: Madness, Memory, and History in

Dismorphomania and *The Honeymoon* (Hochzeitsreise)

Synopsis of Dismorphomania: Dismorphomania begins with the introduction of psychologically disturbed patients, who take turns entering the stage as a voice reads lengthy and detailed descriptions about their past, their medical history, and their psychological and physical illnesses. After a lengthy first act that consists almost entirely of narrative, the patients transform into characters from Shakespeare's plays, Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet. In the remaining two acts of the play, they proceed to enact the tragedy of Hamlet and Juliet, a morphed, grotesque version of the two original plays. After an initial viewing of Dismorphomania, the connection between the play's first act and the recreation of Shakespeare's plays remains entirely unclear.

Synopsis of The Honeymoon: The play features a masochist, Gunther, whose father was an oberführer of the Schutzstaffel (SS). Gunther experiences sexual gratification through suffering, because he believes that it enables him to purge the guilt he has inherited from his father. Gunther's fiancée, Masha, is the daughter of a former NKVD general. Unlike Gunther, Masha simply ignores the murderous legacy she has inherited from her mother. The couple has difficulty forming a blissful union because their respective national and personal pasts haunt them. It follows that the play's drama centers on the question of these characters' ability to cope with the traumas of Nazi and Soviet history. The play's plot, however, is complicated by strange occurrences and metamorphoses: Masha's character splits into Masha-1 and Masha-2 for unexplained reasons; Gunther's deceased father and Masha's deceased mother make several appearances – in one instance, by stepping out of a painting; "six androgynous beings," the strangest part of the cast, take on the role of a narrator at one point, become a car in another scene, and represent Masha's inner thoughts in yet another scene.

Because Vladimir Sorokin has successfully pushed the limits of literature according to both academic and popular standards, his writing has simultaneously received wild acclaim and harsh criticism. For instance, the publication of his novel *Blue Lard* (Goluboe salo)¹⁵⁶ in 1999, gained him commercial success and, in 2002, a criminal court case, in which

¹⁵⁶ The title alludes to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* and a common Russian pejorative for homosexual.

he and the novel's publisher were charged with disseminating pornography.¹⁵⁷

Unsurprisingly, then, a great deal has been written and said about the shocking aspects of Vladimir Sorokin's prose – its embodiment of “the reverse of literature;” its over-the-top sexual content; and its use of vulgar and profane language (Chitnis 175, Rutten 543, Borenstein 74-75, Vladiv-Glover 274).

Despite the fact that many scholars acknowledge the “gestures of transgression” (Chernetsky *Mapping* 75) in Sorokin's work, his oeuvre is often divided into two antithetical parts: the earlier apolitical works and the later politically subversive literature. No doubt, Sorokin's own words on the subject have influenced literary histories and analyses that deal with his work:

The citizen lives in each of us. In the days of Brezhnev, Andropov, Gorbachev and Yeltsin, I was constantly trying to suppress the responsible citizen in me. I told myself that I was, after all, an artist. As a storyteller, I was influenced by the Moscow underground, where it was common to be apolitical. This was one of our favorite anecdotes: as German troops marched into Paris, Picasso sat there and drew an apple. That was our attitude — you must sit there and draw your apple, no matter what happens around you. I held fast to that principle until I was 50. Now the citizen in me has come to life. (Doerry and Schepp)

Sorokin's attestation to an evolution in his aesthetic ideology is reflected in analyses that “trace” the author's “engagement with Russian history” to his later works, like *Blue Lard* (Gillespie 233). This type of formulation effectively undermines the historical engagement of

¹⁵⁷ For details about the controversy surrounding the novel see Chernetsky's *Mapping* p. 87 and Borenstein's *Overkill* pp. 73-75. See also Vladiv-Glover on Sorokin's relative unpopularity during the earlier part of his career in Russia in comparison to the virtually instant international interest in his work (274).

an entire corpus of Sorokin's texts produced in the late Soviet and first post-Soviet decade.

As a result, some scholars have found it necessary to rethink the consensus in Sorokin studies in order to show that in fact "the Sorokin of the early 1990s was much less of an underground figure and much more of a consciously public-oriented artist than is often acknowledged" (Rutten "Postmodern Provocation" 177).

Largely because they remain comparatively underexplored, Sorokin's plays have not entered the conversation about the relationship between art and politics in his oeuvre. Often cited as sharing affinities with his prose works, Sorokin's dramatic texts are usually mentioned in passing in articles that focus on his novels and screenplays. Considering the fact that Sorokin has produced a total of ten plays since the beginning of his career – the productions of which have attracted large audiences both in Russia and abroad – this body of work has not received the critical attention that it deserves.¹⁵⁸ A consideration of Sorokin's plays further bolsters the argument that his works, despite their postmodern play and

¹⁵⁸ There are only a handful of scholarly articles on Sorokin's plays: Mikhail Ryklin's "Borsh after Oysters" ["Borshch posle ustrits"] on *The Honeymoon*; a number of articles in German in *Meta-discursive Poetics: The Postmodern Prose, Film and Drama of Vladimir Sorokin* [*Poetik der Metadiskursivität: zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*], edited by Dagmar Burkhart; and a few academic and journalistic articles on *Capital* – Dagmar Burkhart's "Vladimir Sorokin's Play *Capital* and the Mythologizing of Money," Kerstin Holm's "Motor Mammon: Sorokin's *Kapital* am Moskauer Praktika-Theater uraufgeführt. Schattenspiele im Geldmaschinenraum," Alena Karas's "'Kapital' ne po Marksu. B teatre 'Praktika' postavili sochinenie Vladimira Sorokina," and Sasha Steinberg's "Vladimir Sorokin *Kapital*, Praktika Theatre. December 17th, 2009"

Beumers and Lipovetsky's *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama*, the only English language study that treats Sorokin's plays at length does so in order to highlight the qualities of the theater of the subsequent generation. Though it provides a useful overview of Sorokin's theater, Beumers and Lipovetsky's analysis is neither thorough nor meticulous when it comes to the details of the scripts. For example, they offer an inaccurate account of the characters in *The Honeymoon*: "Masha Rubinshtien [...] marries the rich, neurotic German aristocrat Nebeldorf, a stammering masochist who is haunted by the ghosts of his father (an SS officer) and his mother (an NKVD officer)." In fact, according to the script, Nebeldorf's mother-in-law, Masha's mother, was an NKVD officer: «Роза Гальперина — следователь НКВД, мать Маши.» ["Rosa Galperina – NKVD officer, Masha's mother."]

Similarly, Marusenkov's *Vladimir Sorokin's Absurdopedia of Russian Life: Zaum, the Grotesque and the Absurd* [*Absurdopediia russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina: Zaum', grotesk i absurd*], the only Russian language study that treats Sorokin's plays at length, offers brief summaries with little analysis of five of his plays – *Pel'meni*, *Iubilei*, *Zemlianka*, *Dismorfomaniia*, and *Dostoevsky-trip* – in order to characterize them as absurdist (219, 223-224, 229, 274-275, 279).

Most recently, the first English language conference on Sorokin took place at Aarhus University in Denmark. The two-day program did not feature any papers devoted solely to Sorokin's drama.

indeterminance, have always been politically charged – particularly throughout the 1990s, during his purported apolitical or “underground” phase of writing.

As with the absurdist Armenian plays and the post-Soviet postmodern novels in the previous two sections, two of Sorokin’s plays in particular, *Dismorphomania* (Dismorfomania) (1990) and *The Honeymoon* (Hochzeitsreise) (1994-95),¹⁵⁹ present characters’ mental illnesses and psychological disturbances as a metaphor for sociopolitical dysfunction. More specifically, much like Khanjyan’s *The Hospital* and Pelevin’s *Chapaev and Pustota*, Sorokin’s plays draw parallels between the body politic and the ailing body/psyche. They explore the impact of national, historical memory on the heroes’ consciousness. Furthermore, Sorokin’s plays add a new dimension to the portrayal of psychologically disturbed characters – they explore various approaches to the therapeutic process (drugs, role playing, counseling). As the characters try to cope with their reality, they draw audiences into a participatory role. As Sorokin himself describes it, his works compel society’s collective body to shiver. The visceral reactions that his plays elicit, then, create a type of “therapy [for] the viewer” (Burkhart “*Capital*” 10). Both the presence of the burden of the past and the necessity of therapy, in turn, suggest that Soviet history continues to haunt the characters’ and, by extension, the viewers’ consciousness.

Stylistically, Sorokin’s plays also fuse the devices discussed in the previous parts of this study: their depictions of the medical problems of the body and mind (*Dismorphomania*) and the problems of consciousness (*The Honeymoon*) incorporate the aesthetics of absurdism and postmodernism. In fact, Sorokin’s plays have most frequently been characterized as either absurdist or as both absurdist and postmodernist. As with the large majority of scholarship on the absurd discussed in the second part of this dissertation, much of what is

¹⁵⁹ All of Sorokin’s published works are available electronically on his website, <http://www.srkn.ru>

said about Sorokin's plays deals solely with aesthetics and style, while the texts' political potency often goes unnoticed.¹⁶⁰ For example, Marusenkov's *Absurdopediia russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina: Zaum', grotesk i absurd*, the most comprehensive study of Sorokin's plays to date, takes an almost exclusively apolitical approach (219, 223-224, 229, 274-275). Though his reading of one play, *Pel'meni*, briefly acknowledges that the text demonstrates the continuity between the Soviet era and the post-Soviet period, by and large, Marusenkov reads absurdist elements in Sorokin's plays as a statement about the loss of meaning, as a representation of the horridness of the contemporary world, and as a reflection of the author's profound disappointment in humanity (223-24, 278). Similarly, his discussion of postmodernism in Sorokin's "anti-plays" is limited to a list of generic devices associated with most postmodern works: the dismantling of the author, the distorted incorporation of intertextual borrowings, and the deconstruction of the text (219). Marusenkov's disregard for the more specific socio-political meaning of Sorokin's plays undeniably resembles Martin Esslin's universalist approach to the theater of the absurd:

The basis for Sorokin's creative method lies in a distanced attitude toward literature, the perception of the work of art as an object, which can be manipulated in any number of ways. This approach frees the literary work from its ethical context, rendering the perception of literature as a "textbook of life" impossible [...] This understanding of the role of art runs contrary to the classical tradition of Russian literature, but is in keeping with the quest of

¹⁶⁰ Burkhart's reading of Sorokin's play *Capital* is one notable exception. Her analysis places the play in the tradition of the theater of the absurd à la Daniil Kharmis, the OBERIU group, Ionesco, and Mrozek, by virtue of its incorporation of grotesque elements (8). Though her mention of absurdism refers purely to aesthetics, her discussion of the play focuses on its commentary on Russian history and contemporary Russian society.

Russian and West European avant-gardism and postmodernism. (*my translation*)¹⁶¹

It is unsurprising that Sorokin's plays have been depoliticized in this way. After all, like the Armenian plays, they employ a significant number of absurdist devices that result in the abstraction of the play's plot, themes, and characters. First and most obviously, they emphasize illogicality and the breakdown of language.¹⁶² Second, the plays' settings mirror the lack of thematically recognizable references in the content: the stage is an "abstract, sterile" space that "creates an unreal world" (Beumers and Lipovetsky loc 1676). Like the plays of the absurd, particularly *Props* in this study, Sorokin's scripts present nondescript, removed, or unfamiliar settings that create the effect of estrangement: "The *dramatis personae* of absurdist plays most often find themselves in a symbolic location, or in a void cut off from the concrete world as we (think we) know it" (Cardullo 12). Third, in terms of plot, these texts present the frustration of an expected, seemingly attainable transformation – one that never occurs. As with the Armenian characters of the absurd, Sorokin's characters either do not achieve transformation because they cannot or, when they do, it is inconsequential. And, fourth, Sorokin's theater depicts characters that embody types or concepts: numbered (unnamed) patients (*Dismorphomania*), a robotic, stuttering masochist (*The Honeymoon*). These characters' marginal positions are identifiable, but, at the same

¹⁶¹ В основе творческого метода Сорокина лежит дистанцированное отношение к литературе, восприятие художественного произведения как предмета, с которым возможны любые манипуляции. Эта установка вырывает литературное произведение из этического контекста, делает невозможным восприятие литературы как «учебника жизни» [...] Такое понимание задач искусства идет вразрез с традициями русской классической литературы, но созвучно исканиям русского и западноевропейского авангарда и посмодернизма (274-75).

¹⁶² Scholarship on Sorokin's prose works has also made claims about its affinities with the absurd: "Like a Russian Samuel Beckett in *Norma* (1994) Sorokin reduces [an] idea to an absurd extreme, evoking the complete breakdown of human communication through language: several pages simply reproduce a meaningless collection of sounds, ending in a prolonged shriek" (Marsh 248-49).

time, because they have been abstracted rather than humanized, they give the sense of being outside the realm of human possibility. The device of characterlessness, as with the absurdist tragi-comedies, facilitates interpretive ambivalence in the viewer. It resembles the effects that Sorokin's novels have been said to produce: "The text can [...] be interpreted as sadistic if read as populated by living beings, or comical if the characters are interpreted as inanimate" (Chernetsky *Mapping* 82-83).

Because Sorokin's texts straddle the line between the real and the unreal, their nonsensical, absurd elements are often read as "postmodern play." In fact, Sorokin's absurdism meets postmodernism in the characters' abstraction and the unrealistic scope of their existence. The characters in Sorokin's plays are comparable with those in his novel *Four Stout Hearts*, which depicts a world where inanimate objects and animate beings are undifferentiated:

Sorokin's text [...] brims with feverish but unmotivated activity. Seemingly, the characters' actions are devoid of sense or cause, positioned as they are at the border between sense and non-sense. Thus, Sorokin's text follows the convention, originating in European modernism, of writing at the limit, a convention that includes the tradition of the absurd as well as the whole heritage of postmodernism. (Genis "Postmodernism and *Sots-Realism*" 209)

But just as the entire tradition of absurdism carries a political charge, the incorporation of the conventions of absurdism and postmodernism in Sorokin's plays of the 1990s results in a call for a radical reconsideration of Russia's national past. Rather than presenting a disintegration

of the real, these texts represent a forceful encounter with a horrific, unimaginable past, one that is often ignored or reframed as positive in contemporary culture.¹⁶³

Sorokin himself complains about the idealization of the Soviet past by the Russian media: “My television teaches me that everything was wonderful in the Soviet Union. According to the programs I watch, the KGB and apparatchiks were angels, and the Stalin era was so festive that the heroes of the day must still be celebrated today” (Doerry and Schepp). In more neutral terms, narratives about the Soviet past are, at best, “underdeveloped and unstable” (Dobrenko and Shcherbenok 77). Sorokin’s plays intervene in the mainstream process of narrativizing Soviet history: they present “therapeutic” reconceptualizations of the past, and they force audiences to confront and cope with “collective historical trauma[s]” (Rutten 539-40).¹⁶⁴ With regard to the project of his plays of the 1980s and early 1990s, it is possible to conclude that Sorokin “alone did the work that in Germany after World War II was carried out by enormous institutions.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, because Sorokin’s oeuvre challenges the contemporary mainstream, positive view of the Soviet past, his plays are ultimately socially conscious and politically motivated.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Vassilieva makes a similar point with regard to postmodern aesthetics and political commitment in Sorokin’s film script 4.

¹⁶⁴ Rutten interprets the therapeutic aspects of Sorokin’s novel *Goluboe salo*, multi-media projects, and the film 4. Sorokin’s novels *The Queue* (Ochered’) and *The Trilogy* (Trilogiia) also deal with the Soviet past as historical trauma.

¹⁶⁵ Sorokin “один делал работу, которую в Германии после Второй мировой войны проделывали огромные институции” (Karas 10).

¹⁶⁶ Positive reworkings of the Soviet past are prominent in the media, politics, and both highbrow and popular art. As Smith’s *Mythmaking in the New Russia* has shown, the practice of drawing upon the Soviet past as “political capital” began as early as the Yeltsin years. As for the masses, by 1997 Russians had developed a strong sense of nostalgia for the Soviet period – “its literature, films and artefacts” (Marsh 74). For examples of favorable literary and artistic representations of Soviet history throughout the post-Soviet era see Rutten’s “Art as Therapy” (541).

Sorokin's postmodern prose style, "which privileges bodily processes and with them violence" has been referred to as an "excremental poetics," because it focuses on ugly and visceral corporal details (Vladiv-Glover "Russian Post-Avant-Garde" 282). It has its roots in *chernukha*, a style that became popular in late Soviet media and mass culture.¹⁶⁷ *Chernukha* was geared toward exposing the truth by revealing "the seamy underside of Soviet life and ideology" (Borenstein 13). This type of narrative "functioned according to the logic of inverted fairy tale: a miserable person encounters a set of often unlikely situations that, taken together, leave him or her even more miserable than when the story began" (17). In the post-Soviet era *chernukha* evolved to become *neo-chernukha*: it no longer concerned itself with the need to expose the workings of the Soviet system; instead, *neo-chernukha* endeavored to "transform post-Soviet moral anxieties into a discourse of anxiety, a symbolic language for both the expression and shaping of fears about crime, sexuality, and national status" (18). In the same vein as *neo-chernukha*, scenes that depict violence, "pornography," and an "excremental poetics" in Sorokin's plays represent post-Soviet anxieties as cultural and historical identity crises. The spectacle of the highly fictionalized play with an implausible plot becomes an effective means by which to represent these contemporary anxieties. The device of alienation – the incorporation of (un-)familiar, psychologically disturbed characters and unusual and often estranged settings – productively prescribes the need to undergo a process of recovery and change through a confrontation with historical memory. As a result, the projects of *chernukha* and *neo-chernukha*, with their respective desires to uncover the truth and conceptualize the nation's present moment, resound in Sorokin's plays, thereby cementing the need to rethink the politics (of absurdism and postmodernism) in his texts.

¹⁶⁷ In *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* Eliot Borenstein delineates the socio-political project of *chernukha* and its later manifestations, thereby qualifying the blanket themes of sex and violence with which it has been equated.

Dismorphomania, an example of one of Sorokin's earliest plays from the 1990s, frames the theme of psychological crisis through the portrayal of multiple intersecting, and for the most part, uncanny narratives. The play's first act has virtually no action: it introduces psychologically disturbed patients, who take turns entering the stage accompanied by medics, as a voice from offstage reads seemingly endless, detailed descriptions about the patients' past, their medical history, and their psychological and physical illnesses. After a lengthy first act that consists entirely of excremental narratives, the patients transform into characters from Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. They proceed to enact the tragedy of Hamlet and Juliet, a morphed, grotesque version of the two original plays.

Watching a staging of the play in St. Petersburg in 2009, I could not help but wonder what in the world all of the chaos in it represented. What was the relationship between the patients' psychiatric medical records and Sorokin's distorted version of the Shakespearean world? To add to the chaos and sense of fragmentation in the play, the director had chosen to include a live rock band as part of the performance: their music produced some jarringly cacophonous sounds at the end of each of the acts. It was only after reading *Dismorphomania* alongside *The Honeymoon* that the play's seemingly unrelated parts began to make sense. It became clear that the key was in the play's first and most unusual act: Sorokin's portrayal of the patients' illnesses in *Dismorphomania* was a means by which to explore individual, past traumas. The first act of *Dismorphomania* explores the effect of personal history on mental and bodily health. Sorokin reworks this theme later with *The Honeymoon*, in which national traumatic history affects the characters' psychology.

The multiple, distorted narratives across the three acts of the play are linked, then, through the motif of breakdown, which is applied to the realms of the psychology (the patients' mental breakdown) and literature (the breakdown of Shakespeare's plays). Sorokin's concerns in *Dismorphomania* – the breakdown in language, psychological health and the memory of the past – while only hinting at a political critique of Russia, are further developed and more explicitly politicized in *The Honeymoon*. The play serves to show that Sorokin has in fact been interested in the problem of a traumatic history since the early 1990s. *Dismorphomania* reads like metaphoric portrayal of *The Honeymoon*.

Much like *Dismorphomania*, *The Honeymoon* presents an eerie take on the absurd through the incorporation of surreal devices. The stage directions call for the metamorphosis of animate and inanimate objects: characters walk in and out of paintings; paintings become puzzles; paintings turn out to be made up of ice cubes; characters come back from the dead; and, perhaps most strikingly, six "androgynous beings," come together to perform various functions – for example, in one scene they become a car and in another they narrate the thoughts of the main character, Masha. And, finally, the audience experiences at least three versions of Masha: Act I features Masha-1 and Masha-2, while, for the most part, Masha plays a role in the remaining acts.

Alongside the play's blatant departures from the realm of the humanly possible, the text does develop a straightforward plot starring a masochist, Gunther, whose father was an *oberführer* of the Schutzstaffel (SS). Gunther experiences sexual gratification through suffering, because he believes that it enables him to purge the guilt he has inherited from his father. Gunther's fiancée, Masha, is the daughter of a former NKVD general. The night they meet, they go to a hotel room and Gunther asks Masha to beat him. She complies and

afterward he falls asleep. The next morning, Gunther asks Masha to marry him and she agrees. He then says he has to tell her something important before she can agree. She thinks he either has cancer, AIDS, or he's "just" schizophrenic. She then thinks it would be best if he simply has sexual neuroses (31-32). Masha asks him if he's sick, if he has AIDS. He says that what he has is worse than any sickness – his father (32). At this point, an image of Gunther's father steps out of a portrait in the background, and the strangest part of the cast, the six androgynous beings, interrupting one another, narrate his biography (33). The biography is long and detailed; it tells of the crimes that Gunther's father committed in the name of the Nazi Party. It concludes with an account of his death by suicide. Masha's response to the narrative – "So what?" (34) – reveals her extreme apathy toward history. She tells Gunther she loves him; then the beings begin to ask her about her mother. They repeat the question "And your mother?" She tries to shoo them away, but with no luck. At this point, the painting of her mother repeats the same steps as Gunther's father. Masha's mother's biography is remarkably similar to Gunther's father's: she represents the Russian equivalent to Gunther's Nazi father. Both are responsible for the tortuous deaths of many victims in the name of an ideology. When their respective ideologies fail, they commit suicide. The play repeatedly returns to the parallel between the two: they always make their appearances on the stage together; they repeat the same lines and movements; and, at the end of the play, they, alongside Gunther and Masha, get married. The parallel between the Nazis and the Soviets is unmistakable (35).

By drawing this parallel, the play effectively equates the Soviet atrocities of the twentieth century with those perpetrated by the Nazis. In doing so, it breaks "one of the most

significant Russian cultural taboos” (Chitnis 124)¹⁶⁸ and addresses the problem of the valorization of the Soviet period:

While Nazi imagery (symbolising a regime of mass murder) remains marginalized as a symbol of representation, Soviet imagery (also symbolizing a regime of mass-murder) is embraced by global society as a popular aesthetic. Communist kitsch has thus succeeded in detaching itself from its referential basis and it has been incorporated into the commercial environment with remarkable ease, both in Russia and worldwide. [...] A possible reason behind this phenomenon is that the Stalinist terror has retained a sense of comical farce in the common social psyche despite its terrifying legacy.

(Barrer 35)

By pointing out the similarities between the Nazi and Soviet regimes, *The Honeymoon* rejects any possibility for redeeming the Soviet legacy. It proposes that the forgettable or forgotten tragedies of the Soviet era loom large in the Russian present, despite the success of attempts to detach the symbols of communism, and perhaps even Soviet history, from their referents.

The play treats the theme of the Soviet period by exploring history as trauma. Sorokin’s later prose works, particularly “Horse Soup” (Loshadinyi sup) and *Blue Lard*, have been read as “directly rendering trauma, thereby acknowledging its ubiquity in the post-Soviet period” (Wakamiya 140). Readings of Sorokin’s works, then, naturally engage with trauma studies; in fact, when asked about the pathologies represented in his work, Sorokin did not reject the idea that they are meant to explore a “general national trauma” (Laird 157). However, while trauma theory focuses on the psychology of the victim, Sorokin’s *The*

¹⁶⁸ Sorokin also breaks this taboo in his prose work *Mesiats v Dakhau* (Chitnis 124).

Honeymoon presents the experience of the perpetrator's descendants as traumatic.

Definitions of post-traumatic stress disorder, however much contested, often describe the disorder as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events” (Caruth “Trauma and Experience” 4); similarly, Sorokin's characters' key traits are correlated with their responses to history, though they may have not witnessed traumatic event(s) themselves. Sorokin's characters respond to their knowledge of the past as trauma victims would: their reaction to the overwhelming events of history “takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth “Trauma and Experience” 4). For example, through her indifferent attitude, Masha exhibits apathy (a type of numbness) and the avoidance of everything that reminds her of the Soviet era, while Gunther practices repeated rituals that evoke memories of the Holocaust. By manipulating the themes that relate to the denial of and fixation on the past, *The Honeymoon* takes as its subject the trauma of the aggressor's descendant and suggests that the character's pathology results from an attempt to cope with or deny his/her predecessor's legacy. The play, then, while affirming the similarities between the Nazis and the Soviets, points out the crucial differences between the German and Russian cases by drawing contrasts between Gunther and Masha's characters and, especially, their attitudes toward history.

In fact, Gunther and Masha represent the opposite poles of two extremes: Gunther reacts to the world around him by exercising restraint and discipline, while Masha reacts by engaging in overindulgence and excess. Gunther stutters when he speaks, while the talkative,

outspoken Masha curses often;¹⁶⁹ as a masochist, Gunther is not interested in copulation, while Masha is sexually promiscuous; Gunther is always sober, while Masha borders on alcoholism – she is constantly talking about and drinking alcohol at all hours of the day; she even dreams about it (87-88); Masha is portrayed as a light-hearted joker;¹⁷⁰ Gunther is always serious. Gunther is a workaholic and Masha wonders why he insists on working at the patent bureau when his real estate inheritance is valued at 22 million (44). Gunther responds that it's his profession. Masha explains that she has not worked in her profession a single day in her life (44-45).

Masha is entirely without limits to the extent that even her characterization breaks boundaries: the play presents multiple Mashas with multiple personalities. As the stage directions put it, Masha Rubinstein is split into Masha-1 and Masha-2 “when the opportunity” presents itself. Her relationship to excess is an early example of what has been identified in Sorokin’s later work as “a disavowal of limit [that] characterizes the untenable position of the post-Soviet subject” (Wakamiya 140-41). Masha’s denial of any lack, her dramatic embracing of excess corresponds with her denial of history: in other words, the dominance of excess in the material and physical realms of her life compensates for the lack of psychological soundness – excess becomes a means of “expressing the repressed.”¹⁷¹

Gunther, on the other hand, exhibits a pathological response to trauma: he is intent on

¹⁶⁹ For both characters language bears the marks of trauma: in Masha’s case it’s her linguistic register, in Gunther’s case it’s his stuttering. Gunther is inarticulate, because the trauma he must cope with is inarticulable. Masha represents a different type of inarticulateness – she cannot communicate without using a jarring amount of profanity. Furthermore, while Masha rejects her own literary heritage, Gunther tries to compensate for the injustices done to the Jews by learning Hebrew in Jerusalem. In both cases, language is a powerful tool that enables the characters to enact their psychologies. It turns out that Masha’s mother lives on in Masha’s speech, while Gunther’s father lives on in Gunther’s silence (his language impediment, his stuttering) (Ryklin 8-9).

¹⁷⁰ It is possible to conclude that, in fact, Masha’s behavior is an indication of her feeling of guilt: “Perhaps laughter is the best defense against the pain of shame” (Nathanson 16).

¹⁷¹ Borenstein makes a similar observation about sexual discourse in the post-Soviet era – he describes it as “an exercise in excess, a pointed and self-conscious indulgence in overkill as remediation” (26-27).

purging his father's guilt by punishing himself and by focusing exclusively on Jewish art and culture. His characterization follows the Freudian formula, according to which his "sense of guilt" contributes to his desire for "masochistic perversion" (Freud *Three Essays* 158). Gunther's masochism allows him to confess and repent and to recreate a reversal of the circumstances of the Holocaust by becoming the victim.¹⁷²

Masha's coping mechanism involves the adoption of an attitude that borders on denial, so much so that she is oblivious to her mother's past. The theme of forgetting functions like an epithet for her: it is referenced early on in the play's first scene when the two versions of her character converse with one another; it becomes her mission to help Gunther forget about his father's past; and throughout the play, she uses drinking to forget her woes. Because she is associated with forgetting, Masha's character preserves the literal experience of Soviet history. That is to say, through her attempts to forget she conjures up the very experiences she seeks to repress:

The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. If repression, in trauma, is replaced by latency, this is significant in so far as its blankness – the space of unconsciousness – is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality. (Caruth "Trauma and Experience" 8)

¹⁷² Sorokin often uses confession as a device (Burkhart 5).

Masha's rejection of the past, in contrast to Gunther's acceptance of it, suggests that Masha suffers from a more severe, deep-rooted problem: "It seems as though Masha Rubinstein's disorder does not exist, because it is new and profound: it appears not as a result of displacement (Verdraengung), as in Gunther's case, but rather as rejection (Verwerfung)."¹⁷³ Masha's speech indicates that she is obsessed with the notion of guilt, but a sense of guilt that has not been "translated as an emotion" ("Borshch" 7). Masha's inability to call herself guilty represents the post-Soviet Russian reality, where guilt has not yet been expressed as a conscious feeling ("Borshch" 7). Accordingly, all of Gunther's neuroses are readily apparent, while Masha's remain implicit. Gunther's masochism brings his psychological problems to the forefront of the plot, framing them as the central conflict of the play. However, though almost the entire action of the play deals with the question of whether or not Gunther can be cured, the implicit, equally vexing issue is whether or not Masha can be cured. The development (or lack thereof) of the play's plot reveals that the answer is no, and, as a result, the two polar opposites are rendered one and the same – unified by the similarities in familial/national lineage they share in common. Gunther's lineage defines him from the very beginning: the stage directions indicate that he is his father's son, and there is no other description for him. By the end of the play, the message is that Masha's lineage also defines her, though she refuses to accept it.

From the very beginning, the play hints at Masha's neuroses by portraying her as a character with a fragmented self – she is represented in pieces, in several voices. Though never explicitly labeled schizophrenic, she has a split personality, like Grigor from *The Hospital* and Pyotr from *Chapaev and Pustota*. The duality in her personality functions as

¹⁷³ "Симптом Маши Рубинштейн ощущается как несуществующий, потому что он слишком свеж и глубок: он является продуктом не вытеснения (Verdraengung), как у Гюнтера, а отвержения (Verwerfung)" (Ryklin "Borshch" 7).

another coping mechanism. The play begins with a conversation between binary opposite versions of Masha – Masha-2 has proper manners and speech, while the outspoken Masha-1 uses vulgar language and behaves impolitely. For example, Masha-1 addresses Masha-2, calling her a bastard, *svolochyshka*. At one point in the conversation, Masha-2 tells Masha-1 that she prays for her; she hopes that she will be able to escape the totalitarian hell that she is in. She essentially says the same things that Masha-1 says, but in the polite language of a believer (2-3). In complete contrast, Masha-1 uses the word dick instead of God: “Thank Dick, everything’s behind us.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly, the two have opposite attitudes toward Masha’s husband: Masha-1 focuses on his wealth; Masha-2 focuses on his kindness (6-7). In this way, Masha-1 is depicted as more of a practical materialist, while Masha-2 gives precedence to moral values.

The most obvious point of the first act is to demonstrate the duality in Masha’s character. But beyond that, it introduces her rejection of all things Russian, which stems from her inability to cope with the trauma of the past. Masha-1, in particular, urges Masha-2 to forget about the past as though it were a nightmare, *umonastroeniia* (2). In addition to erasing Russia’s historical legacy, Masha-1 encourages Masha-2 to undermine the Russian literary legacy:

Masha-1: And those writers of ours, leaders who shape the mind. Such a crock of shit, such a crock of shit!

Masha-2: Such a crock of shit, such a crock of shit!¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ “Слава Хую, все позади” (3).

¹⁷⁵ “Маша-1: А эти писатели наши, властители дум. Такое говно, такое говно!
Маша-2: Такое говно, такое говно” (11).

Masha-2 simply repeats Masha-1's denigration of the phrase from Alexander Pushkin's poem "To the Sea" ["K moriu"], which refers to the influence of Byron and Napoleon on social thought (Slovari). By quoting Pushkin, the father of Russian literature, Masha-1 verbalizes a complete rejection of the importance of the role of authors, beginning with the foundation of the Russian national literary canon. The historical amnesia and cultural apathy that Masha exhibits in the rest of the play is an elaboration of the antagonism toward the Russian cultural-historical heritage introduced by Masha-1 in the first act. Early on, then, the play presents forgetting and avoidance as symptoms of Masha's psychological instability.¹⁷⁶

The first act is also a microcosm of the action of the entire play. Masha-2 eventually begins to curse like Masha-1 (10), and after the shift in her speech register, Masha-2 simply repeats all of the curse words that Masha-1 utters. At this point, the conversation shifts to become a narration of Masha's meeting with Gunther. The two Mashas take turns narrating the story. Masha-2 describes their initial meeting. She explains that she tried to recall some of her German so that she could speak to him. (Her grandparents were German.) Masha-1 begins to stutter and is unable to continue telling the story. Act I ends with Masha-2 pushing Masha-1 into the floor. The reversal in their roles is complete: while Masha-1 was the louder, dominant character at the beginning of the act, Masha-2, having adopted some of Masha-1's traits, overpowers her by the end. However, although Masha-1 disappears, everything about her remains with Masha-2 and the Masha that we see throughout the rest of the play. The

¹⁷⁶ Throughout the rest of the play, Masha's character exhibits the problem of Russian national identity as it relates to the post-Soviet context. She represents a satirical embodiment of the typical anxieties of the 1990s – those that dealt with the country's "moral blight, cultural degradation, and lack of national purpose" (Borenstein 2). Masha's character takes these qualities to an extreme: her spoken Russian is vulgar and very colloquial, at best; she rejects the importance of Russian authors and does not pursue any cultural interests. Masha refuses to give credence to everything that shapes her identity – Russian history, culture, and the possibility of a homeland. She displays the character traits that Boris Yeltsin tried to undo among the Russian population by introducing the "new Russian idea," the proposal of which suggested that post-Soviet Russia "lacked a sense of its own purpose and identity" and that it required the adoption of a new set of moral and national ideologies (Borenstein 2).

scene presents the complex traces that make up Masha's character. The first act is a theoretical portrayal of the idea that various traces make up the self, and the rest of the play is about an uncovering of these traces that are the product of history.¹⁷⁷ The rest of the play explores the multiple layers of history, as it presents Masha's inability to cope with her personal, family history as well as with her national history. The play begins with two versions of Masha – a staging of the negotiation of her character – and though the plot of the play moves in an entirely different, seemingly unrelated direction that emphasizes Gunther's masochism, the primary question of the play remains one that concerns Masha's identity, that is to say, the relationship between herself and history.¹⁷⁸

The props and stage directions in the first act also draw attention to the complexities in Masha's character. The stage is divided into two sections that represent Masha-1 and Masha-2's demeanors. The scene emphasizes the portrayal of the two versions of Masha as much as it presents the notion that the play manipulates the stage and props as a reflection of the two characters. At the very outset, the contrast between the two personalities is apparent through the arrangement of the stage: the top half of the stage, where Masha-1 sits, is brightly lit, while the bottom half, occupied by Masha-2, is dark. Masha-1 sits in a still life painting of a German castle that depicts the motifs of food and drink that are central to the play:

Weissbier (Vaisibir), Weisswurst (Vaissvurst), and the Bavarian pretzel (bretsel'). Masha-2 sits naked in the bottom half of the stage. Before Masha-1 addresses Masha-2, she throws the Visebeer at her. When Masha-2 catches the Visebeer it becomes apparent that it is actually a

¹⁷⁷ Antonio Gramsci writes that the historical process “deposits [in the self] an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (*Prison Notebooks*).

¹⁷⁸ The inclusion of seemingly unrelated, random scenes or acts in a script is one of Sorokin's trademarks. This device, as mentioned previously, is most jarring in *Dismorphomania*, a play, that when performed on stage, seems like a series of disconnected, bizarre scenes.

block of ice with a picture of beer on one side of it. She puts the block of ice down, with the picture facing the floor so that only the ice is visible. Each time Masha-1 speaks she removes something out of the painting and throws it at Masha-2 (the beer, the Alps, the *Weisswurst*).¹⁷⁹ Part of the action of the scene consists of a deconstruction of the painting. Its parts form a type of hut by the middle of the conversation. Eventually, Masha-2 is seen through the window of this ice hut. And, unsurprisingly, a little later, the hut collapses (11). In this way, the play ponders what it means to see and perceive something that has so much more behind it. The play on the ice sculpture as painting, again, ties back to the layers behind the façade of Masha's character.

Having set up the focus of the play as an unlayering of Masha's identity and her history, the plot shifts to tell the story of Gunther and Masha's relationship. It immediately introduces and proceeds to focus on Gunther's psychological problems, Masha's engagement to him, and her subsequent attempt to cure him. All the while, the theme of the traces of history introduced in the first act remains an integral part of the action. As the love story unfolds, Gunther's father and Masha's mother, always lingering in the background, make appearances during the play's most crucial moments. Their ghostlike appearances in the play function as the reappearance of trauma: "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 91). Gunther's father and Masha's mother conjure up the painful pasts of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, respectively – pasts that, according to the play, need to be confronted and reconciled. As their parents' pasts hover, both literally and figuratively, over the action of the play, Masha and

¹⁷⁹ Though the elaborate use of props in the first act of *The Honeymoon* is more persistent and stylized, it reads like an offshoot of the use of props to vaudevillian effects in *Waiting for Godot* (turnips, radishes, carrots, hats, and boots).

Gunther are rendered a symptom of history: “If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth “Trauma and Experience” 5). As in the absurd Armenian plays, Masha and Gunther are not clearly defined characters, unique in their individuality. Instead, they represent opposite *types* of traumatized characters. The play’s plot does not explore their unique cases, but rather their dramatic situation allows for an exploration of history. Masha and Gunther are further removed from the designation of “characters” in the traditional sense through the play’s emphasis on physicality. The play’s characterization adopts one of the principles of *chernukha*: it “defines the human body in terms of sex and violence” (Borenstein 20). That is to say, the characters are objectified bodies “to be fucked, beaten, or killed”: Gunther is a character fueled by the desire to be beaten; Masha not only satisfies Gunther’s desires, but she also does a great deal of talking about her past experiences “fucking” and her present desire to “fuck.”¹⁸⁰ The play, then, makes its political statement through, on the one hand, Gunther and Masha’s shared experiences of a traumatic national and personal history, and, on the other hand, their contrasted subject positions – a body to be beaten, a body that beats and fucks.

Masha and Gunther are also more like devices rather than characters in so far as they allow the play to explore the social dimensions of trauma or the “group culture” that develops as a result of the combined wounds of traumatized individuals (Erikson 185). The play suggests that the legacy of Nazi Germany shapes the collective German psychology and attitude toward the Holocaust. Driving this point home, Masha describes the difference

¹⁸⁰ Here, again, the characterization reads like a cousin of the absurdist device of presenting opposite pairs of characters (who often abuse each other), as in the plays of Beckett, Pinter, and Ionesco.

between German and Russian reactions to symbols of the Nazi party: “The Germans are a surprisingly serious people. In Moscow you could walk around Red Square wearing an SS uniform – no one would say a thing to you. But here – it’s a matter of life and death.”¹⁸¹ In another scene, when Mark tells Masha a story about a stranger who apologizes to him for the Holocaust, Masha responds by saying that no one would do that in Russia (65). Masha’s statement recognizes the lack of repentance on the part of Russians for the mistreatment of Jews by the Soviet state. In both scenes, the Russian attitude toward the victimized other and traumatic histories is one of apathy. As Sorokin himself remarks in an interview from 1999, “For seventy years people here have been living according to a new kind of moral code in which killing and torturing and humiliating people is quite okay provided it’s in the service of a higher aim” (qtd. in Laird 156). While the play depicts German behavior toward the Jews and Jewish history as marked by seriousness and repentance, the Russians are depicted as indifferent to the past. These contrasts between the Germans and the Russians become the organizing principle of the play – they set up the logic, which dictates Gunther and Masha’s characterization. It follows that Gunther and Masha are portrayed as emblematic products of their respective group’s psychology. In addition to accentuating the severity of Masha’s psychological problems, the contrast between the two characters highlights a broader contrast between Germany and Russia. Germany is generally thought to have coped well – openly and honestly – with its past. Markers of Nazi atrocities all over Germany – museums, placards, monuments, etc. – serve as constant reminders of the Holocaust.

¹⁸¹ “Немцы удивительно серьезный народ. В Москве на Красную площадь выходи в эссовской форме — никто тебе слова не скажет. А здесь — вопрос жизни и смерти” (81).

Germany is often cited as a good example of how to confront a legacy of atrocity.¹⁸² The trend in Russia has represented the opposite extreme: the post-Soviet state has made a concerted effort to salvage any and all positive Soviet associations, thereby diminishing the extent of Soviet-era oppression and cruelty.¹⁸³

Beyond the specific contrasts between the Germans and the Russians presented by the play's content, the formal details that organize the plot contribute to an understanding of its larger concerns about history and trauma. The play's circular plot and its refusal to deliver what its title promises – a honeymoon – are both in line with the devices of the theater of the absurd. Furthermore, just as the absurd often employs these devices in order to represent a reaction to unspeakable catastrophes, *The Honeymoon* portrays the persistent presence and influence of trauma in the same way. The play's plot introduces the problem in Gunther and Masha's relationship – Gunther's masochism, his stuttering problem, and his obsession with Jewish art and culture; it then moves to present the attempt at a cure for Gunther's psychoses, followed by a brief honeymoon period in the relationship, when Gunther no longer experiences any of his old symptoms. However, the honeymoon is interrupted with the return of the traumatic memory and all of Gunther's former symptoms. The play concludes with the return of Gunther's father and Masha's mother, who invoke the inescapable, permanent haunting of the characters' lives by the ghosts of the past. The play's circular pattern, then, depicts a cycle of trauma: “the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them” (Caruth 1).

¹⁸² See Wirshing's *National Trauma in Postdictatorship Latin American Literature* for examples of Germany's approach to its past (4-5).

¹⁸³ It is worth mentioning that Sorokin's depiction of the German attitude is rather one-dimensional. For example, the play does not take neo-Nazi activities into consideration.

With Gunther having been cured, the very last scenes of the play seem to promise the potential of a happy ending, presumably in the form of a wedding and honeymoon. Gunther tells Masha the story about his ancestors and the plague in the 17th century. They set out to follow the pre-wedding ritual that every couple in his family has followed since then. In doing so, they move one step closer to marriage. However, on the way, they crash into a van, and after the collision Gunther begins to stutter again. Masha-2 narrates most of the occurrences. She says that everything is ruined. The last few pages end with the wedding song that at the very end turns into a battle march (105). The play concludes with the ominous message that Gunther and Masha can never have a relationship that is not haunted by their pasts. However, the reasons for this are different: Gunther is haunted by the past because he cannot let it go; Masha is haunted by the past, because she refuses to recognize it.

The play's title implies a beginning, a journey, but its content delivers an ominous ending. The play concludes with two marriages accompanied by a foreboding military march, thereby suggesting a potentially destructive future for these unions. Sorokin has fundamentally altered the traditional understanding of comedy, which requires a conclusion that presents a form of unification, oftentimes worked out through the device of marriage. In *The Honeymoon* marriage becomes a tragic symbol. In this sense, the play falls in line with Sorokin's other texts: "Sorokin works within a clearly-defined Russian eschatological tradition which declares the end of all things, without delineating a beginning of anything new" (Gillespie 235). By alluding to violence through the military march, Sorokin suggests that marriage, which normally marks a new beginning, actually signifies an end. Read

allegorically, the play suggests that the post-Soviet period cannot offer a new beginning; it merely represents a catastrophic end.¹⁸⁴

Yet there is one other way we might interpret the play's ending. If we read Gunther and Masha's car accident as fate¹⁸⁵ – then we find the positive potential of meaning in the play, so that its message is not entirely ominous:

The presence of freedom transforms everything that is happening with a person into a fate, into a field of meaning that has not yet been understood. But fate never reveals its meaning completely. Fate that does not pose a question about the meaning of events is just an accident. Fate that answers this question completely is causality. Fate is located in this very space between an unexplainable accident and an all-explaining cause, as an anxious and questioning field of potential meaning. (Epstein qtd. in Vassilieva)

If we seriously consider the possibility that fate does not allow us to understand the reason for the car accident, which induces the return of Gunther's trauma, Sorokin's play may not merely be a dark and hopeless rumination on the way in which the past haunts the present. Rather, it enables a questioning of the characters' reality in order to encourage the viewer's freedom to interpret and create meaning. In this sense, the play's postmodern sensibilities – its categorical refusal to make a conclusive statement about its own content and its insistence on leaving the viewer wondering about its content – take precedence over its otherwise overwhelming pessimism. Understanding the play's avoidance of an overt didacticism sheds

¹⁸⁴ As we have seen with the ending of *The Guards of Ruins*, where the celebratory freedom fighters' song accompanies the rise of new dictator, absurdist reversals and cyclical plots have become recognizable metaphors for the post-Soviet period.

¹⁸⁵ The devices of accident, coincidence, and chance are also at play in the film *4*.

light on the literary implications of its content. Its treatment of the Nazis and Soviets reminds audiences of another commonality between the two ruling parties:

The rhetoric and demagoguery of fascism and Stalinism are strikingly similar; there was constant speculation on the concepts of nationality and the instructive, didactic role of art and how it should serve some kind of social ideals. Moreover, the other qualities of literature and art which are capable of awakening the spirit of quest or of introducing an imbalance into official ideology were “forgotten.” (Aitmatov 14)

It turns out, then, that the play’s treatment of political themes speaks not only to its engagement with the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, but also to its own sense of literature’s responsibility to reject official ideologies and to push audiences into unfamiliar and often uncomfortable mental terrain.

Sorokin’s theater ties together the main concerns of the previous sections of this dissertation: through the interplay between aesthetics and politics; through a self-reflexive critique of literature; and through the portrayal of absurdity and (mental) illness as representative of the post-Soviet world. More specifically, Sorokin’s therapeutic theater facilitates an encounter with history, one that challenges viewers to confront questions about their identity and about the Russian nation. These encounters occur in the most uncanny moments of the texts – when paintings metamorphose into characters who are dead; when characters split into two; and when the mentally ill become the characters in Shakespeare’s plays. Through the unifying device of strangeness, Sorokin’s plays explore trauma from various angles – as art, as history, and as psychology. Sorokin’s theatrical theory of trauma concludes that history is always present in contemporary existence. Taken together, his plays

offer a powerful testimonial: “Texts that testify do not simply *report facts* but, in different ways, encounter – and make us encounter – *strangeness*, how the concept of the testimony, speaking from a stance of superimposition of literature, psychoanalysis, and history, is in fact quite unfamiliar and *estranging*” (Felman “Education and Crisis” 19).

Discussions of Sorokin’s plays often mention the OBERIU writers, whose prose and dramatic works of the early Soviet period incorporated surreal and grotesque elements and whose work is said to foreshadow the European theater of the absurd. The simple connection that follows, however, often goes unsaid: the OBERIU movement was an artistic reaction against the ruling Soviet authorities, and, so too, almost a century later, Sorokin’s plays represent a challenge to the post-Soviet status quo. With the example of his work, it becomes possible to extend the argument that absurdist aesthetics bear an inherent connection to political commitment. His work demonstrates another example of the political commitment of absurdist drama, thereby cementing the connections between the earliest absurdist plays to the works of the post WW-II era and, finally, to the present day.

“The underrepresentation of other Soviet ethnicities in American universities and in America at large, not to mention their regional isolation from global intellectual debates, is probably as much responsible for the underdevelopment of Eurasian postcolonial studies as the purely methodological question of postcolonialism’s applicability to the post-Soviet region. [...] What I am proposing, then, is a renewed focus on the regions of the Eurasian periphery, a commitment to the local archive that requires careful study of languages and sources outside Russian and an ability to contemplate cultural phenomena that exceed the Petrine paradigm of Russia and the West. This project must be complemented by an openness to the kinds of questions already being posed in other parts of the globe by transnational methodologies such as postcolonial studies. Such work might point to a convergence among Slavic studies, comparative literature, and work now pursued in various area studies institutes.” (Harsha Ram “Between 1917 and 1947” 832-33).

PART V: CONCLUSION

Chapter 10

Reflections on Postmodernism in the Context of Comparative Post-Soviet Studies

This dissertation has been aimed, however modestly, at narrowing the disciplinary gap in Soviet/post-Soviet studies that Harsha Ram so eloquently characterized in his address to the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages – a gap that remains in tact today, almost a decade later.

This study began with an introduction to the directions in which post-Soviet postmodernisms developed in Armenia and Russia – in locally unique ways that reflected both the problems of the Soviet past and the repercussions of the collapse of the Soviet Union. I set up the argument that post-Soviet postmodernity does not merely engage in a flippant type of “postmodern play” with texts and metanarratives, but rather that it produces politically charged, critical rewritings of Soviet and Russian nationalist discourses that challenge past and present power structures in the newly emerged post-Soviet nations. I proposed to resolve the apparent contradiction between the ludic aesthetics of postmodernism and its politically resistant aspects by creating a dialogue between the Armenian plays of the

theater of the absurd, two postmodern novels from the period, and the plays of Vladimir Sorokin. In order to read the resistant postmodernisms of this period, I chose the themes of madness and confinement as the chief metaphors for post-Soviet nation building in these texts.

The second part of the study demonstrated that the absurdist Armenian plays of the late post-Soviet period give us occasion to reconsider the entire body of scholarship on the theater of the absurd. By engaging the thematic particularities of the Armenian texts – their self-reflexive treatment of the themes of madness and confinement in the context of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras – with the existing academic conclusions about the absurd, I have shown that the aesthetics of this dramatic form are politically and culturally subversive. I used the Armenian theatrical examples to bridge discussions of the Euro-American absurd that focus on this tradition as propounding universal, existential(ist) ideas and the breakdown of meaning and language and the East European absurd that focus on the politically engaged and historically-rooted bent of this type of theater. In my comparative analysis of the Armenian texts and the plays of the absurd canon, I demonstrated that absurd plays oftentimes have at least four interrelated strands – they portray non-linear plots that are seemingly divorced from reality in order to convey the absurdities of existence, human relations and/or communication; they ponder the possibility of a higher being or force; they interrogate the power dynamics in relationships and/or the role of the individual’s agency; and they either directly or metaphorically interrogate power structures on the communal, national, or geopolitical level. By considering the specific historico-political context of the Armenian plays, I further concluded that, through the immediate concerns of their marginal characters, these texts allegorically represent Armenia’s position as a peripheral post-Soviet

nation grappling with its Soviet past, while simultaneously dealing with the influence of global powers and the new world order on its contemporary existence.

Drawing upon the absurdist portrayals of the themes of madness and confinement, the third part of the dissertation moved to an analysis of representations of schizophrenia and the chronotope of the hospital in two post-Soviet postmodern novels. The pairing of these two sections – the one on the drama and the other on the novel – made it clear that because post-Soviet authors “inherited a cultural landscape littered with catastrophe,” their narratives were full of ruins and psychological crises (Simon 3). Moreover, these two sections argued that both absurdism and postmodernism speak of various silences in Russia’s history as empire and offer an alternative voice to that cultivated by various post-Soviet institutions, local authorities, global powers, and even by mainstream popular culture. My analysis of the novels added to the discussion about the politics of post-Soviet literature by responding to postcolonial critics’ theoretical concerns about the ethics of postmodernism. My readings of the “heroes” in Gurgun Khanjyan’s *The Hospital* and Victor Pelevin’s *Chapaev and Pustota* demonstrated that these characters strive toward a cure for their schizophrenia, which is achievable through a decolonization of the mind. At the same time, these two novels give the ultimate interpretive agency to the reader – yet another move toward liberation. In the simplest terms, the example of these novels demonstrates that post-Soviet postmodern culture does not simply reject all discourses; instead, it offers a “theory of agency” through aesthetic experimentation and an unwavering demand for critical engagement on the part of the reader. In both cases, I concluded that the post-Soviet postmodern approach is not only based on a deconstruction of all the ways of knowing (ideological, mythological, religious, national), but that it also advocates a “restructuring” based on a new set of nonhierarchical, non-essentialist

principles that foster a dialogical view of both Soviet history and the present post-Soviet period.¹⁸⁶

Taken together, the second and third parts of the dissertation gesture toward the comingling of the concerns and the aesthetics of the absurd and the postmodern. The two are discussed here as related aesthetics that often overlap in post-Soviet Armenian and Russian literature. This pairing has served to broaden academic discussions of postmodernism, which have thus far emphasized the various trends in Russian cultural production – conceptualism, Sots art, *stiob*, and, most recently, the new sentimentalism. In order to cement the relatedness of the two, I concluded the study with an analysis of Sorokin’s plays, which I argued to be both absurdist and postmodernist. In my analysis, I pointed out that Sorokin’s dramatic texts, though often overlooked by academic studies, offer an important counterpoint to literary histories that artificially divide the timeline of his output between a period when he produced art that distances itself from society and politics and a later period during which he wrote politically committed literature. Sorokin’s plays of the early post-Soviet period are concerned with the need to confront personal traumatic histories, and, by extension, the history of Russia as empire. Like the absurdist Armenian plays, Sorokin’s *Dismorphomania* and *The Honeymoon* portray marginal characters in unfamiliar situations, seemingly removed from

¹⁸⁶ Lipovetsky views Russian postmodernism along similar lines, though his framework centers around the role of myth-making:

Postmodernism deliberately aimed to destroy all mythologies, viewing them as the ideological foundation of utopianism and all attempts at mind-control in general – enforcing a single, absolute, and rigidly hierarchical model of truth, eternity, liberty, and happiness. Beginning with a critique of Communist mythology (socialist art in the visual sphere, and subsequently in literature), postmodernism soon turned on the conceptual myths of Russian classical literature and the Russian avant-garde, and later to the myths fostered by contemporary mass culture. However, in shattering existing mythologies, postmodernism strives to reassemble the pieces into a new, non-hierarchical, non-absolute, playful mythology, since the postmodernist writer views myth as the most stable and a-historical form of human consciousness and culture. Thus postmodernism’s strategy with regard to myth might be defined more properly as deconstruction than destruction -- a restructuring along different, counter-mythological principles. (“The Aesthetic Code”)

reality; and, like Khanjyan and Pelevin's postmodernist novels, Sorokin's plays present multilayered, indeterminate narratives about the plight of psychologically disturbed characters. The incomprehensible elements in Sorokin's theater allude to Soviet history through the device of estrangement. The outcome is a liberating critique that strives toward an understanding of the role of Soviet history in post-Soviet Russian politics and nation building.

The liberating aspect of the resistant absurd and postmodern texts in this study has been a consistent element alongside such dismal themes as poverty, madness, confinement, and schizophrenia. The fruitfulness of the seemingly unproductive, indeterminate characteristics of Russian postmodernism has been theorized under the designations of chaos and paralogism. According to this formulation, the chaos of postmodernism, its absurd convolutedness, enables a new type of productivity, whereby everything is possible at once. While chaos undoubtedly creates ambivalence and indeterminacy in these texts, it also simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically begets a new sense of order:

By combining semantic polar opposites in paralogical compromises, Russian postmodernism achieves an effect of unprecedented fullness: the resulting creative system 'turns out to be all that it might be' – both fiction and reality; integral and fragmented; faceless and personal; the embodiment of memory and an emblem of oblivion; the realization of freedom and proof of power. (Lipovetsky "The Aesthetic Code")

The post-Soviet postmodern texts in this study have a maximized potentiality through their commitment to nothing and their incorporation of everything. It is in this sense that we must read them, not as representative of a rupture with the past, but as a new expression of

resistance and creative freedom that calls into question all disempowering limits and mechanisms of control.

Three of the works discussed in this study, Aghasi Ayvazyan's *Props*, Gurgun Khanjyan's *The Hospital*, and Vladimir Sorokin's *Dismorphomania* represent literature on the cusp of the Soviet/post-Soviet period and hailing from the tradition of politically subversive late Soviet literature. Alongside these earlier texts, the remaining works from the first post-Soviet decade – Aghasi Ayvazyan's *Props*, Gurgun Khanjyan's *The Guards of Ruins*, Victor Pelevin's *Chapaev and Pustota*, and Vladimir Sorokin's *The Honeymoon* – represent the continuation of the antiauthoritarian and experimental strand of literature that had its roots in the Soviet era. Today, a little over twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, artists still have a great deal to resist in the realms of governance, civil rights, nationalist discourses, and institutional apparatuses. Meanwhile, some critics claim that postmodern culture no longer dominates the literary field as it used to ten years ago. Nevertheless, I maintain that the texts that I have discussed in this dissertation are part of the segment of postmodern literature “that is poised to enter into robust contact with other trends” (Ivanova 49-50). Furthermore, the chaos of postmodernist narratives also reflects the chaotic ways in which literature has developed in the post-Soviet period: with the destabilization of the Soviet publishing industry and the rise of the Internet and, with it, piracy, literature has become increasingly interactive, decentered, inclusive, multitextual, and unbound.¹⁸⁷ The various directions of literature and the debatability of the new categories in literature correspond with the chaotic, all-encompassing productivity of postmodernity.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Kevin M.F. Platt describes the decentering of Russian poetry: “With each year, Russia is home to more and more competing poetry portals, web journals, and fan sites, relating to the most varied of physical geographies. In place of the traditional Soviet organization of literary value, in which all activity was stacked in a single pyramidal hierarchy that reached its peak in Moscow, circulation of poetry in Russia today brings to mind the

Some of the latest scholarship in post-Soviet studies has identified a turning point in the literary field, the beginning of a “post-post-Soviet” sensibility. According to this new method of categorization, the post-Soviet was characterized by a sense of transition and “revolutionary transcendence” beyond the Soviet period as opposed to the post-post-Soviet, which has been based on a sense of continuity with the Soviet past. The distinction, however, has not applied in the case of the texts that I have discussed. Instead, these absurdist and postmodernist works have insisted on the need to address the ever-looming specter of the past. And in this sense, they connect with the post-post-Soviet return to history. The urge to return to history, as I have shown, has to do with Russia’s position as an empire and Armenia’s position as a colonized and then “decolonized” state:

A dynastic empire fell, a socialist one followed, and a third is now consolidating its institutions along familiar trajectories. The collapse of the Soviet Union – internally imperialist but (in its declared animosity to First World predation) externally anti-imperialist – resolved one core contradiction, but substituted another: Russia, recovering gradually from its postimperial fatigue, remains (though reconfigured) an empire nevertheless. Does that repetition, like a stubborn habit renounced again and again, nullify change? An adequate account of the current conjuncture must address the simultaneity of Soviet postcoloniality and Russian

computing principle of n+1 redundancy, according to which any given circuit is replaced by another in the event of failure. Think spiderweb rather than pyramid” (“Poetry in the Cloud” 422). One such website that demonstrates this type of decentering in the Armenian case is the *Armenian Poetry Project*, which features the work of hundreds of Armenian poets, old and new, from around the world. Similarly, the two-volume anthology of contemporary Russian prose and poetry, *Led Tom I* and *Plamen’ Tom II*, respectively, offers a good snapshot of the decentered model of contemporary Russian literature, suggesting that it is no longer possible to find a geographic center for Russian literature.

¹⁸⁸ See *Russkaia proza kontsa xx veka. Xrestomatiia* as a pedagogical example that testifies to the difficulties in categorizing the various strands in Russian literature at the end of the twentieth century.

colonialism, their contradictions and yet their intense compatibilities.

(Condee 830-31)

The second post-Soviet decade has shown that many young authors – even those who never lived through the Soviet experience – are still grappling with the ruins of Soviet history alongside the new and increasingly complex concerns of the globalized, digitized, post-human world (Simon 3).

In its discussions of the themes of madness and confinement as they relate to Russia as empire, on the one hand, and the postmodern aesthetics of repetition, non-linearity, and ambivalence, on the other, this dissertation has aligned itself with and drawn upon the discourses of postcolonialism, not in order to prove the postcoloniality of the former Second World, but because of the thread that ties together postcolonial theoretical discourses – the commitment to leveling the playing field of knowledge production and the “task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (Gandhi 4). In this regard, I imagine that the methodology I have employed throughout this comparative project can serve to engage with various parallel discussions about minor or peripheral post-Soviet postmodernisms.

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