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# Maddening Truths:
## Literary Authority and Fictive Authenticity in Francophone and Post-Soviet Women's Writing

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

by

Melanie Veronica Jones

2021

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2021

# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

## Maddening Truths:
## Literary Authority and Fictive Authenticity in Francophone and Post-Soviet Women's Writing

by

Melanie Veronica Jones

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor David MacFadyen, Co-Chair

Professor Laure Murat, Co-Chair

At the start of the "post-truth" era, women writers in post-colonial France and post-Soviet Russia were searching for a strategy to respond to the crises of authority and authenticity unfolding around them. Linda Lê, Gisèle Pineau, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, and Anna Starobinets exploit the ambiguity of literary madness to destabilize traditional sites of knowledge and work towards new conceptions of truth.

All four women's works have traditionally been approached as narratives of trauma, detailing the ravages of mental illness or cultural upheaval. This dissertation argues that they instead work to expose the irreconcilability of medical, sociological, and spiritual authorities, forcing readers to constantly question who (if anyone) can be considered trustworthy and which

(if any) perspective can be declared reliable. The texts provide fictional reference points, like intertextual allusions and meta-literary framing, as the surest way for readers to anchor their assumptions. Linda Lê's autofictional text *Calomnies* and Gisèle Pineau's autobiographical novel *Chair Piment* depict a Francophone world wracked with social fractures in the wake of decolonization and economic crisis: amidst the splintering chaos, literature acts as a tenuous web holding contradictory discourses in suspension. Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's novella *Vremia Noch'* and Anna Starobinets' novella *Perekhodnyi vozrast* instead depict literature as a veil cast over the hollowed-out remnants of authority after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, each of these women's works rejects any assumed conflation between knowledge and truth, and by extension an unquestioned relationship between authority and authenticity.

In the wake of its successful dismantling of these sites, mad literature serves as a surprisingly promising step *towards* truth, rather than an obstacle to reaching it. Drawing on French philosopher Alain Badiou's conception of the void as no-thing, I argue that madness in Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's oeuvre both models Badiouan subjectivization and encourages readers to approach truth as an axiomatic intervention. Utilizing Russian existentialist Lev Shestov's work, I then approach Gisèle Pineau's continuous engagement with despair and insanity as a way to reintroduce singularity and contingency to reader consciousness, pitting them against the constrictive forces of necessity.

Both Petrushevskaya and Pineau tackle madness as something to be passed through via literature; Lê and Starobinets, by contrast, follow philosopher Gilles Deleuze in their encouragement of endless engagement with dis-order. Linda Lê draws on Russian muse Marina Tsvetaeva in her search for adequate truths, transforming autofiction into a schizo-analytic process. Anna Starobinets instead draws on Franz Kafka to trace contemporary obstacles to true Deleuzian creation, illustrating the infinite potentialities of meaning.  In all four cases, mad literature is a crucial tool for producing truths that come before or outside frameworks of knowledge — its authenticity not yet, and perhaps never, authorized.

The dissertation of Melanie Veronica Jones is approved.

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I would like to express my appreciation for my dissertation committee. Their feedback and support bolstered me as this project developed, over-expanded, and became manageable again. Kathleen Komar has been a consistent guide through my graduate experience. Eleanor Kaufman's insights on Alain Badiou and the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri were especially appreciated. Thank you to Co-Chair David MacFadyen, for his continuous commentary, his patience, and for his insights regarding contemporary Russian culture. Most of all, thanks to my Co-Chair and advisor Laure Murat for her encouragement as the dissertation took shape, and for her belief in the significance of this work from the beginning.

I am immensely grateful to those friends, colleagues, and family members who helped me weather the emotional highs and lows of past four years. This dissertation would not have been possible without their strength and wisdom. To Brandon Archambault, Maggie Astor, Allison Collins, and Shayda Kafai especially: you have my deepest gratitude.

I dedicate this dissertation to Colin, who holds my heart and gives it reason to beat.

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# INTRODUCTION

Doubt… is an illness that comes from knowledge and leads to madness.
— *Memoirs of a Madman* (1838), Gustave Flaubert

From its beginnings, the term "post-truth" has been associated with a kind of madness: a mass susceptibility to delusion and suggestion, accompanied by a wholesale rejection of most traditional sites of authority.[1] In the final decades of the Twentieth Century — before the rise of the Internet or the rebirth of fascism in the Western world — anxieties were rising that "we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning."[2] Overwhelmed by this glut of knowledge, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard suggests that cultural simulacra no longer function as meditations on, or even disrupters of, a shared reality. Instead, they hide the fact that our increasingly mutable approach to truth has become "directly destructive of meaning and signification."[3]

Whether stated outright or heavily implied, madness haunts the margins of these discussions. The spectre of mental illness embodies some of our deepest anxieties regarding certainty, stability, and power.[4] The capacity to determine a subject's (in)ability to be trustworthy, and to evaluate if their words are (un)reliable and (un)verifiable, is an essential part of the process of truth-telling. It is no coincidence that Michel Foucault, who argued that reason needs madness as a framework against which to organize its assertions, would also relentlessly link truth to regimes of power, not immutable values.[5]

---

[1] The phrase "post-truth" was coined by Serbian American playwright Steve Tesich in 1992, in an essay condemning the Gulf War. Tesich casts the rise of "a world in which the truth is no longer important or relevant" as a syndrome. He invokes medical terminology to describe both the American people's willingness to substitute opinions for facts and then-President George H.W. Bush's rejection of absolute standards of morality. Watergate Syndrome, he warns, reduces rational subjects to "prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams." Steve Tesich, "A Government of Lies," The Nation 6 January 1992. Retrieved from: www.thefreelibrary.com/A+government+of+lies.-a011665982.

[2] Jean Baudrillard and Sheila Faria Glaser, Simulacra and Simulation (The University of Michigan Press, 1994) 79.

[3] While these anxieties reached a fever pitch in the early 1990s, they were anticipated as early as 1961, when Hannah Arendt published the remarkably prescient Between Past and Future. Arendt argues that the upheaval triggered by the horrific toll of fascism, the collapse of while empires, and the long-term implications of Cold War politics would eventually result in a mass breakdown of shared cultural meanings. The next generations, she asserts, will have to grapple with how to evaluate words and deeds now that the old frameworks had crumbled and communal standards of ethics can no longer be taken as universal mandates.

The multiple and often overlapping classifications of what we now call mental illness only draw our attention further to the difficulties that arise when determining which epistemological framework is worthy of our allegiance. "No term in the history of madness is neutral," Geoffrey Reaume reminds us. "Not *mental illness, madness,* or any other term."[6] Mental illness has been employed both as a stand-in for a complicated spectrum of medical diagnoses and as a blunt tool of political repression. Terms like trauma may approach madness as a mass cultural wound, but may also dismiss its very existence as a form of valid neurodivergence.[7] Spiritual interpretations may cast suffering as demon possession, but may also interpret excessive ecstasies as a form of transcendent rapture. The proliferation of metaphorical madnesses within everyday discourse, meanwhile, continually expands this massive hermeneutic web, encompassing every shade of potential divergence. “In spite of its susceptibility to caricature,” then, as Shoshana Felman writes:

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[4] The intertwining of these anxieties can even be charted through spikes in mental illness following great cultural upheaval. Russian health professionals have been particularly struck by a rise in severe cases following the dissolution of the USSR. The after-shocks of this abrupt breakdown, which one psychiatrist called "tantamount to an earthquake," led another professional to declare bluntly that "Russia is going crazy." As quoted in Julie V. Brown, "Afterword," in Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky, Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture (University of Toronto Press, 2007) 284.

[5] A "truth regime," in contrast to the old concept of a "truth-value," signifies "the types of discourses [a society] accepts and makes function as true," with no measurement for fidelity beyond that power relation. Lorna Weir, "The Concept of Truth Regime," Canadian Journal of Sociology 33.2 (2008): 368.

[6] Geoffrey Reaume, "Mad People's History, Radical History Review 94 (2006): 182.

[7] This tension is explored by Therí Alyce Pickens. Sociological approaches that claim madness is solely a cultural construction risk dismissing a mad voice "as a viable subject position, ensuring that those counted as such — either by communal consensus or psy-disciplines — remain excluded from conversations about disability because they cannot logically engage." Therí Alyce Pickens, Black Madness :: Mad Blackness (Duke UP, 2019) 32.

> … we begin to understand that if the issue of madness has been linked so insistently to the current upheaval in the status of knowledge, it is because madness poses in more than one way a question whose significance and meaning have not yet been fully assessed and whose self-evidence is no longer clear.

That question is “not so much the question of “who ‘knows’ and who doesn’t ‘know’, but what does it mean to ‘know’?”[8]

The unanswerability of this query, and its implications for authority and authenticity, is brought to the fore in literature. The very status of fiction as not-real allows characters to make all kinds of assertions at will, and for anything to happen. Readers have no guide posts to declare madness present or absent, figurative or literal, outside of what has been given within the pages themselves. This can allow for a deconstruction of the boundaries between insanity and reason that threatens, by extension, the foundations of a particular epistemological framework, interpretative stance, or ontological position. On the one hand, to quote Felman, this causes rhetoric itself to be exposed for the madness of its “at once unceasing and uncontrollable movement, of its infinite, indefinite relay from one sign to another.”[9] On the other hand, this textual destabilization allows authors to interrogate various truth regimes with less risk of immediate censure or dismissal.

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[8] Shoshana Felman, La folie et la chose littéraire (Éditions du Seuil, 1989) 12. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French and Russian language texts are my own.

[9] Ibid. 178.

Perhaps nowhere is this trend of taking up mad literature in a quest to interrogate and explore truth more pronounced than in post-colonial French[10] and post-Soviet Russian writing.[11] In the 1990s and early 2000s, crises of national identity, the collapse of shared cultural values, and the disruption of traditional gendered and racialized roles were matched by the publication of hundreds of literary works centered around going crazy in an insane world. I analyze four women writers within these two traditions who thoroughly exploit the ambiguity of literary madness, bringing tensions between authority and authenticity to a head. French-Vietnamese writer Linda Lê (1963-), Guadeloupean author Gisèle Pineau (1956-), and Russian writers Ludmilla Petrushevskaya (1938-) and Anna Starobinets (1978-) share a fascination with mental illness, an omnipresent theme in their texts. Traditionally, their works have been approached as narratives of personal or collective trauma. It is my contention, however, that these women do more than depict social upheaval or analyze their own suffering. Instead, I argue that their texts interrogate and ultimately undermine extraliterary[12] sites of narrative authority. They then make use of this vacuum to enact counter-conceptions of truth that are firmly distinguished from traditional frameworks of knowledge. Ultimately, they both suggest new paths through which to navigate the coming "post-truth" world and fiercely advocate for the role of mad literature in declaring and enacting these new truths.

---

[10] French and Francophone examples include works by Linda Lê, Gisèle Pineau, Marie NDiaye, Florent Couao-Zotti, Michel Houellebecq, and Jeanne Hyvrard. For more on the significance of this surge in the already abundant sub-genre of mad literature, see Valérie Orlando, Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls: Seeking Subjecthood Through Madness in Francophone Women's Writing of Africa and the Caribbean (Lexington Books, 2003) and Claire Ellender ed. Translating Mind Matters in Twenty-First Century French Women's Writing (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020).

[11] Russian examples include works by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Anna Starobinets, Tatyana Tolstoya, Svetlana Vasilenko, Viktor Pelevin, and Vladimir Makanin. For more on how these turn-of-the-century works specifically tackle post-Soviet anxieties, see Angela Brintlinger, "The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past," Slavic Review 63.1 (Spring 2004): 43-65, and Helena Goscilo, "Madwomen without Attics: The Crazy Creatrix and the Procreative *Iurodivaia*," in Brintlinger and Vinitsky 226-42.

[12] The term "extraliterary" comes from Lev Loseff's O blagodetel'nosti tsenzury: Èzopov iazyk v novoi russkoi literature ("On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in New Russian Literature," Sagner Verlag, 1986), referring to sites of authority traditionally viewed as outside and above the world of fiction. In the case of my dissertation, this specifically refers to medicine and psychiatry, sociology and cultural studies, and religion or spirituality. The fact that these authority's dominant discourses have historically been interwoven with literary production is not lost on the women I analyze, who expose the blurred lines complicating the supposed distance between the "literary" and "extraliterary" at every opportunity.

## Fracture and Chaos: France and Russia On the Precipice

A series of cultural implosions rocked France in the 1980s and 1990s. It was the end of Gaullism, the breakdown of "Marxist consensus," the failure of "*socialism à la française*."[13] The economy had slumped, and unemployment was rising. Meanwhile, an ever-growing population of ethnic minorities were fighting to secure the rights of citizenship[14] and unearth buried histories.[15] French politics found itself both confronting its colonial skeletons and witnessing an influx of nativist sentiment in response. The State had nothing to offer either group: "There seemed now to be no framework within which to understand these problems and no principles that could be used to offer solutions."[16]

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the term *la fracture sociale* (social fracture) entered the national discourse as a way to broadly characterize immigration issues, the emergence of identity politics, and the return of the extreme right. Before long, however, it had come to signal nothing less than the "breakdown, dissolution, or disintegration of the body politic."[17] The 2005 riots in the poorer suburbs (*banlieues*) of Paris and other cities did two things: it showed "how many of the cuts between the Republic and her children in the districts were deep ones," and served "to re-place the question of the *banlieues* at the heart of the political agenda" once again. It marked, as *Le Monde* noted, "Thirty Years of the Banlieue Crisis," a dark echo of the "Glorious Thirties" of France's post-war economic prosperity.[18]

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[13] Emile Chabal, A Divided Republic: Nation, State and Citizenship in Contemporary France (Cambridge UP, 2015) 1.

[14] By the 1990s, a quarter of the people born in France's Overseas Departments (DOM-TOM) of Guadeloupe and Martinique were living in the metropole. By the early 2000s, an influx of immigrants from North Africa meant France had the largest Muslim population in Europe. Alec Hargreaves and Mark McKinney, Post-Colonial Cultures in France (Routledge, 1997) 8-9.

[15] Touchstones within this movement included memorial laws prohibiting genocide denial; a 2001 law declaring slavery a "crime against humanity;" controversies surrounding the colonial origins of museum items in French; President Jacques Chirac's recognition of the 1947 massacre in Madagascar; public re-discovery of the 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris; and accusations of French complicity in the Rwandan genocide. Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, "French Intellectuals and the Postcolonial," Interventions 14.1 (2012) 88-9.

[16] Chabal 1-3.

These social fractures were symptoms of a community grappling with truth-telling and its authorized speakers. In 2005, a law was passed instructing high school teachers to emphasize "the positive role of colonization" in North Africa. It was met with outrage and quickly repealed, leading President Chirac to declare that "in the Republic, there is no official History."[19] Tensions continued to build, exploding with President Sarkozy's creation of Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development in 2007 and its nativist approach to the idea of a national identity.[20] At the time of this writing, a new battle is being waged over whether fields like post-colonial studies are destabilizing influences imported from American universities. These claims by Higher Education Minister Frédérique Vidal prompted the announcement of a government investigation into whether such research, which openly interweaves academic and activist discourse, feeds "Islamo-leftist" tendencies" that "corrupt society."[21]

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[17] Stam and Shobat 87.

[18] Luc Bronner, "Trente ans de crises des banlieues, trente ans des blocages politiques," Le Monde 15 July 2011.

[19] Didier Samson, "Ce n'est pas à la loi d'écrire l'Histoire," Radio France Internationale 11 November 2005: http://www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/072/article_40372.asp

[20] Stam and Shohat 88-9. The authors provide a detailed list of examples to back their case that France has become increasingly nativist in the past three decades. Case studies include the debates around the veil and other religious insignia in French schools, the official banning of the burqa, and the expulsion of the Roma in 2010.

[21] Nicolas Roux et Pauline Perrenot, "'L'université menacée par 'l'islamo-gauchisme'? Une cabale médiatique bien rodée," Acrimed 2 March 2021: https://www.acrimed.org/L-universite-menacee-par-l-islamo-gauchisme-Une

“Our history,” Hannah Arendt writes, specifically citing French poet and Resistance fighter René Char, “was left to us with no testament.[22] Western Europeans would have to face the “ominous silence that still answers us whenever we dare to ask, not “What are we fighting against” but “What are we fighting for?”[23] Such a question was doubly loaded for the children of immigrants, refugees, and those citizens of *la France d’Outre-Mer,* those territories far from their Republic and removed from some of its rights.[24] After the storm of de-colonization, many struggled to reclaim some sense of individual and group identity, even as wounds hadn’t yet healed, and divisions appeared starker than ever. The question of which traditions to turn to, which voices to heed, and which paths to follow appeared unanswerable.

If France at the close of the Twentieth Century felt itself fracturing, many Russians worried their country had finally broken definitively. While totalitarianism had been defeated in Nazi Germany, it had remained a reality in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin (1878-1953). The Great Terror of the 1930s was followed by mass famines, prompted through yet concealed under the championing of Soviet collectivization.[25] The Gulag, a system of forced labor camps, was an omnipresent threat to political dissenters.[26] While policies softened under Khrushchev and the following General Secretaries, totalitarian domination at the State level remained an established fact, adherence to the Party line an inevitable consequence.

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[22] Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (Viking Press, 1961) 3.

[23] Ibid. 27.

[24] Gisèle Pineau’s family hails from Guadeloupe, which exists as part of the broader “France of the Outer Sea,” sometimes rendered as the pun *France d’autre mère* or “France of another mother.” The island is a constituent territory of the European Union, granting its citizens French nationality and representation. At the same time, its status as an overseas region means that local administrators cannot pass new laws. Its distance from Europe also disqualifies it from being part of the Schengen Area, where border control documents are not required for EU citizens. Guadeloupeans are thus both “French on paper,” and denied papers that would give them the full benefits of citizenship. Marie Léticée, “My Body, My Land: Redefining and Rediscovering the Guadeloupean Creole Woman,” CLA Journal 51.2 (December 2007): 133-4.

[25] Historians continue to debate whether the *Holodomor* (the Terror-Famine) in Soviet Ukraine was ultimately the result of disastrous mismanagement, an attempt to subdue locals and drive them into collectives, or an intentional act of genocide. Regardless, between 7-12 million Ukrainians perished after the institution of a man-made famine to supply grain to Soviet soldiers, and were forbidden to speak about what had happened for generations. Anne Applebaum, Red Famine: Stalin’s War on Ukraine (New York: Random House, 2017) 3-6, 382-4.

With the sudden collapse of the USSR, however, "Russia suddenly switched from a position of 'everything is forbidden' to 'nothing is off-limits': one sixth of the world's surface found itself in a state of anarchy."[27] A totalitarian government had upended an imperial tsardom almost a century ago: now both were gone, replaced by a fledging democracy. This frenzied period opened Russia up to great uncertainty as a nation. It had suddenly lost both an empire and an identity that had attempted to bind dozens of distinct cultural groups together.[28] Although some cast the following decade as one of ephemeral, intoxicating freedom, the term most evoked to describe the lack of government regulations and resulting crime spike was *bespredel* (anarchy, being without limits). Originating in the criminal underworld, by the late 1990s the term had become a politicized symbol of pure chaos. It signified suffering without hope, the complete breakdown of shared communal meaning. The sole alternative appeared to be a return to authoritarian rule, with the justifications for this system only extending as far as survival. In early 2000, Putin gave a television address in which he openly declared, "Without the legal system and the dictatorship of law, freedom turns into *bespredel*."[29]

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[26] Ludmila Alekseeva, Istoriia Inakomysliia v SSSR: Noveishii Period (Vest', 1992) 254-55.

[27] Artemy Troitsky, "Sex, Drugs and Excess: Russia's Music Scene in the '90s," The Moscow Times 04 May 2015.

[28] The First Chechen War served as a potent illustration of both Russia's ambivalent relationship with its ethnic and religious minorities, and its determination to re-establish its political influence in Eastern Europe. Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus (New York UP, 1997) 2-5.

[29] Vadim Volkov, Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism (Cornell UP, 2002) 82.

Russian historians, politicians, and writers, meanwhile, began increasingly "asking such questions as: How do we know the past? Can we know it at all? What can we know of it now?"[30] New files are still being uncovered from the Soviet archives each year. Many of these testimonies are horrific; yet they remain "the only history upon which [post-Soviet readers] can draw" to better prepare for a new age.[31] "Most assessments of the literary output" of the 1990s into the early 2000s in Russia link the dissolution of a common ground in the former USSR to "a dearth of acknowledged leading figures and aesthetic tendencies" in literary criticism.[32] By assigning it the role of witness and testifier, literature had traditionally been directly embroiled in shifting political discussions as a voice for the voiceless. Its authority depended upon a trust the reader must place in the author, just as the suspicious censor once did, that there is a deeper meaning to be unearthed which extends far beyond literature-as-itself.[33] The existence of any such meaning was now deeply in question.

Multiple theorists have declared the Twentieth Century the "age of trauma," introducing the world to an endless fight against mass genocide and totalitarian rule.[34] It is not surprising, then, that many theorists have primarily interpreted the flood of works depicting mental illness in French and Russian texts at the turn of the century primarily as trauma narratives, testifying to the personal impact of social horrors. Gillian Ni Cheallaigh sees post-colonial writing's fixation on madness as a response to writers being "related and mutually imbricated in an 'entangled history,' one which traces the disorienting effects of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizers."[35] Rosalind Marsh maintains that despite local critics' ambivalence regarding trauma theory, "the cataclysmic events of the 1990s do seem to be implicitly reflected in contemporary Russian literature, since madness and the psychiatric hospital are often used as metaphors."[36]

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[30] Rosalind Marsh, Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006 (Peter Lang, 2007) 245.

[31] Brintlinger "The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past" 63.

[32] Evgeny Dobrenko et al, A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond (University of Pittsburg Press, 2011) 254, 287.

[33] Lev Loseff argues that Imperial and Soviet censorship played a significant role in both boosting literature's status and giving it greater depth through multiple layers of narrative ambivalence, all rooted in the indispensable tension outward-facing "social-ideological orbit" and insular "literary aesthetic." Loseff 4-5.

[34] Marita Nadal and Monica Calvo, Trauma in Contemporary Literature: Narrative and Representation (Taylor and Francis 2014) 1-2.

Trauma and testimony are valid lenses through which to evaluate these women's works; they are often essential aspects of literature's capacity to engage with contemporary discourses and one of women's few avenues for open expression. As Nancy Luxon reminds us, however, this rhetorical strategy risks flattening out a true interrogation of truth-claims, and is "ill-suited to holding onto the indeterminacies of experience."[37] Scholars may take for granted that a character's mental instability is definitively proved or disproved, that its origins can be traced, and that once this is discovered, the character may in some way be liberated or cured.[38] This contains the narrative within the bounds of fiction, rather than illuminating how Linda Lê, Gisèle Pineau, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, and Anna Starobinets challenge the links between truth and knowledge and authority and authenticity, drawing on centuries of literary tradition to do so.

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[35] Gillian Ni Cheallaigh et al, Quand la folie parle: The Dialectic Effect of Madness in French Literature since the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge Scholars, 2014) 7.

[36] Marsh Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006 162.

[37] Nancy Luxon, Crisis of Authority: Politics, Trust, and Truth-telling in Freud and Foucault (Cambridge University Press, 2013) 270.

[38] Within trauma studies, scholars such as Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis in Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative (2017) and Martin Modlinger in Other People's Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics (2011) are among those who have greatly enriched the field by calling for an examination of the "ethical demands" assumed by studying trauma, and by questioning the presumptive conclusions of healing upon which its analyses often rely.

## Maddening Truths in Lê, Pineau, Petrushevskaya and Starobinets

A new generation of Vietnamese immigrants arrived in France in the second half of the Twentieth Century, fleeing the shadow of the French Indochina and American wars. Among them was Linda Lê (1963-), born just nine years after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. At fourteen, she fled to Paris with her mother's family, all naturalized French citizens. Her Vietnamese father was left behind. Although they maintained a fervent correspondence, Lê would never see him again. He died in 1995, just as his daughter's autofictional writing[39] was making her a literary star.

"The history of my soul," Lê relates in quasi-memoir *Le complexe de Caliban* (Caliban Complex, 2005) "is one of exile, of mourning, and of the madness that accompanies them."[40] Each work in her extensive oeuvre acts as a continuous examination of the traumatic dance between these three forces. As middle-class refugees with business skills, Vietnamese immigrants were often "accepted more readily than other post-colonial minorities" in France, especially since the Cold War conflict had recast them from former colonial subjects to victims of "the West's ideological adversaries."[41] Nonetheless, racism against Asian immigrants was still a considerable factor in Lê's childhood. The forced migration, and separation from her father, was deeply traumatic for the young girl. "I have the impression of carrying a dead body in me," Lê stated in 1999. "It is surely Vietnam that I carry, like a dead child."[42] Her French-Vietnamese protagonists, often young women but occasionally older men, carry similar weights, and are dogged by paranoia, obsession, and delusion.

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[39] The term "autofiction" was coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977. This hybrid form deliberately blurs the generic boundaries between, and distinct rules of, autobiography and the novel. Typically a first-person narrative where the protagonist shares the author's name and/or backstory, autofiction cribs significant details from the creator's life only to wholly invent the scenarios, secondary figures, and personal backstories with which their character-self will grapple. The form is intended to both illustrate and further identity creation through textual experimentation.

[40] Linda Lê, Le complexe de Caliban (C. Bourgois, 2005) 86.

[41] Alec G. Hargreaves, Immigration in Post-War France: A Documentary Anthology (Methuen Educational, 1987) 10.

[42] Linda Lê and Catherine Argand, "Interview," L'Express 01 April 1999.

Critical responses to Lê initially relied heavily on her status as a female Vietnamese immigrant for interpreting her work. The incessant themes of "memory, exile, madness, and… ruin" were cast as attempts to heal from the ruptured subjecthood of cultural trauma.[43] By extension, the recurrence of the tormented survivor, the abandoned father and the castrating mother were read as a form of psychoanalytic regression. "The characters embrace death, absorb it into their being," Maryse Fauvel writes in her analysis of Lê's early works. "Some recognize their madness, all have been confronted by suffering":

> Why? Because they are haunted by their past, haunted by their native village in Vietnam, their family dispersed by war, the end of French colonialism, the immigration to France[,] and they are persecuted by the sentiment of guilt for having left, for having abandoned their father, their house, their village and their culture.[44]

That such themes are omnipresent in Lê's work, and are deeply indebted to her own turmoil, is undeniable. Yet any critique that places literature in the service of culture in her autofiction will need to grapple with Lê's outspoken rejection of such approaches. She refuses to take up the label of Vietnamese writer (though the French label is rejected as well), and dismisses attempts to group her in a post-colonial or Francophone framework. "To be the child of no one, from no country," she declares, "is for me the only attitude possible" to take as a writer.[45] Just as crucial is her choice to write autofiction rather than memoir. More recent critics have noted that characters are not the only ones who find themselves enraptured by "rare illusions," tracing relationships revealed to be "lures," and left feeling the possibility of any real exchange is "near-illusory."[46] Lê works within a genre designed to destabilize all sense of a comprehensible self, "in order to refuse the notion of a univocal truth and to assert its fracture."[47] She "openly delights in combining autobiographical detail with falsities and fantasy," allowing her to trace a "tenuous and deliberately deceptive connection between 'life' and 'writing'" across her oeuvre that hopes to both "suggest an itinerary" and lead readers "in wrong or unlikely directions."[48]

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[43] Marie-Magdeleine Chirol, "Histoire de ruines: Calomnies de Linda Lê," French Forum 29:2 (Spring 2004): 91.

[44] Maryse Fauvel, "Déterritorialisation de l'identité et de la langue des personnages de Linda Lê," Romance Notes 42:3 (Spring 2002): 331.

[45] Lê as quoted in Alexandra Kurmann, Intertextual Weaving in the Work of Linda Lê: Imagining the Ideal Reader (Lexington Books, 2016) 1.

Leslie Barnes, in particular, has advocated for resisting the urge to read Lê's work as a traditional trauma narrative geared toward either personal healing or public testimony. This resistance allows us to move from reading her oeuvre as "a literature of exile" to a metaliterary interrogation of "literature *as* exile."[49] Alexandra Kurmann has similarly drawn critical attention to how the "community" of writers she assembles through her intertextual weaving is linked to her preoccupation with the mad, who through "their imprecations and their ravings," ultimately "speak truth about the world." Having herself long operated on the brink between oracle and oblivion, Lê views it as a writer's task to engage as much as possible with "a crystalline madness, born from the will to not make common cause with hypocrisy."[50]

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[46] Julie Assier, "Les Migrances du Moi 'Calomnies' de Linda Lê," Francofonia 58 Exilées, expatriés, nomades… (Primavera 2010): 37.

[47] Arnaud Genon, Autofiction: pratiques et théories: Articles (Mon Pétit Editeur, 2013) 11.

[48] Leslie Barnes, Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature (University of Nebraska Press, 2014) 168.

[49] Ibid. 197.

[50] Kurmann 67.

My work expands on these fruitful engagements with Linda Lê's writing, moving from her stated aim of identity destabilization to her literature's destabilization of broader epistemological systems. I examine how Lê's "fundamental rejection of all authority"[51] paradoxically elevates the *legitimacy* of mad voices in her texts, and how her well-documented use of writers from across global traditions — often bound solely by struggles with mental illness — allows literature to disrupt extraliterary sites without becoming rooted within a single tradition's demands. I then turn to her assertion that an author must "demand of herself only the naked truth" when writing.[52] If such a truth is always the outcome of personal brushes with madness, as Kurmann suggests, does that necessarily bar it from broader generativity? Could this "naked truth" be accessed by the reader — in spite or even because of Lê's autofictional traps?

Gisèle Pineau (1956-) was born in Paris to Guadeloupean parents. Despite Guadeloupe's transition from a colony to an overseas region of France a decade before, her dark skin marked her as unalterably foreign to white Parisians. "The pain of always being rejected [and] repelled" by them "threw a very dark veil" over much of her childhood.[53] Nor could she cultivate a significant connect to her grandparents' homeland. When she finally visited Guadeloupe as a teenager, she was scorned by locals for being too French. Like Lê, then, Pineau was born into an ambivalent space between cultures; and like Lê, her literature blends the autobiographical and fictional to "speak abundantly of suffering, madness, [and] misery."[54] Her protagonists are overwhelmingly transplanted women of color. Whether they grew up on the island or were born in Paris, they all operate within "a climate of instability that permeates all aspects of Guadeloupean people's lives, including their culture, their education, and their relationship with France itself."[55] They are also riddled with disability and disorder, and face the question of whether healing is possible in the face of an abyssal insanity.

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[51] Barnes 213.

[52] Lê as quoted in Kurmann 68.

[53] The anguish Pineau felt as a result of rampant racism formed the crux of her first attempt at writing, at age ten. Like several works to come, it was an autobiographical novel, drawing on both personal and communal memories to produce a quasi-fictional narrative. Gisèle Pineau and Valérie Loichot, "Devoured by Writing: An Interview with Gisèle Pineau," Callaloo 30.1 Reading "Callaloo"/Eating Callaloo: A Special Thirtieth Anniversary Issue (Winter 2007): 330.

As scholars such as Njeri Githire have noted, Pineau's "fixation with psychological disorders and behavioral dysfunction" continues the broader West Indian tradition of using specific psychiatric markers to express intergenerational trauma.[56] Guadeloupean women's writing often features protagonists whose difference is "doubly intrusive": the character "is not 'in her place' (as a black), nor does she 'know her place' (as a woman).[57] Véronique Maisier joins Lorna Milne in approaching Pineau's writing as "a kind of talking cure," a path to socio-cultural liberation set along strictly gendered lines.[58] In stark contrast to Lê, the author herself proclaims explicit solidarity through her writing. "To say, to search out, to relate again and again the existence of black women," she muses, "to place writing in the service of these women's suffocated words," is her central goal. [59]

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[54] Christa Stevens as quoted in Véronique Maisier, "Les femmes traits d'union dans les romans de Gisèle Pineau," Nouvelles Études Francophones 26.2 (Automne 2011): 159.

[55] Marie Léticée, "My Body, My Land: Redefining and Rediscovering the Guadeloupean Creole Woman," CLA Journal 51.2 (December 2007): 134.

[56] Njeri Githire, "Horizons Adrift: Women in Exile, at Home and Abroad in Gisèle Pineau's Works," Research in African Literatures 36.1 (Spring 2005): 85.

[57] Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Kevin Meehan as quoted in Léticée 136.

[58] Véronique Maisier, "L'Écriture au service de la parole dans les romans de Gisèle Pineau," Nouvelles Études Francophones 27.2 (Automne 2012): 36.

[59] Ibid. 42.

Yet that goal necessarily demands an interrogation of what authorizes these voices (or doesn't), and how their truths are declared authentic (or not) within the narrative. Tension between the demands of voicing and the instability of its validation are heightened through her use of the autobiographical novel. While Pineau's incorporation of her own experiences into her writing is often assumed, René Larrier is one of the few critics who notes the extent to which her books continually play with reader expectations, enacting a dance of *relie, relaie, relate* (link, relay, relate) by switching between narrators, allowing first- and third-person accounts to bleed back and forth, and letting numerous characters act as shadows or doubles for the protagonists.[60] This has led Christine Duff to argue that "it is the way in which the experience and its memory are interpreted and incorporated into the character's *self* that is significant" in Pineau's works.[61]

While Larrier's analysis contributes to a more sophisticated reading of Pineau's stylistic devices, however, it does little to contest the relationship between "the act of bearing witness" and the "establish[ment] of truth;"[62] nor does it expand on how these *ailleurs* end up mapping out overlapping yet inherently contradictory sites of knowledge. Duff, for her part, remains focused on the ways trauma breaks down the dialectic relationship between memory's construction and its bearers. My work brings the supposed goal of Pineau's work — the restoration of "one's sense of a unified, coherent self"[63] — into conversation with her endings, which leave characters at yet another crossroads. Their fates are never fully depicted, our

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[60] Renée Larrier, Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean (University Press of Florida, 2006) 79.

[61] Christine Duff, "Looking Back to Move Forward: The Counter-Poetics of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction," Journal of Caribbean Literature 3.2 The Caribbean That Is? (Spring 2002) 29-30.

[62] Larrier 24.

[63] Christine Duff, "Looking Back to Move Forward: The Counter-Poetics of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction," Journal of Caribbean Literatures 3.2 (Spring 2002) 24, 26.

answers rarely fully satisfied. The relationship between voicing and truth is in fact problematized, rather than resolved, in her oeuvre. I begin by considering how being psychiatric nurse as well as author might cause her to differ from Lê, a defiant (anti)patient, when interrogating how framings of mental illness reveal broader assumptions about knowledge and authority. Can an author elevate underrepresented voices without dictating their truths?
I then weigh whether identity is as important to Pineau as its transformative processes. Might the construction of a "unified, coherent self" actually limit the reach of her textual revelations?

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya (1938-) has been witness to some of the most unimaginable upheavals of the past century. Her family has also paid some of the more brutal costs of the breakdown of belief regarding authoritative, authentic truths. Petrushevskaya's family were labeled "enemies of the people" under Stalin. Her grandfather, renowned academic Nikolai F. Yakovlev, was placed in a mental institution for twenty years for criticizing Stalin's treatise on linguistics. Around this time, "two members of [her] family were put to the wall," shot without trial. Her great-grandfather, still operating according to the old system of government, did not understand that euphemisms like "ten years without the right to correspondence" actually meant summary execution. His continued needling of officials resulted in his own suspicious death.[64] Amidst these family tragedies, Petrushevskaya grew up alternating between being a beggar, an orphan of the state, and a ward of her family. After training as a journalist, she began writing plays and short stories on the sly.[65] It wasn't until the censorship thaw that her work was widely distributed, at which point she "became a household name virtually overnight."[66]

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[64] Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and David Garza, "Interview with Ludmilla Petrushevskaya," Kirkus Reviews 21 February 2013: www.kirkusreviews.com/news-and-features/articles/complete-interview-ludmilla-petrushevskaya/.

Despite the immense socio-cultural weight of her formative years, however, the radical and compelling nature of Petrushevskaya's work lies precisely in how intensely and isolatingly personal her narratives are. Often, the action extends no further than a single family unit. "The foundational theme of most of stories and tales [is] the image of female love," notes Alina Sabitova, as well as nods "to the family story."[67] Petrushevskaya herself has said that her whole life has been writing "the lives of Russian women."[68] The home, however, has now been warped into "the quintessential site of psychic warfare and emotional evisceration."[69] Her characters are almost always psychologically shattered. D.V. Rykova is among several scholars who note that "very often, her heroes suffer from mental illnesses," while "almost every tale or story [by Petrushevskaia] has mention of a not wholly healthy or at least strange person."[70] Sadism, suicide, dementia, and psychosis haunt the margins and eventually flood the pages of her works. Ol'ga Lebedushkina asserts that "disease is the natural state of Petrushevskayan heroes."[71]

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[65] Even in her days as a relatively anonymous writer, she was frequently censored. Her apartment was bugged, and she was once even charged with a felony for criticizing then-General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. While official censorship is not the brute tool it once was, meanwhile, Petrushevskaya argues that *samosokhranenie* (self-preservation) still rules local instincts, enacting censorship at an individual as well as state level. Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and Irina Shcherbakova, "Ia pisala o sud'be sovetskoi zhenshchiny," L'Officiel Russia 03 June 2018.

[66] Viv Groskop, "Russia's Last Writer," Financial Times 14 January 2011.

[67] Alina Sabitova, Khudozhestvennaia spetsifika voploshcheniia zhenskikh obrazov v raskazakh L. Petrushevskoi (Dissertation) Kazan, 2006: 8.

[68] Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and Liza Birger, "Mne vse vremiia vsoi i chuzhie liudi rasskazyvali svoi istorii," Glavnaia Stranitsa Vedomosti 24 May 2018.

[69] Helena Goscilo, "Women's Space and Women's Place in Contemporary Russian Fiction," in Rosalind Marsh ed. Gender and Russian Literature: New Perspectives (Cambridge UP, 2011) 338.

[70] D.K. Rukova, "'Geroi zdorovie' i 'geroi nezdorovie' v proze L.S. Petrushevskoi" Vestnik TGU 4.48 (2007): 88.

[71] Lebedushkina quoted in Ibid. 87.

Considerable attention has been paid to the ways in which the combined psychic and physiological sickness that permeates Petrushevskaya's stories are utilized to obliterate, not just interrogate, sites of authority outside literature's grasp. Petrushevskaia "persistently interweaves themes of memory and identity" alongside her destabilization of narrative forms and generic conventions.[72] Presenting such uncompromising depictions of the tension and uncertainty of post-Soviet life, Rykova asserts, means that "Petrushevskaia acts as a competent diagnostician of the problems of our time."[73] But is her role circumscribed to identification and elucidation? Some readers have taken up the "spiritual cripples" whom she often makes central protagonists and used their faults to declare that "all positive feelings — love, trust, pity, desire to help — Petrushevskaya considers an illusion."[74] Even Sally Dalton-Brown — whose analysis greatly informs my work — characterizes her oeuvre as more descriptive than radical, depicting a "crisis of truth in Russia" whereby "texts… ultimately, must strangle themselves into silence."[75]

In my own analysis of Petrushevskaya, I ask whether the void at the center of her works can be conflated with nothingness. Is hinting at a verity that cannot be grasped the same as asserting that this truth does not exist? Do Petrushevskaya's mad narratives go beyond breakdowns, and offer more for readers than dire warnings? I approach her continuous engagement with despair and insanity not as a litany of suffering but a potential instigator for radical re-conceptions of subjecthood, whereby truth is declared rather than discovered.

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[72] Adele Marie Barker, "The persistence of memory: women's prose since the sixties," in Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith, A History of Women's Writing in Russia (Cambridge University Press, 2002) 292.

[73] Rykova 87-8.

[74] Anonymous "Analiziruia tvorchestvo Liudmily Petrushevskoi": www.allsoch.ru/sochineniya/13599.

[75] Sally Dalton-Brown, Voices from the Void: The Genres of Liudmila Petrushevskaia (Berghahn Books 2001) 8.

Anna Starobinets (1978-) was born forty years after Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, and entered a dramatically different world. During her childhood, Gorbachev began to initiate new policies under the general principles of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost'* (transparency) that loosened censorship and decentralized political and economic systems. She came of age during USSR's dissolution in 1991, after a failed coup attempt by Marxist-Leninist hardliners. During the chaotic period of explosive economic and social change that followed, Starobinets worked as a journalist and screenwriter. Her debut story collection *Perekhodnyi vozrast* (Transitional Age, 2005) then catapulted her to fame, containing stories that often feature deranged characters or toy with the possibility of a fantastical mad abyss.

"Mental illness and disorders," as Nora Fitzgerald writes, are certainly "a motif" for the woman often dubbed Russia's "Queen of Horror."[76] Her collection was greeted by American reviewers almost as testimonials. "She bores into irrational depths, embracing the points at which mental illness devours people," Alexandra Guzeva writes in her review of the translated work. "Starobinets poignantly reveal[s] the gradual disintegration of a personality, describing the grip of [disorders like] schizophrenia from within."[77] By contrast, those Russian scholars who have engaged with her work tend to evaluate it almost solely through the lens of fantasy. The designation of Starobinets as someone who works in "genre writing" has dogged her for the bulk of her career, despite her repeated rejection of the label.[78] It has also led to her works frequently being cast as self-explanatory horror.

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[76] Her stories have featured ailments as varied as hallucinations, delusions, and split personalities ("Agentstvo" or Agency 2005), crippling obsessive-compulsive disorder ("Pravila" or Rules, 2005), Gogolian neurotics and holy fools ("Yashina Vechnost" or Yasha's Eternity, 2005), and psychopathy on both and individual and culturally mandated scale ("Zhivye" or The Living, 2012 and "Parazit" or Parasite, 2014). Nora Fitzgerald, "The queen of horror," Russia Beyond the Headlines 26 April 2011.

[77] Alexandra Guzeva, "Describing schizophrenia from within," Russia Beyond the Headlines 12 May 2012: www.rbth.com/literature/2012/05/12/describing_schizophrenia_from_within_15625.html.

Valeriia Pustovaia is one of the few scholars who appreciate Starobinets' stylistic innovations. The writer stands apart from contemporaries in the so-called New Gothic movement[79] for her stories' "unique documentary quality." Pustovaia, however, asserts that this style indicates a "verbatim translation" of archaic schema back into modern literature.[80] She approaches Starobinets' notorious twist endings as "akin to the classical formulas of 'they were not expecting this';"[81] good for raising our hackles, but little else.

Enforcing such absolute separation between the archaic and the alien is to do a disservice to Starobinets' insistent focus on in-between states, and her use of genre play to undermine notions of an absolute reality.[82] Alongside Starobinets' frequent engagement with fairy tales and folklore, she also employs neo-realism, the absurd grotesque, and social satire, often combining many of them in a single story. While most eventually point to a definitive interpretation of what's happened in the tale, the key to situating the reader comes at the very end, and seemingly without prior indications to serve as narrative anchors. This reveal, moreover, is unable to follow erase the implications of the other interpretive lens that have been stacked up throughout the story, often with the aid of intertextual references that helpful point in opposite directions.

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[78] In one interview, Starobinets responded to the constantly repeated question "Why fantasy?" by stating: "first of all, let's start with the fact that [my work] is not completely fantasy. There are writers whom it would never cross our minds to classify as fantasy authors — Bulgakov, for example, or Gogol." Anna Starobinets and Svetlana Reiter, "Anna Starobinets: Pishut, chto dali premiiu za to, chto Rossiiu nenavizhu," BBC 26 July 2018: www.bbc.com/russian/features-44964400.

[79] Noting the prevalence of vampires, werewolves, and other monsters haunting the pages of twenty-first century Russian novels, Olga Lebedushkina places Starobinets' quasi-monstrous humans as part of "Our New Gothic," a tradition following in the footsteps of Vladimir Sorokin (1955-) and Victor Pelevin (1962-). "Today, the time has come for those who have been avoiding and shunning lowbrow culture to succumb to temptation," to engage with shock value and return to sentimental horror. Olga Lebedushkina, "Our New Gothic: The Miracles and Horrors of Contemporary Prose," Russian Studies in Literature 46.4 (Fall 2010): 84.

[80] Valeriia Pustovaia, "The Imp and Piety: Contemporary Prose Between Folktale and Myth," Russian Studies in Literature 46.4 (2010): 66.

[81] Ibid. 68.

[82] Giuliana Garzone argues that genre diversifications and recombinations don't just reflect new ways of thinking; they actually "bring about changes in the way we understand the world and ourselves." Giuliana Garzone and Cornelia Ilie, Genres and Genre Theory in Transition (BrownWalker Press, 2014) 7.

Starobinets returns so frequently to children in her stories because, in at least two senses, they are borderlines. They exist "on the border of two worlds — the real world (in our understanding) and the magical," and are themselves "a borderline, incomplete, inconclusive being," primed for a potentially monstrous metamorphosis.[83] The knifes-edge between miracle and madness proves endlessly fascinating for her, while the forks in the interpretative road she paves means that "naturally, there is no single answer."[84] In analyzing Starobinets, I explore the implications of this merciless manipulation of reader expectations. In what ways might the simultaneous hybridity of her generic boundaries and the monstrous figures that occupy her texts force reader awareness beyond revulsion?

These questions represent my initial divergences from previous research. They were driven by a commitment to turning trauma readings into truth interrogations, coalescing around the central themes of authority and authenticity within mad fiction specifically. All four women weave complicated systems of truth possession, expression, and support in their works. It is obvious that this is a weighty subject for them, one to which the narratives return again and again; but it is equally obvious that the authority to declare truth and validate it is not easily given, and may be impossible. As the above passages have hinted, meanwhile, an inescapable thread across all four oeuvres is the conscious and deliberate construction of intertextual weaving, generic play, or meta-literary framing as a way to interrogate systems of knowledge via traditional sites of authority. In a world that is both literarily post-modern and (in any ultimate, unified sense) post-truth, how do these women explore the potentials and risks of constructing narrative authority for mad voices *literarily*? And how might their novel constructions of literary authority result in new paths for authenticity not possible outside of engaging with mad narratives?

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[83] Anna Starobinets and Elizabeth Klein, "Anna Starobinets," The Morning News July 30 2012.

[84] Anna Starobinets and Aleksandr Podolsky, "Anna Starobinets: Mezhdu sumasshestviem i chudom vybiraiu chudo," Darker 6 October 2011: darkermagazine.ru/page/anna-starobinec-mezhdu-sumasshestviem-i-chudom-vybiraju-chudo.

## Mad Literature's Engagement with Truth: French and Russian Contexts

In some ways, the construction of literary authority through mad narrative — and the subsequent exploration of authenticity within its forms — builds on French and Russian traditions that stretch back centuries, and were often in dialogue with one another. French literature's medieval roots placed the madman *hors du sens* — literally, "outside of sense." This exteriority was conveyed through "a severely impaired linguistic faculty," and marked distance both from his true identity and its construction through social context.[85] This perspective was then modified by later theorists' assumption of an essential link between *le rêveur* (the dreamer) and *le fou* (the madman), leading both scientists and writers to try to produce a mad state "while leaving consciousness intact, and thus [enabling] the states to be observed, as they unfold, from the inside."[86] Such attempts to penetrate and domesticate madness coincided with the historical "feminization of the asylum," and a definitive shift to madness being viewed a "'female malady,' prevalent among females and femin*izing* in men."[87]

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[85] Sylvia Huot, Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost (Oxford UP 2003) 1-2.

[86] Tony James, Dreams, Creativity, and Madness in Nineteenth-Century France (Clarendon Press 1995).

[87] Cheallaigh 77.

As France's empire expanded in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, literature increasingly depicted its colonies — and at times, its Eurasian neighbor Russia — as spaces of "savage violence," "lurid sexuality," and a more consuming form of insanity. Many authors began locating the "source of madness" in an explicitly gynocentric and Oriental "empire of unreason," a dream-world that provided "a blank slate for the inscription of the [male] European will" while forever eluding their full grasp.[88]

The Twentieth Century produced seismic shifts in French conceptions of mental illness, psychiatry, and their respective relationships to politics, culture, and philosophy. In the bloody aftermath of the World Wars, Martinican intellectuals began placing the origins of their countrymen's mental illness in a radically different light than their French predecessors. Rather than claiming insanity as something innate to an essential Other, they argued that symptoms like psychosis were a direct consequence of the traumas of colonial rule, and the later abrupt transition to statehood.[89] This argument was championed by the psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), who accused France of trapping the colonized "in an inescapable language of inferiority and immutability."[90] It was the colonizer's civilization that was "sick," and it was infecting the colonized with its twisted logic.

As colonies began to secure their freedom in the late 1950s through the 1970s, then, conversations around mental illness became increasingly based on a "Foucauldian premise": insanity's definition was understood to be "culturally constructed, a discursive formation in which a group, usually a dominant group, designates deviations from its supposed norms as 'mad'."[91] While some thinkers positioned disorder as the effect of oppression, others attempted to reclaim madness as a primal, generative force. Essayist and poet Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) worked precisely to cultivate "a ritualized performance of madness, intoxication, and phoenicism," emphasizing the potentially salutary aspects of dis-orientation, dis-location, and so dis-alienation from one's mind.[92] The philosopher Édouard Glissant (1928-2011), although critical of Césaire, also argued that mad characters had access to truths unavailable to those locked in homogenizing structures. "This emancipatory madness," as Keith Walker puts it, "evolves into *ex*propriative gestures that deconstruct, decenter, destabilize, renew, and expand the embrace of language, culture, ideology, and discourse so that they yield to the expression of the colonized person's worth, genius, and worldview."[93]

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[88] Richard C. Keller, Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa (The University Of Chicago Press, 2007) 1-3.

[89] Richard Keller, "Madness and Colonization: Psychiatry in the British and French Empires, 1800-1962," Journal of Social History 35.2 (Winter 2001): 312.

[90] As quoted in Keller Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa 3-4.

These approaches to the intersection of psychiatry and colonization had profound effects on the post-colonial literature in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. This was especially true for women of color, who emerged as a significant literary force as early as the 1970s. Valérie Orlando has traced "these nervous depressions and physical sufferings," in which women cross the outside realms of what is considered "normal" by their respective societies," across Africa (Algeria, Cameroon, Morocco and Senegal) and the broader West Indies (Guadeloupe, Haiti, and Martinique).[94] On island nations like Martinique and Guadeloupe, especially, which remain part of "overseas France," a literary trend emerged focusing intently on the figure of the madwoman. *La folie Antillaise* expresses both a broadly social and deeply personal torment, where the psychic break experienced by the story's protagonists is echoed in the ravages inflicted on their homeland. This became "a recurrent motif in the literature of the French Antilles."[95] More broadly, Francophone women's writing was often cast as "unwinding a discourse that aims to produce speech and a position confronting Official History."[96]

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[91] John Thieme, "Becoming a Madman, Becoming a Madwoman: Ex-Centricity in Caribbean Writing," in Annalisa Pes and Susanna Zinato, Ex-centric Writing: Essays on Madness in Postcolonial Fiction (Cambridge UP, 2013) 95.

[92] Keith Louis Walker, Countermodernism and Francophone Literary Culture: The Game of Slipknot (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) 183.

[93] Ibid.184.

[94] Valérie Orlando, Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls:Seeking Subjecthood Through Madness in Francophone Women's Writing of Africa and the Caribbean (Lexington Books, 2003) x.

While the French imperial project initially cast mental illness in gendered and racial terms that placed it tantalizingly on the edge of its borders, Russian conceptions of madness originated, and largely remained, in masculine, religious, and localized contexts.[97] This was particularly true with regard to the Russian author, who both assumed a holy task and could easily be seduced into a demonic abyss.[98] After Russia's war with France in 1812, and the growth of the Slavophile movement throughout the Nineteenth Century, this spiritual approach to mad literary production became influenced by secular skepticism regarding Western influence on society.[99]

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[95] Léticée 144.

[96] M. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, "Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle de Simone Schwartz-Bart: Mémoire du temps et prise de parole," in Ginette Adamson and Eunice Myers eds. Continental, Latin-American, and Francophone Women Writers: Volume II (University Press of America, 1990) 155.

[97] The Orthodox tradition prominently featured mad men (and, in rare cases, women) raving or speaking in riddles; homeless, half-naked, and filthy; and deliberately disrupting civilized life. These were not cursed men but holy Fools for Christ. The question of whether they were "truly" mad or merely feigning insanity to criticize the state became an increasingly important religious and civic debate; regardless, they were often considered prophets and, on occasion, candidates for sainthood. While the Western madman could reveal truths, particularly in the Renaissance period, he often did so as a clowning figure: the Russian fool, in contrast, "alien" to secular art and society, was always deadly serious even in seeming absurdity. His laughter signified nothing less than "the laughter of the world which is horrified by its own reflection in the mirror." Sergey Ivanov and Simon Franklin, Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond (Oxford UP 2006) 5.

[98] The religious and outright supernatural connotations of mental illness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were intimately connected to Russian writers' deep ambivalence regarding the nature of literary language and the possibility of its carrying or transmitting truth. On the one hand, literature had become almost sacral by the nineteenth century, with writers often regarding"the re-creation of moral and religious values" through narrative as their primary mission. At the same time, many writers feared that literary creation threatened to place themselves alongside God, and that the hubris spun from their webs of fiction might "somehow possess the artist and obstruct the pursuit of higher goals." Pamela Davidson, Russian Literature and Its Demons (New York: Berghahn Books 2010) 144, 125.

As World Wars and the after-effects of decolonization were being processed by French and Francophone writers, meanwhile, the Bolshevik Revolution upended the Russian Empire and made it the USSR.[100] The Great Terror and massive crackdowns against perceived or actual dissident writers from the 1930s onwards changed the literary landscape considerably. The New Soviet Man — "strong-willed, optimistic, and collectively inclined"[101] — emerged as a product of Soviet Realism, an overtly ideological approach to literary production. It drew upon a binary opposition of *stikhiinost'* (spontaneity) and *soznatel'nost'* (consciousness), which formed the basis of "all the most obsessive dilemmas" of government-approved works.[102]

Those psychiatrists who embraced the Revolution, meanwhile, saw the Soviet system as a way to eliminate social deviance completely, starting with literary dissidents. "In a well-designed or 'healthy' society," after all, "psychiatry would not be needed," as mental illness would no longer exist.[103] The concept of the 'norm' had completely reversed, and madness as a result became even harder to identify or separate.[104] Some writers embraced the insane label bestowed on them as a form of State silencing. "We weren't at all afraid to be called psychos," recalled activist Vladimir Bukovsky (1942-2019):

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[99] Mental illness in Russian literature, when not taking the form of a folkloric fool, often looked like a young man who had read too many Western books, and who was now bed-ridden with a brain fever after losing all sense of moral duty and communal connection. Dmitri Merezhkovskii, "Gogol and the Devil," in Robert A. Maguire, Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays (Princeton UP 1976) 57.

[100] Until that event, Symbolist and Decadent poetry and prose at the turn of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century had been increasingly playing with demonism: not in a literal or foreign sense, but as the essential risk that fiction could trap author and reader in solipsism. Writers took joy in playing with "the very notion of writing as inherently ambiguous or indecipherable, infected by the demonic reality which it [sought] to express." Graham Roberts, The Last Soviet Avant-Garde: OBERIU - Fact, Fiction, Metafiction (Cambridge UP, 1997) 12.

[101] Angela Brintlinger, "Introduction," in Brintlinger and Vinitsky 12.

[102] Not that there wasn't considerable slippage that writers could undertake when choosing which side of the binary with which to ally. On the one hand, *stikhiinost'* could imply something wild, ignorant, and potentially willful and out of control, while *soznatel'nost'* suggested enlightening and culturing this wretched mass. On other hand, *stikhiinost'* could also stand in for the effortless and natural, in contrast to *soznatel'nost'* as a symbol of contrived artifice. Katerina Clark, The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000) 21-3.

[103] Irina Sirotkina as quoted in Brintlinger "Introduction" 12.

> On the contrary, we were glad of it. Let these fools consider us psychos — or rather the other way around, let these psychos consider us fools… We laughed our heads off at the doctors and ourselves."[105]

Writers' legacies during and after the Soviet Union were often retroactively separated out into those who fell into the system's "sickness," those who resisted it, and those who, as Nadezhda Mandelstam would claim, allowed a collective madness to speak through them.[106] Still, it was only following the collapse of the Soviet Union that many Russians "began to talk about mental illness" and its cultural contexts openly and in earnest, stemming from "the more general reassessment and reconsideration of Russian and Soviet history made possible in the post-Soviet period."[107] N. Leiderman and Mikhail Lipovetsky cast contemporary writers' fixation with the breakdown of all truth after the collapse of Tsarist-Soviet authority as "a dead end of a dull crisis": relativism without limit, and deceit without counterpoint.[108] Yet the period also helped uplift more diverse voices within Russian literature. Under *glasnost'* (transparency), a period of lessening censorship in the late Twentieth Century, "an explosion of women's writing in Russia,

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[104] Ibid. 4.

[105] Bukovsky s quoted in Rebecca Reich, State of Madness: Psychiatry, Literature, and Dissent After Stalin (Northern Illinois University Press, 2017) 567.

[106] J.M. Coetzee, "Osip Mandelstam and the Stalin Ode," Representations 35 Special Issue: Monumental Histories (Summer 1991): 106.

[107] Brintlinger "Introduction" 3-4.

[108] N. Leiderman and M. Lipovetsky, "Zhizn' Posle Smerti, ili Novye Svedeniia o Realizme," Zhurnal'nyi Zal: Gorkii 1993: www.nm1925.ru/Archive/Journal6_1993_7/Content/Publication6_6074/Default.aspx.

Central and Eastern Europe greater than in any other cultural period" occurred. Their writings were incredibly diverse: nonetheless, both those who proclaimed themselves "New Amazons" dedicated to female liberation and those who firmly rejected all association with Western feminisms were quickly lumped together under the ambivalent category of *novaia zheskaia proza* (New Women's Prose).[109] Responses to the explosion of texts was mixed: often, writers were castigated for breaking taboos surrounding literary depictions of female sexuality and bodies, even as their works were conflated.[110] Still, their fictions served as crucial means through which women could communicate their own hopes and anxieties regarding the chaos surrounding them.

When Linda Lê, Gisèle Pineau, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, and Anna Starobinets began their own interrogations of authority and authority at the end of the Twentieth and start of the Twenty-First Century, they were thus able to draw on a massive folio of diverse perspectives on the relationship between madness, literature, and truth, within and across the Francophone and Russophone context. They needed, however, to engage with them in new ways, entering as they were into an even more globally enmeshed and philosophically fraught world than their literary predecessors.

Readers can no longer imagine Literature as transcendent, nor conceive of Madness as an independent force to be channeled or translated. The fundamental questions mad narratives evoke — What does understanding mean? Can one comprehend something without grasping it or confining to ourselves?[111] — remain, but must be repurposed. Their literature confirms Lorna Weir's assertion that "the truth regime of advanced modernity is characterized by multiple, irreducible truth formulae that co-exist and sometimes vie for dominance," resulting in contemporary configurations of "radically heterogeneous truthful knowledges — science, governance, religion/politics, and common culture — that have distinct histories and relations to power."[112] All four authors employ forms of literary authority — intertextual references, generic hybridity, meta-literary framing — to undermine extraliterary sites of authority. None of them, however, permit literature to occupy its own truth-site. Its power comes from destabilizing, not replacing, the truth regimes in play. Neither is their work is (solely) personal — it is *productive,* in a way that neither subordinates literature to an outside discourse nor adheres to former models of its transcendence. All four women resist conflating mad literature with any sense of an ultimate, transcendent truth; nonetheless, the dismantling of these extraliterary authorities does open up new paths in their writings for *immanent* truths to be heard.

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[109] Rosalind J. Marsh, "Introduction," in Marsh ed. New Women's Writing in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe: Gender, Generation and Identities (Cambridge Scholars 2012) 2.

[110] To this day, the term *pisatel'nitsa* (authoress) functions an insult: within Russian literary circles, it signifies "at worst an oxymoron and at best an unwitting sign of creative inferiority." Helena Goscilo, "Mother as Mothra: Totalizing Narrative and Nurture in Petrushevskaia," in Sonia Stephan Hoisington ed. A Plot of Her Own: The Female Protagonist in Russian Literature (Northwestern UP, 1995) 102.

## Dissertation Structure and Chapter Overviews

My first two chapters analyze how literary authority is employed to destabilize extraliterary sites, before itself is either undermined or dethroned by the authors. This initial analysis is organized by national tradition. In Chapter One, I trace how Linda Lê's *Calomnies* (Slander, 1993) and Gisèle Pineau's *Chair Piment* (Chili-Skin, 2002) present sites of authority on madness (and by extension trustworthiness and validity) through competing epistemological frameworks: the biomedical, the socio-cultural, and the spiritual. Both women ensure that none of these often-clashing authorities can subsume the others, nor be completely eliminated as an avenue for understanding. Yet this precarious balance is achieved by anchoring extraliterary sites in fictional precedents, and underlining their discourses' historic interweaving with literary production. Readers are unable to dismiss this literary infestation or submit to its authority, as Lê and Pineau then exploit the ambiguity of auto-fictional play to drop readers amid a narrative labyrinth of potential fact, potential fiction. I argue that Lê's ultimate goal in destabilizing authority through literature is informed by her status as a defiant (non)patient who resists narrative closure, while Pineau's experience as a nurse informs her desire to resist narrative univocality.

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[111] Felman 56.

[112] Weir 367.

Chapter Two turns to Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's *Vremia Noch': povest'* (Night Time: A Tale, 1992) and Anna Starobinets' *Perekhodnyi Vozrast* (Transitional Age, 2005). Within the French auto-novels, madness is never fully dismissed and never fully endorsed, acting instead as a mutating but never containable mode of (mis)apprehension. Petrushevskaya's and Starobinets' novellas don't challenge madness's presence in their narratives so much as they question what form it takes: what might have caused it, what it might produce, and how best to characterize it. On the opposite end, sites of authority are no longer rooted in epistemic approaches but through explicitly literary hermeneutic lenses. Centuries of rigid censorship have turned literature into a safer (and so essentially the main) avenue for radical extraliterary conjecture, be it debates over scientific advances, the assertion of new spiritual philosophies, or analysis of socio-cultural upheaval. Rather than literary experimentation keeping epistemological systems in perpetual suspension, these novellas hollow out the possibility of any current lens to help us codify and comprehend. While this appears to coincide with other Russian postmodernist approaches that deprive literature of the capacity for truth once robbed of authority, I argue that both women are united in their refusal to leave readers as trapped as their characters in a hermeneutic abyss.

My third and fourth chapters turn from how these mad narratives destabilize authority to whether they offer paths for readers to pursue authenticity. Put another way, we are shifting focus from madness in relation to knowledge and interpretation to a potential relationship with truth, one which avoids the pitfalls of either epistemic allegiance or hermeneutic seduction precisely through mad-dening our approach. To explore that possibility, I put my authors into new conversations, alongside theorists whose national backgrounds are less important than their unorthodox understandings of truth.

Chapter Three examines how Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and Gisèle Pineau search for hope and healing in the face of the maddened knowledges they have brought to the surface. I bring Petrushevskaya into conversation with French philosopher Alain Badiou; I then bring Pineau into conversation with Russian philosopher Lev Shestov to show that they seek to use mad literature help uncover truths that are both wholly individual and only accessed when individuality, as such, is made obsolete.[113] At the turn of the Twenty-First Century, interest in these thinkers sharply increased;[114] readers were drawn to their unwavering commitment to truth, and in their conviction that there are *unique* truths that only art, and in particular literature, can offer. In some ways, the two philosophers seem diametrically opposed.[115] Yet both see philosophy's traditional approaches to the truth as too preoccupied with knowledge — systems of discernment, classification, and containable representation — which can only operate in limited situations and according to existing orders of belief. Using Badiou's theory of the void to re-interpret Petrushevskaya's *Night Time* alongside her short story "V dome kto-to est'" (There's someone in the house, 1991) and interviews with the author, I suggest that Petrushevskaya shares Badiou's understanding of truth an an axiomatic intervention, and literature's specific role in helping to declare truths-to-come without conceptualizing them. I then position Pineau's *Chili-Skin* alongside earlier novel *L'espérance-macadam* (Macadam Dreams, 1996) and her recent interviews to consider how her oeuvre embodies Shestov's crusade against necessity, demanding a radical understanding of faith that relies on the constant awareness and re-invigoration of singularity and contingency.

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[113] While these authors and philosophers were brought into conversation solely for the resonances each bring out in the other, it is not the first time that Badiou and Shestov have influenced, and been influenced by, Russian and French cultures respectively. Badiou has long been an admirer of Russian literature. He argues that it was only through mixed-source works like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago that "the regime of blind certitudes," which had withstood data-driven attacks by activists, could be "completely shaken" (Badiou Poets x). For all that Lev Shestov's name fell from favor before his return to prominence in the early twenty-first century, meanwhile, he left a considerable mark on his French contemporaries ,who both read his work and engaged with the thinker directly in his lifetime. These include Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Albert Camus (1913-1960), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), as well as Lithuanian émigré and ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Their collective championing of individual freedom, "the emergence of the particular from the general," and their rejection of traditional epistemology and ontology, were bound to and cultivated alongside Shestov's own legacy as an attack-dog on "the entire Western metaphysical tradition." James McLachlan, "The Il y a and the Ungrund: Levinas and the Russian Existentialists Berdyaev and Shestov," Levinas Studies 11.1 (2016): 214-5.

Chapter Four places Linda Lê and Anna Starobinets into triangular points of comparison with French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. I first examine the two authors in conversation with Deleuze's emphasis on ontological instability, and how the search for representation (in Lê's case) or meaning (in Starobinets' work) is not just frustrated but ultimately beside the point of their literary endeavors. I then bring Linda Lê and Anna Starobinets, into conversation with both Deleuze and a third literary influence — the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva for Lê, and the German writer Franz Kafka for Starobinets. For this analysis, I supplement Lê's *Slander* with *Voix: Une Crise* (Voice(s): A Crisis, 1998) and her foreword to *Marina Tsvétaïéva: Comment ça va la vie?* (Marina Tsvetaeva: How Goes Life?, 2002), and analyze Starobinets' *Transitional Age* alongside short story "Agentstvo" (Agency, 2005) and interviews discussing her writing process. I employ this rhizomatic model of analysis to argue that both Lê and Starobinets enact forms of becoming-other in their literature, aimed at the potential creation of adequate rather than the discovery of transcendent truths.

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[114] This uptick in both public and academic interest in the two philosophers has been noted in the introduction to a belated translation of Badiou's magnum opus, L'être et l'événement (Being and Event, orig. 1988, trans. 2005) and in recent critical reviews of Shestov's work, including Taras D. Zakydalsky's "Lev Shestov and the Revival of Religious Thought in Russia," in James P. Scanlan, Russian Thought After Communism (M.E. Sharpe, 1994).

[115] Peter Hallward argues that "No one, perhaps, has taken the death of God as seriously as Badiou." His writings are driven by the necessity "to eliminate any notion of an originally divine or creative presence… and with it, to abolish any original intuition of Life or Power." Shestov, by contrast, argues that "philosophy should not have anything in common with logic… Philosophy is an art, striving to break through the logical chain of inferences and leading a person to the boundless sea of fantasy, the fantastic, where everything is equally possible and impossible."
Peter Hallward, Badiou: A Subject to Truth (University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 7 and Lev Shestov, Apofeoz bespochvennosti: opyt dogmaticheskogo myshleniia (Zakharov, 2000) 59.

# CHAPTER 1

## Illegitimate, Undefined: Epistemic Destabilization and Auto-Fictional Interweaving in Contemporary French Literature

> You feel yourself taken in by the book. It will not let you go
> until after you have given your mind away.
> — Linda Lê[116]

> [Writing] is for me at once a necessity and a battle, an engagement.
> It is through it that I construct my self…
> — Gisèle Pineau[117]

Epistemological authorities jostle for the right to define sanity, and by extension trustworthiness and reliability, within Linda Lê's autofictional text *Calomnies* (Slander, 1993) and Gisèle Pineau's autobiographical novel *Chair Piment* (Chili-Skin, 2002). None of the discourses these works interrogate — the biomedical, the sociological, or the spiritual — succeed in subsuming the others; yet neither can any be eliminated as the potential key to understanding characters' maladies. What keeps them in tenuous balance, both dethroned and unable to be dismissed, are methods of literary authority. Fictional allusions anchor characters' assertions regarding which supposedly extraliterary discourse to follow. Adherence to particular movements then direct reader expectations in the direction of one authority or another. As a result, readers' understanding of whether someone is mad, whether to listen to them, and whether to extrapolate new realities based on their words is determined by literary expectation and precedent.

Fiction's role in determining the scope of medical, sociological, and religious authorities could easily be dismissed as a form of literary play. Linda Lê and Gisèle Pineau circumvent this dismissal, however, through the relentless blurring of auto-fictional boundaries, forcing readers to follow literature's dictates through the persistent desire to determine what is "true" or "false." Linda Lê exploits this splintering of boundaries as a tactic of continual hermeneutic evasion. Gisèle Pineau instead overflows readers, flooding us with multiplying potential realities. Despite their differing aims, both women succeed in destabilizing claims to ultimate knowledge, ultimately calling on us to reject authority in all its forms.

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[116] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 20.

[117] Gisèle Pineau and Christine Avignon, "L'écriture est un combat," Africultures 23 May 2007: http://africultures.com/lecriture-est-un-combat-5946/

### Linda Lê: "A Contradiction in Terms"

*Slander* marked a turning-point for Lê. Its publication came shortly after her decision to omit three of her first four works from her bibliography, dismissing them as too beholden to the French language. It was only with the publication of her fourth book, *Les Evangiles du crime* (The Gospels of Crime, 1992) that Lê discovered her voice, and only with *Slander* that she established herself as "one of the most provocative, daring, and fearless writers working in France today."[118] Like almost all of the twenty-three works to come, it is a traumatic history of isolation, betrayal, and despair, navigating the twin forces of madness and death.

*Slander* is told through the alternating accounts of an unnamed uncle and niece, whose correspondences are never received and yet build on each other. The Niece writes the Uncle because her worldview has been shattered. Her mother has revealed that her father was not the meek parent abandoned in Vietnam, but a high-ranking American officer. Only the Uncle supposedly knows the true story of their affair. He, however, was institutionalized a decade earlier after committing incest with their third sibling, a crime which ended in the Aunt's suicide. The Niece has written the Uncle begging him to both unearth her origins and help her flee their implications. She fears she is going mad, and cannot escape the noxious influence of both former lovers and current male companions. The Uncle grudgingly recognizes her as a peer, but her intrusion upsets the delicate balance he has achieved between freedom from their family's depravity and descent into abyssal insanity. He decides to self-immolate surrounded by the books that have been his companions since his release. He sends his notebooks to the Niece, who has been reflecting on the madman's status within the family. When she receives his writings, she chooses not to read them. Instead, she hands them to her friend Ricin, who had urged her to write the Uncle in the first place. The book ends as she walks off, driven only by the thought *je m'en vais* — I'm going.

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[118] Barnes 165.

The twin narratives of Uncle and Niece exist in isolation. Readers are given only their claustrophobic perspectives as guides. It is clear that the Niece views the Uncle as a source of desperately needed knowledge, and that his status as a madman bestows him with paradoxical authority. But what is the nature of this authority? From whence comes this knowledge, and to what ends should it be employed? In addressing these questions, Lê blurs the boundaries between the objective gloss of medicine and the fluid relativity of culture. She then forces these awkward bedfellows to share space with a spiritual framework whose foundations run counter to both. Yet *Slander* does more than simply present competing discourses. The tethers that secure each point are anchored in literary allusions. These references simultaneously support a given perspective through evocation and undermine its surety by linking it to fiction. In this way, any authority on madness, and by extension our trust in a mad guide, is incapable of being fully dismissed and is implied to be unsustainable as a transcendent source of knowledge.

Although she is driven by the search for her parentage, the Niece also writes for fear she's losing her mind. She has some grounds for this worry. The family chronology is bleak: every generation, at least one member is sacrificed to insanity. This grim tradition began with the literal chaining of an ancestor to a cage in the bedroom. By the time she reaches out, the Niece is spiraling. She is racked with anxiety and doubt, becoming rapidly more paranoid about a man who may or may not be stalking her. She avoids the park, for fear that people can smell the congealing insanity on her skin. When she writes to demand "a new genealogy," she is not just asking which father to claim. She seeks, from one who has experienced its horrors, how to avoid the moment when "heredity pulls you off your feet," the ancestor returning to "trample the nerves of his descendants" (*Slander* 20, 25).

Neither party fully denies this genetic entrapment is at work. The madman's status as the authority on his own derangement, however, is a deeply fraught one. "To say 'I am mad,'" Shoshana Felman argues, "is already, logically, a contradiction in terms."[119] If the speaker is mad, then his pronouncements are nonsense. If he is saying something meaningful, he is — at least at the moment he says it — sane, and so cannot occupy the position to which he lays claim. "She is crazy," the Uncle repeats when his niece first asks him for guidance. "You have to be crazy to ask a madman to show you the way" (12). By the end of his writings, that dismissal has turned into a jealous protection of his unfortunate birthright. The Niece can have no comprehension of real madness, of "the horrors that have colored [his] days." She is nothing but a *petite prétentieuse* who seeks to exploit his suffering. "She says she wants to make something of her madness," he fumes. "In truth, she wants to make something of *my* madness. I will not let her dispossess me of it" (106, 107).

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[119] Felman 196.

This biomedical explanation, however, is undermined multiple times. No diagnosis is ever attached to either writer. No statement is given as to how the genetic trap might spring. Lê, meanwhile, has expressed exasperation when critics approach her works as straightforward chronicles of mental illness, or when they affix psychiatric labels to her or her characters.[120] The Niece is skeptical from the beginning that the Uncle is "truly" deranged, instead viewing his affair with his sister as a doomed romance. The Uncle, for his part, suggests the asylum system, not hereditary disease, is responsible for deranging its patients. Each inmate immediately has their head shaved and is garbed in nondescript rags. Deprived of stimulation, crammed into a morass of misery, they gradually lose all individuality and expression. "The madmen no longer had faces," he remembers. "They were eggshells on which someone had painted a grimace" (81). After months drowning in a sea of illegible moans and shrieks, the Uncle feared that he too would devolve into a permanent fixture of the institution. He felt compelled to accept a sentence against which he could not defend himself.[121] It is medicine's absorption of all mad narratives under its aegis that prompts the Uncle's initial contempt when he learns his niece is a writer. Her appropriation of his life will cause her to channel her talents like a druggist. She will become a "distiller of tranquilizers," a "maker of sedatives" (11). By casting her approach through pharmaceutical terms, he condemns her narrative as puppetry for medical control.

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[120] Barnes 196.

[121] This asylum owes much to Michel Foucault's depiction of mental institutions. Rather than a place of healing, Foucault casts the asylum as a courtroom of the preemptively condemned. Once labeled mad, sufferers endure an "indefinite trial" producing nothing but its "perpetual recommencement through the internalized form of remorse." Michel Foucault, Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique (Union Générale d'Éditions, 1963) 522.

Still, readers cannot dismiss the sense that an inescapable pathology lies at the heart of the Uncle's suffering, for all that a decade of detention may have affected it. His incestuous, quasi-pederastic love does not seem limited to his sister. The Niece's letter prompts him to sketch her nude and surrounded by slavering madmen. He recalls a moment in Vietnam when he began mechanically tearing the buttons off her dress while the little girl recited a story. After glimpsing an underage prostitute in his building, he becomes plagued by fantasies of ravaging and mutilating her young body, only barely restraining himself from doing so in reality.

The horror of these desires, and the silencing of the books that had offered him guidance and comfort, convince the Uncle to kill himself. The Niece's letter has "ruined [his] illusions" (148), laying bare the banal horror hidden under romantic posturing. As he prepares to die, however, the Uncle notes a peculiar taste under his tongue. It tastes "like a pastile of ink that spreads its bile — a liquid shredding my palate, insinuating itself between my teeth, descending into my viscera" (172). This likening of ink to poison calls another suicide to mind, one similarly prompted by reality's inability to match lofty scripts. When Madame Bovary kills herself with arsenic in Gustave Flaubert's 1856 novel, she is seized by a "frightful taste of ink;" she then shocks mourners at her funeral when a "flow of black liquid" bursts from her pallid corpse, spilling ink onto her "paper-white" body.[122] The Uncle's final assertion of biomedical surety, then, achieves its power by cribbing from canonical literature, specifically a meta-scene demonstrating literary mastery.[123] Its "evidence" is taken from the fictional story of a woman whose end comes from reading too many books.

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[122] Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary: moeurs de province (Livre de Poche, 2019) 188, 196.

Before *Slander* begins, however, the Niece has already rid herself of a terrible affliction. In her letter, she tells the Uncle she is "cured of the family": in rejecting their rapacious desires and servile attitudes, she has "expelled all the germs from her body," "scrubbed out her soul," and "purged her heart of bitter humors" (105). This evocative combination of discursive registers helps flip the biomedical script. At various points in their narratives, both Uncle and Niece claim that madness — or at least its guise — is not a burden but a protection. "I played the madman," the Uncle asserts, "so as not to go mad" (26). Irrationality acts as a talisman against their family's baseness. This social disease is expressed through a collective obsession with money and prestige. It is also explicitly channeled through nostalgia for the colonial hierarchy, a cringing devotion culminating in the affair between the Niece's mother and the American officer.[124] *Madamère*, whose nickname combines the filial "mother" with the formal "Madam," wholly subscribes to a romanticized view of French and American imperialism. As the Uncle muses, his sister would need to be blind, deaf, and dumb to ignore the carnage of her lover's bombing campaign in Vietnam, facts she blissfully ignores when recounting their time in expensive hotels. Madamère, in turn, directly links her mad brother with her abandoned husband as twin shames of the family. *L'homme au couteau* (the man with the knife) and *l'homme sans sou* (the man without money) are equally scandalous for what they reveal about the family's weaknesses: "the one lacked authority; the other lacked education" (23). Her conflation of knowledge and power results in mental illness and poverty being drawn along identical lines of rejection, uniting the fear of scandal and the desire for colonial force. Nor are her attitudes unusual in their cultural milieu. White inmates only called the Uncle slurs like "monkey face" during their "rare moments of lucidity." His endeavors to learn French reading and writing were met with hateful suspicion by the orderlies: his success "claimed to scramble the borders" (83). The divisions between sane and insane seem ruled by blatantly subjective, Euro-centric standards, which alternately punish or efface signs of cultural difference.

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[123] Flaubert's description of arsenic tasting and looking like ink is significant. Arsenic has no aftertaste, and would not produce the viscous liquid described. Mercury, however, can conjure the taste of ink, a fact Flaubert would know from his own medical treatments. In Madame Bovary, his cure becomes her poison, his pen the means by which she drowns in ink. Benjamin Bart and Janet Beizer have convincingly argued that a principal model for Emma Bovary was Louise Colet, a paramour of Flaubert's who became a rival writer and the source of much venom concerning her ability as a woman to produce quality literature. In Beizer's eyes, Emma's death is meant to contain Louise Colet as "completely Flaubert's creature, her body under his control," while the agony and post-mortem excess of Emma's consumption-expulsion of ink "hints at the instability and capacity for excess that this hermaphroditic liquid can produce." Madame Bovary's death, then, can be both conflated with the Uncle's suicide and a way of supporting his connection to the niece whose feminine pen he initially denigrates. Janet Beizer, Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France (Cornell UP, 1993) 84.

[124] Unlike the more open subjugation undertaken in Africa and the Caribbean, colonial tactics in French Indochina relied less on brute force than in the elevation of select native families to the rank of "cultural translator." These families helped further French control in the region in exchange for a modicum of wealth and power, and were cast as perverse traitors by communist insurgents. Karl Britto, Disorientation: France, Vietnam, and the Ambivalence of Interculturality (Hong Kong UP, 2004) 6-7.

Lê's family was itself largely made up of naturalized colonial sympathizers. She has often asserted that her education in French school while still in Saigon "alienated her from her native land long before she was physically exiled."[125] Parisian children's mocking of her as *une métèque* (a derogatory term similar to "half-breed") shaped her image of herself — first ashamedly, then triumphantly — as a monstrous figure, factors she acknowledges played into her own psychiatric institutionalization. Still, attempts to place Linda Lê within the Francophone tradition of the cultural trauma narrative have been met with well-documented disdain. Lê rejects the title of either French or Vietnamese author, but is equally dissatisfied with the labels

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[125] Lê as quoted in Barnes 25.

Francophone or Post-Colonial. "To be the child of no one, from no land," she asserts, "is for me the only attitude possible."[126]

Nonetheless, a moving story of escape from society's dictates does play out in the Uncle's past. Among the indifferent doctors and cruel orderlies is a medical professional called the Monk. He chooses to shave his own head, don rags, and wander among the patients as though he were one of them. It is he who encourages the Uncle's literacy, discusses literature with him, and sympathizes with his existential anxieties. A nested narrative even reveals that the Monk has experienced a breakdown, and that this experience revealed the paucity of his former life. He saw the arbitrariness of the rules that governed his world, and realized that he and his fellows were simply "glue eaters," numbing themselves into a living death.

This encounter, which has shaped the Uncle's whole psychic trajectory, makes for an immensely powerful tale. But it wasn't his own story first. The tale of the Monk and the Uncle is a loose but easily recognizable retelling of Anton Chekhov's short story "Palata Nomer Shest'" (Ward No. Six, 1892). Like Chekhov's Doctor Rabin, the Monk was once an apathetic practitioner, convinced that life was meaningless. His intellectual curiosity and capacity for empathy are re-awakened by the patient Gromov, who shares the Uncle's paranoia of persecution and vacillation between the idealistic and sardonic. As in Chekhov's story, the bond between doctor and patient erodes their differences and spurs widespread horror among the staff: the Monk is allegedly re-assigned for his health, while Doctor Rabin is committed as a fellow inmate for his transgressions. "Ward No. Six," a satire of Russian social medicine and its inability to differentiate between madness and genius,[127] is here repurposed into a salvation story in order to put French society on trial.

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[126] Lê as quoted in Kurmann 1.

The medical lens has not been fully eradicated by this socio-cultural perspective, even as the two jostle for supremacy. Their overlap produces dual visions of the Uncle, in his own and the Niece's eyes, that cannot easily co-exist: defiler-liberator, victim-martyr, carrier of genetic chains and breaker of social ones. These approaches to the Uncle's madness are further muddied for the reader with the introduction of the spiritual. Neither a medical problem child nor a cultural scapegoat, this positioning casts him in stark terms of salvation and damnation. Its approach is based on transcendent revelation rather than experimental knowledge or social mores.

Overt religious references and blatantly magical elements pop up at the halfway point of the novel, with a spiritual battle eventually dominating the Uncle's narrative. Religion as an alternate site of authority is first introduced via the Monk, through his association with Catholic tradition and a reading style that calls for us to be struck by phrases like holy visions. When he relocates to a halfway house, the Uncle is then drawn to sketches by German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) thanks to their religious undertones. A portrait of the artist, "the angel" who defends him "against death [and] against madness," hangs over his door like an icon, her benevolent gaze "half madwoman, half monk" (118). As his ascension is rooted in mystical terms, so too do they frame his descent. Tormented by the return of his perverted fantasies, the Uncle tears down the artist's portrait. Soon after, the young prostitute attempts to solicit him, and his guardian angel is replaced by a literal, external demon: a monster who tries to force him to become “the executors of its base works.” The Uncle wrests back control, exorcising the demon by plunging a pair of scissors into his thigh. Still, the creature’s words haunt his dreams, promising future temptation. “You were right not to play the savior,” it mocks. “There is no place for purity in this bedroom” (139). Sure enough, its corroding influence has marked him for good; the Uncle no longer experiences ecstasy when he reads, nor find communion among his books. His decision to burn — even as it is triggered by supposed biomedical determinism, and even as it reflects the accumulation of years of trauma — is explicitly chosen so that he “will become one with the books” (178), enacting a compelling inversion of the word made flesh.

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[127] Margarita Odesskaya, "'Let Them Go Crazy': Madness in the Works of Chekhov," in Brintlinger and Vinitsky 194.

Within *Slander,* spiritual authority is both the least openly challenged and the most in jeopardy of the three sites of authority. Its operation through “speechless and actionless seeing” is reliant on an unshakeable hierarchy of absolute truths, the kind of world order Hannah Arendt groups under the spiritually weighty terms of “testament” and tradition.”[128] Its methods of verification, antithetical to the sciences, ironically run somewhat in parallel to the trust readers must put in literature, a trust to be either embraced or abandoned. The Uncle seeks revelation through books; the Niece seeks deliverance through writing. A demon produces base *oeuvres* (works), against which lines from plays, novels, and poems grant blessed union. In her quasi-memoir *Le complexe de Caliban* (Caliban Complex, 2005), Lê herself both avoids reference to organized religion and pays frequent homage to an almost mythic awakenings and spiritual rebirths that authors chronicle in the production and reception of their text.

The most compelling evidence for the Uncle’s experience comes with the knowledge he is gifted through literary communion. His notebooks trace moments where he, “a castaway,” spots another hand above the waves and calls out in recognition. “I’m not from here,” he says in French, after which comes an English response: “I’m a stranger here myself.” His intimate connection to these books allow him to comprehend English, a language he has no way of knowing, and to cross that linguistic boundary to begin a metaphysical quest. “We turn our backs to the world,” he cries in ecstasy, and “we march in the same direction” (118). This exchange is a beautiful elision of the boundary between literature and religion. One is equally tempted to interpret his reading as an act of genuine worship, and to suppose that Lê has followed some French forebears in positioning Literature, itself, as transcendence. Yet the passage the Uncle draws on here is not from a religious tome, nor a philosophical treatise. The lines he records are lifted from a story collection by Ogden Nash (1902-1971). Following the absolute logic of religious belief, either the Uncle has infused even the most prosaic of vessels with holy writ, or the words to which he pledges his life are nothing but pithy musings from an American humorist.

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[128] Hannah Arendt argues that ever since Descartes rooted knowledge in the twin forces of doubt and experimentation, “the conceptual framework of that tradition [Christian religion] has not been secure.” Arendt 39.

Leslie Barnes has argued that Lê’s vision of literature is rooted in “a fundamental rejection of all authority.”[129] The authorities rejected here implicate not just an individual psyche but whole systems of epistemic inquiry, all of which in turn rely on a trustworthiness that madness’ presence in literature does its best to unsettle. As each perspective on the Uncle and his teachings battles for dominance, their inability to either eliminate or fully overlap with the others leaves readers similarly unable to fully endorse or dismiss any combination of them. Those passages that most stridently defend a particular discourse, meanwhile, draw on intra-literary authorities that simultaneously bolster and undermine those positions. The need to trace back to allusion to evaluate validity and reliability reverses the relationship between the non-fiction, external, and objective and their fictional, internal, subjective tools. Writerly analysis becomes the end-point, carrying readers through outside gateways to a truth balancing atop novelistic foundations.[130]

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[129] Barnes 213.

### Gisèle Pineau: "Never far, barely suppressed"

In *Slander,* Lê confines readers to the written narratives of a single uncle and niece, with those few characters that enter their world filtered through their interwoven voices. Pineau's *Chili-Skin*, by contrast, overwhelms readers with a plethora of divergent yet equally viable narrative perspectives. Alongside the three voices at the heart of the novel are numerous secondary characters, just as haunted, into whose minds the narrative dips for a few lines. On top of all this third-person narration is the erstwhile narrator, who in rare appearances is sometimes detached and omniscient and at others like another character in drama, gossipy and opinionated. Still, it is Mina, Victor, and Suzon who propel the narrative forward.

Mina's family has been plagued by tragedy. Back in the fictional Guadeloupean town of Piment, her father Melchior Montério was struck dead by lightning. Before that, he had lost two wives: his first, mother to Mina's half-sister Olga, drowns, while Médée, mother to Mina and older sister Rose, is run over by a car. Rose, mentally handicapped and shunned, dies in a house fire soon after Melchior's death, leading Mina to flee to Olga in Paris. Arriving there at age fourteen, Mina begins seeing Rose's ghost, and is struck by the insatiable desire to seduce her brother-in-law Douglas. After they consummate the relationship, Rose disappears — only to return two decades later as a mute, fire-wreathed shade. Reduced to "a maddened machine," Mina feels compelled to seduce strangers, only to see Rose's ghost at each moment of climax.

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[130] The further we dig, the more the ambiguities pile on. Reflecting on the division of inmates in the asylum, the Uncle lists some prominent groups: "half-wits," "loonies," "epileptics," the "demented," the "trepanned," and "geniuses who have wasted their calling" (9). The homogenous category of Madness has been divvied up, only to create more warring confusion. Dementia and epilepsy are verified neurological disorders, yet their presence here both calls attention to their awkward placing in an asylum and their previous history as supposed psychiatric conditions. Being a half-wit and a loony are such socially-charged, colloquial "diagnoses" that they encompass everything from mental handicaps to language barriers to mild eccentricities. The horror of trepanation conjures simultaneous images of misguided exorcisms and medical malpractice. Yet it is the final category, "geniuses who have wasted their calling," that most evokes opposing discourses only to pit them against each other. The dual meaning of *génie* — genie or genius — conjures the malign spirit that haunts René Descartes' un/mad dreamer in Méditation métaphysiques (Metaphysical Meditations, 1641), casting logic's foundations in the exercise of radical doubt. The first image, however, harkens to an incredibly rich French literary tradition linking creative genius to mental volatility, which by extension often positioned writers as the ultimate diagnostic experts.

Several chapters in, readers meet Victor, a suicidal Parisian implied to be one of Mina's former conquests. While institutionalized, fellow patient Bénédicte informs him that his sufferings are demonic, not medical in nature. She convinces him to go to Guadeloupe for an exorcism. After Mina and Victor reconnect, they travel to Piment for the start of the new millennium. Here a third central character is introduced: Suzon, a family friend sheltering a terrible secret. After Melchior seduced and then refused to marry her, Suzon sought out a *gadézafè* to curse the family for generations.[131] Mina's arrival prompts Suzon to confess amid a hallucinatory meltdown. This leads to a revelation by Mina's paternal grandmother that Melchior didn't marry Suzon because he discovered they were half-siblings. Victor, meanwhile, accesses his repressed memories through a different *gadézafè.* He then discovers that Mina's maternal grandfather wrote the poem Bénédicte told him would determine his cure. The novel ends with Victor and Mina climbing to Suzon's hut, hoping to forgive the old woman before she dies.

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[131] A *gadézafè* (alternately *gadè-zafè* or *gadézafé*) is a sorcerer within the Antillean *kenbwa* tradition. They can divine the future, cast spells, and create talismans. While they often act as a counter to black magic, in Chili-Skin they mainly direct curses rather than repelling them, and Monsieur Vérité is the only positive figure of the three depicted. Philippe Chanson,"Propagande affichée et concurrence résorbée au sein des champs religieux et culturels guadeloupéens contemporains," in Jean-François Zorn, Concurrences en mission: propagandes, conflits, coexistences, XVIe-XXIe siècle (Éditions Karthala, 2011) 312, 320.

The opening pages of *Chili-Skin* take readers deep into Mina's affliction. We follow her as her body inflames and hardens, as she is spurred by a gnawing emptiness and then horrified by the near-loss of bodily control she experiences. Her desire for invasion and violation presents as textbook nymphomania. Despite it never appearing in the novel, her condition is so associated with the term that scholars often use it as shorthand to describe her condition. If readers take up that interpretation, there is evidence for sexual dysfunction as a persistent malady among Montério women. Mina's great-grandmother Séléna's rapid degeneration into paranoid delusions was preceded by a sudden and obsessive love for her priest. Unknowing aunt Suzon is likewise obsessed with Melchior to the point of either obtaining him or destroying his entire family. When defending her actions, she specifically cites the damaging effects that a hyper-present but never-fulfilled sex drive can have on a young woman's psyche.

If Mina's condition evokes nymphomania, however, that choice is significant for its undermining of biomedical explanations, not its support for them. After decades as a psychiatric nurse, Pineau would know that this condition was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980, due to contentious debates surrounding its history and the subjectivity of its application. Its new title, "hypersexual disorder," was not approved for inclusion in the DSM-V or the IDC-10, the French administrative equivalent. If anything, nymphomania has come, like hysteria before it, to stand as proof of the cultural subjectivities on which psychiatric diagnoses rest, rather than proof of genetic predispositions.[132] The narrator, when catching readers up on Mina's misfortune, even remarks that she had gone two months without being gripped by “what she considered to be a madness” (*Chili-Skin* 19). Whether this consideration should be taken up, questioned, or outright rejected is left unclear.

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[132] Carol Groneman, "Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 19.2 (1994): 337, 358.

What does lend support for casting her condition as nymphomania comes not from Pineau the nurse, but Pineau the writer. When her fevers overtake her, Mina doesn’t mince words: she longs to have “ a man’s sex planted in her stomach like a knife” (147). Readers have actually been primed for this image long before she spells it out. The epigraph provides almost this exact quote, taken from Louis Calaferte’s erotic experimental piece *La mécanique des femmes* (The Way Women Work, 1992). It features a woman begging for “your sex like a knife / planted in my stomach.”[133] Those familiar with Calaferte’s scandalous publication will find its more notorious themes replicated within *Chili-Skin* at large: incest, sex between grown men and pubescent teens, and women depicted as sexual viragos. Far from Lê’s habit of leading readers down a wild goose chase for authoritative interpretations, only to discover foundations of fiction, Pineau clues readers in from the start that Mina’s condition is at least as literary as it is natural.

Victor appears to be a much more straightforward example of mental illness. He presents “the classic tableau of the melancholic on the edge of suicide” (106). His family tree is choked with disorders. His father hanged himself when he was a boy. His hypochondriac mother spent his childhood bedridden from depression. As an adult, he has spent his life in and out of mental institutions, and his doctors warn him he’s likely to do so forever. Even as they do so, however, Victor’s psychiatrists also scold him for believing their dire predictions. His problem, a group therapy organizer tells him, is that he is “only turned towards [himself], the hero of [his] story” (104); in other words, he is *thinking* himself sick, and doing so in a pointedly literary manner. Guadeloupeans, meeting him for the first time, almost universally disbelieve his case is serious. Victor himself is likewise unable to decide where he is *fou* (mad) or *malade* (sick), as well as where the distinction between the designations lies.

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[133] Louis Calaferte, La mécanique des femmes (Gallimard: 2017) 9.

What comforts him, as he stays at the fabled Charenton hospital, is that at least he is the latest in a distinguished list of patients. The asylum has hosted such notable inmates as the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), the artist Charles Méryon (1821-1869), and poets like Théodore Désorgues (1764-1808) and Paul Verlaine (1844-1896). Verlaine's conception of the poet as a man tortured by the weight of artistic genius is notable for how it foreshadows Victor's presentation to others. Despite no evident interest in literature, he has "the melancholy air of a poet from the nineteenth century, lost at the dawn of the third millennium" (109). It is only after he notes the writers who came before him, and Bénédicte instructs him to pursue a line of poetry as part of his quest for salvation, that Victor turns to the pen himself. After running into Mina, he sends her "a sort of poem" outlining his hopes, the act of writing taking him "out of fear" and "far from Paris" (230-1). Once again, Pineau has made the literary traditions to which she is indebted clear, linking French medicine to French writing: this time, however, literature appears as both a potential cause and a possible cure for Victor's many maladies.

If Mina's fevers are potentially pathological, they need not remain individual in nature. Their symptomology can easily be traced to the broader Caribbean tradition known as *la folie antillaise* (madness of the Antilles). Several scholars approach Pineau's "fixation with psychiatric disorders and behavioral disfunction" through precisely this lens.[134] This is not an individual disorder but a social affliction, one stemming from the "persisting, corrosive internalization of powerlessness and worthlessness" produced by past slavery and current de-colonization. It reduces whole communities to alienation and self-destructive fatalism.[135] Undercurrents of this kind of widespread trauma lurk just under the surface in *Chili-Skin*. Séléna's descent into insanity was preceded by decades of fighting to obtain and then hold on to her property, in spite of a white landowner who kept trying to cheat her. "Certain among" the immigrant residents of Paris's slums, the narrator tells us, "seemed pursued by malignant spirits of the same calibre as those after Mina" (22). Suzon's "calcified body… used for nothing" (297) ultimately acts as the inverse of Mina's own violated form, both tortured metaphors for their ravaged homeland.

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[134] Githire 85.

Pineau has frequently commented on legacies of anti-Blackness in the Francophone world. "The claw marks of slavery, the bite of the shackles, the flagellations and the abuse of bondage in the cane fields" she muses, "are never far, barely suppressed."[136] The metaphorical resonance of the body, however, reminds us that *la folie antillaise* is a literary phenomenon, not a documented sociological trend or a legitimate medical diagnosis. For all its evident resonance, it is a fictional motif. Its proofs — a woman's body acting as an extension of the island, "a fundamental sense of *non-entitlement,* as though one had no right to exist,"[137] a madwoman who produces a raging double in rebellion against phallocracy — come from novels and short stories, not case studies. The literary and sociological bleed into and consciously grow upon each other in this tradition. Even more so than medical narrative, then, a socio-cultural interpretation of Mina and her community comes, quite literally, pre-scripted.

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[135] Celia Britton, The Sense of Community in French Caribbean Fiction (Liverpool UP, 2008) 57-8.

[136] Pineau as quoted in Duff 23.

[137] Britton 58.

Even accepting this overlap of fiction and reality, Mina and Suzon have trouble fully occupying the positions that *la folie antillaise* requires of them. While malaise rules in the Paris projects, Piment appears rather unspectacular in its sufferings.[138] The Montério family's misfortunes provide by far the most tragedy in the town, and Suzon's virulent campaign is met with shock and disgust by those who learn of it. It is Victor who exemplifies the curative properties of breaking with *la folie antillaise*, even as his background suggests he should be the last one suffering from its symptoms. Based on the cultural specificity of this trauma, readers may be surprised to see how much his losses mirrors Mina's experiences, as do his relentless cycles of delusional health and damnable returns to despair. Victor fits into Guadeloupean culture almost immediately, from the moment he abandons his hotel to join some locals on his trip. These men are stunned that a Frenchman's experiences — "undergoing such calamities, being likewise persecuted by demons" (277) — so exactly match their own. Once he enters Vérité's parlor, meanwhile, Victor sheds all distinction between being *Parisien pure souche* (a "pure strain" of Parisian blood) and one being one of *papier* (paper) like Mina or Suzon. It is in this instant of inter-cultural, de-nationalized existence that Victor finally recovers a memory of his hanged father being cut down by men in suits — the proverbial demons clinging to his back.

Interpreting *Chili-Skin* through a sociological lens of intergenerational trauma can co-exist to some extent with biomedical explanations. Yet its presence is near-impossible to untangle from the literary tradition that pushes these experiences to the forefront. Its reach is so great that it may have expanded beyond the culture whose sufferings birthed it, now joining to and even producing white male narratives to parallel those of black women.

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[138] The relative innocuousness of Piment is especially notable given how appalling conditions have been in the other towns Pineau has dreamed up. In L'espérance-macadam (Macadam Dreams, 1995), for example, the entire community is overrun with secrets and tragic deaths, its residents so sunk into apathy that they no longer question it.

Within the pages of *Chili-Skin*, readers can never be certain that biology and sociology have a firmer footing than magic and faith. Possessions and curses haunt the periphery of every character. Victor's seer is a Guadeloupean transplant. Bénédicte has lived her whole life in and out of institutions, and is frequently overtaken by states of "pure madness." While doctors labeled her a schizophrenic, "she provided her own diagnosis: possession." The whole affair was "too ancient, the demons too deeply rooted," for her take to be convincingly explained (102).

For Victor to succeed in his quest, he too must forgo explanation; he must embrace beliefs that are not only utterly novel to him, but are often dismissed by outsiders as merely "a set of practices relating to magic and sorcery."[139] The novel does give hints that question the efficacy of Victor's "cure." By his own admission, the young man was eager to accept Bénédicte's counter-diagnosis because it offered relief. He wanted to be free of the implicit guilt of being ill and the inescapable cast of his condition; transferring the cause to demons that could be exorcised succeeds in doing both.[140] While he dutifully abstains from sex — and, as the narrative takes care to note, all his prescribed medications — Victor also goes drinking on the island, disobeying Bénédicte's stricture to remain sober. He becomes so intoxicated, in fact, that he loses track of time and nearly misses his crucial rendezvous with Mina. This drinking, forbidden on spiritual grounds, could have been both an excellent social lubricant and potential psychosomatic trigger. Notwithstanding all this, one look from Monsieur Vérité — literally, "Mr. Truth" — and his faith is rewarded. Victor experiences a series of hallucinatory experiences that include both broad transcendent imagery and moments from Mina's and Rosalia's own pasts. He hears Mina recite the poems readers accessed earlier; he watches, as we watched, while Rose waits for her sister outside the school gates. While it's possible Mina could have told him these stories, the novelty of their still-fragile bond makes this explanation unlikely.

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[139] Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizbeth Paravisini-Gebert, Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo (New York UP, 2011) 179-82.

[140] In some ways, Victor's disenchantment with Western medicine echoes Frantz Fanon's thoughts on the differences between French and Maghreb attitudes toward mental illness. Fanon argues that the Muslim patient was cast as the innocent victim of a *djinn*'s possession; as a result, he was treated with far more respect and patience than his counterparts in Western asylums. He was also allowed a separate identity from that of his affliction: rather than being absorbed into a medical category as a depressive or a schizophrenic, he held the status of an individual under attack. Frantz Fanon, "Attitude du musulman maghrébian devant la folie. Frantz Fanon et François Sanchez 1956," Frantz Fanon et al, Frantz Fanon: Écrits sur l'alienation et la liberté: Oeuvres II: Textes réunis, introduits et présentés par Jean Khalfa et Robert CJ Young (Éditions La Découverte, 2015) 357.

There is more substantial evidence that a curse is to blame for Mina's torment than there is that an exorcism will heal Victor. Suzon's call for twenty years of suffering was swiftly followed by the death or torment of every member of Mina's immediate family. Suzon appears to know all about Mina's sexual fevers, claiming she wanted to hollow out the girl's capacity to love. Mina herself only discovers the truth about her family friend thanks to a resurfaced memory of Rose's ghost protecting her when Suzon tried to strangle her in her sleep. And she only confronts the old woman after yet another seemingly supernatural encounter — this time, seeing the eighteen dolls Suzon made as surrogates for her unborn children emerge from their hiding place and crawl over the living room furniture.

The seductive aspect of this script is undeniable. Still, there are once again areas that remain open to question. First, there is a strong implication that Rose's shade, which Mina firmly believes prompts her bouts of nymphomania, was not summoned by Suzon. This immediately makes the nature of her sister's ghost more ambiguous. Is she a divine messenger of healing? A potent embodiment of Mina's clear sense of survivor's guilt? Regardless, she is not the omen of doom that Mina, and the reader, once assumed. Second, there is Suzon herself, who most throws the supernatural element into question. Mina returns to Guadeloupe just before the new millennium, but the curse was set to expire after twenty years, in the previous fall. "You let a year pass, Mina," Suzon reproaches her (298). That was the year Mina was plagued by hallucinations, dissociations, and sexual obsessions. Those symptoms only began when Mina lit a candle in remembrance of her sister, plunging her back into childhood traumas. In a single line, Suzon has re-introduced psychiatric and socio-cultural factors into the mix, whether as elements spurring the hex on or as alternate explanations for its seeming effect.

As the novel unfolds somewhat like a folkloric tale, with a spiritual quest and magical impediments, its characters are bolstered by techniques from the same toolkit. As Victor is seized by visions in M. Vérité's office, a voice cuts in. "Do not laugh!" the narrator urges us. "Do not mock, ladies and gentlemen!" (327). This interjection re-aligns our position as readers to that of audience members, or even fellow players in a narrative dance.[141] This, in turn, mimics Schwartz-Bart's iconic work *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* (Rain and Wind on Télumée Miracle, 1972), a seminal piece of Antillean women's writing that consciously incorporates oral asides and speaking patterns into written French. We are made aware of our skepticism at the very moment we might most have been inclined to suspend our disbelief; at the same time, this interjection forces us to attempt suspending it again.

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[141] This aspect of Pineau's writing has been thoroughly explored by René Larrier. He interprets it as textual *danmyé*, a dance based on improvisation, intervention, and negotiation."The narrator is positioned, without establishing a fixed center, in relation to someone else inside or outside the story, which mimics the reciprocity of the combat dance." Larrier 6.

In contrast to Lê's positioning of fraught socio-medical tension against religious transcendence, Pineau's work emphasizes fluidity between the social and the spiritual through their links to Antillean literature, placing both implicitly at odds with a medical authority rooted in French traditions. Rather than make these fictional reference points into traps for competing lenses, however, she incorporates aspects of these traditions within the unfolding of each individual's malady, undercutting their seeming nativist nature. Ultimately, she allows these epistemological sites to overlap more peacefully than Lê does, intwining characters' journeys through their continuous, but never exclusionary, engagement in each broad tradition.

This seeming easy overlap is not an indication that the distinctions between these sites of authority are negligible, nor that the suffering whose essence they attempt to capture and conceptualize are somehow lessened. What it does suggest is to what extent characters may be further suffocated by discursive restriction. Each of the main characters begins *Chili-Skin* tormented by and trapped within a particular register that has over-determined the boundaries of their existence. For Mina, social speech is akin to a verbal infestation. Ythe speeches men give as they take her to bed, the empty murmuring that accompanies their lovemaking, and the unwanted questions they ask infuriate her. They are nothing but "parasitic" and "empty" words, "that wanted to make her believe, that pretended, and that she despised" (12). What presence they have already secured, and whatever meaning they could potentially have had, they exist now only as drains on her resolve.

Victor's linguistic torment comes not from the mouths of interchangeable lovers, but an unending string of doctors. He continues to attend both individual and group sessions, but his ability to shape his own narrative is suffocated under the weight of words that end up devouring their own meaning. “He had spoken out (*pris la parole,* literally ‘grabbed the word’),” he recalls, “in groups of words where the word counted itself and discounted itself, dissected itself, analyzed itself” (103). The only tools he has — to (dis)count, to dissect, to analyze — operate along the same register where he is already trapped, and so can offer him no escape.

By the time the novel begins, meanwhile, Suzon’s words have begun to completely hollow her out. Berlus, the *gadézafè* to whom she turns when Mina’s homecoming letter arrives, claims her curse has broken its shackles. “When it could no longer find flesh to eat, it turned itself on [she] who had commanded it” (154). In the most literal sense possible, Suzon’s choice of language means that her words have come back to bite her; her faith in spiritual knowledge has blinkered her understanding to the extent that she is now literally going blind.

Even the possibility of breaking out of their suffering, then, must include the recognition of other discourses at play — and, by extension, engagement with the authorities that wield them. As transcendent as *Chili-Skin*’s ending may appear, meanwhile, Pineau does not fully allow readers to embrace the authority of spiritual revelation, nor its potential bedmates social upheaval or biomedical intervention. As with most of her novels, there is hope for closure but no confirmation of it. Victor believes he may be cured; Mina thinks the curse may be lifted. Still, less than a day has passed since these transformations. The words that free them both may have far more prosaic explanations than is initially apparent.[142]

The counting of threes encompasses this final state. Threes begin and end *Chili-Skin,* and appear sporadically throughout. Their omnipresence is given significant weight through repetition without necessarily granting it meaning. After all, the initial *un, deux, trois* is no more than Mina's desperate attempt to keep Rosalia occupied, and to wrest speech from her largely non-communicative sister. Nonetheless, its very inability to be pinned down buoys us in the closing lines, just as the maybe-transcendent, maybe-mundane poem on *l'envers des nuages* (the other of the clouds) is given to us without explanation. "One, two three. / The boats of Rosalia. / One, two, three. / The birds of the sky. / One, two, three. / The other side of the clouds" (371).

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[142] Take the miracle of the poem, for instance. Bénédicte grew up in Guadeloupe, and the narrator mentions in passing that Farétina’s poem became mandatory reading for schoolchildren across the island. Her telling Victor to chase *l’envers des nuages* (the other side of the cloud) is simultaneously miraculous, given his coincidental meeting with Farétina’s grandfather, and mundane, given that Bénédicte probably thought of it only because she recited the poem many times as a young girl.

## Auto-Fiction: Unraveling the Author as Authority

Leslie Barnes and Alexandra Kurmann have meticulously tracked "the vast intertextual network" woven into Lê's novels, which work constantly to *dis*-place "both the text and intertext within a larger literary domain."[143] Gisèle Pineau has similarly asserted in interviews that her books operate within and through continuous engagement with writerly forebears and contemporaries. These first sections have taken up this love of literary allusion and tradition-building to explore their implications, examining how interrogations of madness, when situated across competing sites of authority, rely on literary precedent to keep them in perpetual suspension.

Yet readers, having placed the books down, may still dismiss these destabilizations as "mere fiction," literary experimentation that does little to challenge outside authorities in any meaningful way. It is here that our reliance as readers on the assertion and confirmation of knowledge is further destabilized by their choice of genre: autofiction for Lê, the autobiographical novel for Pineau. Their engagement with generic hybridity forces us to constantly consider the author's presence in the text, only for this intrusion to deny absolute authority of interpretation or designation. It also serves to highlight key differences in their approach to their status as women writers, and to examine their own specific relationship with madness as a potential source of knowledge and authority.

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[143] Barnes 26.

### *Linda Lê: "Wrong and Unlikely Directions"*

By virtue of their generic designation, both autobiography and memoir demand a known quantity of truths. The former assumes the burden of coherent narrative and verifiable facts, while the latter implies a confessional aspect that must bare all. In their wake come ethical imperatives that ensnare both the author, whose assertions must confirm our trust, and the reader, whose approach must be in good faith.[144] Autofiction wreaks havoc on these expectations and imperatives. It refuses to definitely align itself with fiction or to deliver itself to a contract.[145] We have no definitive subject around which to stake our claims, yet we cannot dismiss the thought that "reality" remains at play, if only we could reach it. Within this "paradoxical form where everything is true and everything is false," we find not a unified identity but "a multiplicity of subjects fighting among themselves," who all act "like so many cells in rebellion against a governing body."[146] To combine the auto-genre with outright fabrication is thus to expose the authorial myth itself as fictitious distortion, and knowledge of oneself and the surrounding world as patched with numerous gaps.[147]

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[144] In an effort to define autobiography as a genre, Philippe Lejeune lays down two requirements of "the autobiographical pact": first, a nominal identity shared by the author and the narrator or main character; second, a contract between author and reader whereby the first swears to tell the truth and the latter swears to believe it. Despite many attacks on its premise, this conception of autobiography's ethical demands continues to hold sway in contemporary discourse, as the controversy surrounding James Frey's fictionalized memoir A Million Little Pieces (2003) and the 2015 court case over Misha Defonseca's Survivre avec les loups (1997) can attest. Philippe Lejeune, Le pacte autobiographique (Éditions du Seuil, 1996) 26-32.

[145] Serge Doubrovsky coined the term "autofiction." His work Fils (1977) lures readers with the promise of the nominal identity, but openly combines fact with fabrication, deliberately eschewing a commitment to total sincerity in favor of experimenting with identity creation. The title Fils hints at the immense generic destabilization to come: while *fils* is generally translated as "son," it can also be read as the plural of *fil,* or "thread." The work thus simultaneously declares itself a straightforward genealogy and exposes itself as an intricate construction.

[146] Dominique Rosse, "Autofiction et autopoïétique: La fictionalisation de soi," L'Esprit Créateur 42:4 Les Nouvelles Autobiographies (Winter 2002): 9-10.

Linda Lê is infamous for "the tenuous and deliberately deceptive connection between 'life' and 'writing' in [her] work." First-person narratives where the protagonist shares well-known elements of the author's backstory, viewpoint, and even name exist alongside wholly invented scenarios and completely fabricated experiences and assertions. She regards *Slander*, out of more than a dozen autofictional texts centered around tortured memories and unstable minds, to be the most "unhinged, disturbed autobiography" she has so far produced. This kind of a work is one that "wants to assert an itinerary, but that also seeks to scramble the map [*brouiller les pistes,* "muddy the waters" or "cover one's tracks"], point in wrong or unlikely directions."[148]

While details from the Niece's life in *Slander* adhere closely to Lê's own background, the Uncle's time as a psychiatric patient and attitude towards doctor-critics are similarly tempting to conflate with her words. Divvying up "truth" and "fiction" between them is further complicated by Lê's assertion that the two characters are doubles of the other, if only through their journey through the minefield of mad literature: "They both try to escape madness through writing, their origins by the acquisition of a new tongue."[149] These doubles consist, on the one hand, of a man who alternately declares himself half-mad, pretending to be ill, and one of the "true" insane; and of a woman who regards herself as an acolyte, a betrayer, and a doubter. These dissimilar figures have radically different pasts; they also have diametrically opposed approaches to narrative authority, the Uncle's bold assertions countered by the Niece's tendency to be overwritten.

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[147] It also serves to remind us, in Paul de Man's words, that "the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life;" in other words, that "the illusion of reference" back to a distinct reality is "something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity." Paul de Man, The Rhetoric of Romanticism (Columbia UP, 1984) 69.

[148] Lê as quoted in Barnes 168.

[149] Linda Lê and Sabine Loucif, "Entretien avec Linda Lê," The French Review 80:4 (March 2007): 885.

Literary mastery appears to be key in evaluating the battling authorities at the heart of Lê's *Slander.* Yet the power of writers within the text are ultimately as in flux as the registers the characters shape and subdue, both in their active anchoring and in their desire for escape through writing. What binds Chekhov, Flaubert, and Nash is their use of irony — each, in their own genre, was a master satirist. What is constantly in question, then, is the extent to which narrative authority actually rests with the Uncle in his role as master and muse. Following the Monk's instruction, the Uncle tries to act as translator and boundary-crosser by opening himself up to textual influence. If he had followed the example of *gens raisonnables* (reasonable men), he would have abandoned cultivating this sensibility "in favor of stuffing [his] head," and so ended by "classifying all that [he] had loved." (86). The Monk's approach, however, may have led to a series of tragic *mis*readings. He is a failed muse when viewed through Chekhov, unable to assist the doctor's work; if approached via Flaubert, his links to Emma make him a stand-in for a would-be scriptor mired in mediocrity; if we take up Nash, the Uncle has plagiarized his revelations from down-to-earth humorist. In each of these cases, the Uncle appears to have bound himself to allusions that cast own his narrative power into doubt.

We may look to the Niece to save us, balancing out the mad excesses of the Uncle with a measured response. Lê's construction of the twin narrators as doubles, however, frustrates this effort not only through splintered subjecthood but through a complete dissolution of the boundaries between what is written down and what is written *out*. Despite literal, physical communication never being achieved, Uncle and Niece set up a kind of psychic correspondence simply through putting their thoughts to paper; a memory, recovered by one, may later be inexplicably elaborated upon by the other. This linguistic osmosis most clearly plays out in the Niece's story of the old blind man and his granddaughter, and how the tale reminds her of her uncle. He claims to have no memory of her as a child; after she recalls the story in her diary, he suddenly remembers both the tale and her recitation to him, finishing the story himself. Yet her affinity to the Uncle, rather than open her eyes, is what potentially allows her to *miss* any epistemological anchor, open as she is to being written over. "She pretends to search for the truth," the Uncle scoffs, "while she only asks for her part of the lie" (45). Without a voice to trust, readers must decide for themselves whether to take that statement on faith or challenge its premise; in either case, we are left without a map to follow, all while unable to resist attempting to plumb the text's depths for some ultimate key.

Being unable to totally and assuredly separate fact and fiction furthers an anxiety that lies between the status of voice and the act of writing at all times. While voice "becomes a metaphor for truth and authenticity… perfect, transparent understanding," writing pulls our attention toward the constructive aspects of self-expression, demolishing "this ideal of pure self-presence" by inserting "a deceiving shadow which falls between intent and meaning."[150] This anxiety reaches a fever pitch in autobiographical fiction. It is also an omnipresent feature of mad literature, where readers must, if only temporarily, relinquish their assumptions and do without stable points of references. If the desire underlying the interpretation of both autofiction and mad literature is “the determination to avoid the trap,” the overwhelming “desire to be a non-dupe,” Lê takes merciless advantage of that compulsion.[151]

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[150] Christopher Norris, Derrida (Harvard UP, 1987) 28.

Literature cannot be placed in the service of healing, aimed at resolving and erasing dis-ease. It is an approach Lê finds patently absurd. She supports her case not by citing her own experiences, but by quoting Louis Calaferte, who claimed “the artist fools himself when he envisions his creation in the manner of a cure, for writing legitimates sickness in lieu of lessening it.”[152] Literature is her witness for the defense, the studies she presents as a counter to writing one’s sickness out. This refusal is openly rooted in a rejection of the epistemological straightjacketing that comes from permitting an authoritative interpretation. “Is it despair or madness?” she asks rhetorically in *Caliban Complex*. “We refuse all diagnostics, since a case history supposes a knowledge of the past that we no longer have.”[153] Uprooted and uprooting, the only position Lê will take up is through literature, and that position will be the *non*-patient, as surely as it is also the *non*-woman and *non*-representative of a particular ethnicity. These negations do not efface the words that follow them; rather, they refuse to ever let them settle into a space of comprehensive knowledge.

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[151] Felman 229. In discussing the pitfalls of psychoanalytic interpretation in particular, Felman here references a Lacanian pun: “les ‘non-dupes’ errent,” alternately translated as “the non-dupes wander” or “the non-dupes err,” reads phonetically as “le-nom-du-père” or “the name of the father,” the legislative and prohibitive function of the father in the Symbolic Order. The resonance of this pun in relation to Lê’s own autofictional production should not be overlooked, for readers are simultaneously dis-placed and re-positioned, wandering off-course and locating an origin that is itself a trap within a chain of symbolic discourse.

[152] Lê and Loucif 883.

[153] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 168.

### *Gisèle Pineau: "Something Irremediable, Irreversible"*

*Chili-Skin* initially appears more straightforward than *Slander's* labyrinthian narrative. Far more than Lê, Gisèle Pineau claims a distinct racialized and gendered identity. Essays like *Écrire en tant que Noire* (To Write as a Black Woman, 1995) both openly draw on her three decades as a psychiatric nurse and her work's engagement with cultural displacement and institutional racism. Obvious autobiographical connections between Pineau and her protagonists both cannot be ignored and are specific enough to likely be intentional. Alongside Mina's traumatic past, disconnect from multiple homelands, and self-imposed exile, there is the broader Montério's family's twisted genealogy, a paternal shame with which Pineau has intimate familiarity.[154] These themes are endemic to her writing, appearing in every one of her almost twenty novels. The mental and emotional torments that mark her canon, meanwhile, draw heavily on her own childhood. As she relates in *Folie, aller simple: Journée ordinaire d'une infirmière* (Madness, One-Way Ticket: The Ordinary Day of a Nurse, 2013), she could easily have been one of the patients for whom she cares. Having stumbled into her profession unexpectedly, she views her link to the asylum as "something irremediable, irreversible, apparently fated, predestined, perhaps hereditary," taking to heart the warning that "one never ends up at the psychiatric hospital by chance."[155]

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[154] Pineau's father had an affair with a white woman during the French Indochina War that produced two mixed-race sons. He had another son with a woman in Senegal, married Pineau's mother, and then fathered a final, secret child in Martinique. "My father also traveled to Tahiti," she joked in a 2007 interview, "so I don't know if I have a brother there too." Secret siblings, their effect on children's psyches, and their incestuous potential are all thoroughly explored in Pineau's works, most notably L'espérance-macadam and in Chair Piment. Pineau and Loichot 332.

[155] Gisèle Pineau, Folie, aller simple: Journée ordinaire d'une infirmière (Philippe Rey, 2014) 12.

As a result, critics often approach texts that draw on Pineau's experiences as her quest for *la prise de parole* — the "grabbing hold" of speech.[156] Yet just as *Chili-Skin* is not solely fictional, Pineau is not writing straight autobiography either. The reading of fictional works as biographical templates has historically forced autobiographical readings onto narratives by women of color, how matter how fabricated their scenarios claim to be. Even when driven by the desire to craft a new language of resistance, literature often becomes anthropology, with writers enlisted as representatives of a particular culture or as a particular model of femininity.[157] Pineau has voiced considerable discomfort with this approach in interviews. She has no interest in joining collectives that speak of "we the Guadeloupeans" or "we the Creoles," and is careful to distinguish herself writers who act as political standard-bearers. In her own way, she is as frustrated by readers who seek to contain her within ideology as Lê is by critics who seek to stick her back in the asylum. "It is my freedom as a woman on this earth," she asserts, precisely to resist this pigeonholing: "I have no need of being in a school or a movement. I write."[158]

I join scholars such as René Larrier in arguing that Pineau's oeuvre should be approached as a series of autobiographical novels, a seemingly clear designation whose hybridity hints at a more ambitious goal than relation and assertion. This engagement is reflected in the auto-textual weaving that she carries out across her books. Moments in *Madness: One-Way Ticket* are anticipated in earlier works like *Chili-Skin*.[159] Details from the latter work have appeared in other forms, such as the blatantly autofictional *L'exil selon Julia* (Exile According to Julia, 1996), which draws on interviews from residents of Paris slums, stories from her grandmother, and a multitude of imagined pasts that she could have experienced had she stayed in Guadeloupe.

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[156] Maisier, "L'Ecriture au service de la parole dans les romans de Gisèle Pineau" 30.

[157] Ketu H. Katrak, The Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers (Rutgers UP, 2006) 4-7.

[158] Gisèle Pineau and Florence Ramond Jurney, "Entretien avec Gisèle Pineau: Réflexions sur une œuvre ancrée dans une société mondialisée," Nouvelles Études Francophones 27.2 (Automne 2012): 109-10.

Yet these tracings are not always rooted in individual self-examination; more often than not, they contradict her own views by expand on ones she might have held, or by drawing on those voices she herself would not consider authoritative.[160] If her novels are autobiographical, they act as an ever-expanding communal form, one as speculative as it is realistic. Rather than lead us into traps, this expansion allows for even greater suspension of disbelief, since the knowledge that Pineau's communal biographical insights inform the work keep readers from dismissing her concepts as fictional play. This only produces interpretative lenses we might employ when considering characters' relative authority, loosening our own commitment to a particular approach so that even more questions remain in suspension.[161]

In *Madness, One-Way Ticket,* an elderly nurse remarks that, in healing others, we also heal ourselves: "all these great patients are reflections of ourselves in the mirror" (204). In the same work, the narrator adds another angle to this reflection: that "no one really knows where sickness comes from" (176).[162] What either disease or its healing entails, and how many refracted reflections are contained within this mirror, remain unanswered and unanswerable. It is not enough to parse out where medical, social, and religious discourses might be contained; readers must ask to what extent Pineau's attitudes are fully aligned with Mina's thoughts, and to what extent they might spread across or hide within the vast constellation of Victor, Suzon, and numerous secondary characters. Within the individual-communal, real-potential, and past-future webs of Pineau's autobiographical novel, voices and positionings do not hold readers in claustrophobic limbo. Rather, we are free to gorge on the endless combinations provided us; since all answers are held in suspension, everything is, to some extent, as much true as false, providing at least some relief from judgment as we navigate a world without certainty.

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[159] "Ah, yes, you're insinuating that I could be a mental patient, me too, or I would have need of psychiatric care!" a young Gisèle sputters defensively when an older nurse questions her judgement. This response harkens back to Mina's revealing cry, "You mean to say that *I* killed her!" after her half-sister Olga denies responsibility for Rose's death. Pineau also recalls that, "thirty years later," she can still hear her nervous, hiccuping laugh "like a leper's rattle." A similar description appears in Mina's story — her friend Lysia's laugh is the type one only hears "in psychiatric hospitals and prisons," a bilious, body-rotting sound.

[160] While fascinated by her homeland's beliefs, she distances herself from them. She positions "a parallel world" where "the devil is never far," one into which she travels but of which she is not a resident. Pineau and Loichot 336.

[161] Midway through Chili-Skin, for example, we learn that Mina's sister Rose was born with a putrid umbilical cord wrapped around her throat, likely the culprit for her cranial deformity and intellectual disabilities. While the doctor on hand interprets this as an accident of biology, family friend Silène sees it as proof of a monstrous malediction. She urges Melchior bury the cord at the foot of a sacred traveller's tree, to "spur wings for the day when she will want to fly away" (277). If he didn't, he may have condemned Rose to remain trapped under Suzon's curse. If he did bury, then he may have granted his daughter posthumous wings, allowing her to follow Mina to Paris after death.

This is a reflection of Pineau's work as a nurse, which I argue has greatly informed her approach to writing. The figure of the nurse, Bénédicte André notes, is distinct from that of the doctor, who in medical, juridical, and even potentially spiritual terms is the acknowledged authority, the keeper and distributor of knowledge.[163] By contrast, the nurse is the go-between, moving from doctor to patient and back again, and more often — for Pineau, at least — also moving *among* them, "like an ordinary person among ordinary people." It is a communion of listening, without words, and without interest in "information in order to fill out a social dossier."[164] In her positioning(s) as author-subject, Pineau complicates the absolute assertion of *la prise de parole* in favor of collective, liberatory-because-literary supposition.

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[162] She goes on to list the many ways in which men and women have attempted to pin down madness-as-such: they "have sought to inventory signs, record symptoms, assess syndromes, interpret behaviors, establish statistics, identify risk factors, develop biochemical and other hypotheses, decoding silences and delusions," all in attempts to unravel something whose state comes from being knotted, and to lock down what can only exist in movement.

[163] Bénédicte André, "Aliénate liminalité? Regard sur l'entre-mondes dans "Mes quatre femmes," "Morne Câpresse" et "Folie, aller simple" de Gisèle Pineau," Dalhousie French Studies 101 (Spring 2014)

## Conclusions

As Shoshana Felman reminds us, the "literary thing" at work in mad narratives does more than dramatize the dynamic tension "between sense and nonsense, between reason and unreason." It also enacts the very (in)determination of "the readable and the unreadable" (Felman 5). It brings to the fore what can be reduced, confirmed, and confined, and what continues to deny our ultimate escape from doubt. Linda Lê and Gisèle Pineau do not seek to promote Literature as a replacement source of ultimate knowledge. Rather, both *Slander* and *Chili-Skin* introduce supposedly extraliterary sites of authority that are both dependent upon and destabilized by fictional narrative and tradition. They then utilize the ambiguity of auto-fictional hybrid genres to encourage readers to extend these textual experiments across the borders of "fiction" and "reality." This allows their narrative to reveal gaps in rhetorical knowledge that urge readers to consider the questions we ask, rather than compare the answers we have already assumed.[165]

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[164] Pineau Folie, aller simple: Journée ordinaire d'une infirmière 136.

[165] Such an approach harkens to Louis Aragon's concept of *le mentir-vrai* — literally, the "to lie-true." Aragon's formulation assumes that there are truths other than facts, through fiction's questioning of "those no less fictional narratives that propagate the dominant ideology." Aragon as taken up to Gisèle Sapiro, "Littérature et vérité," AOC Média — Analyze Opinion Critique March 01 2021: https://aoc.media/critique/2021/03/01/litterature-et-verite/

For all the supposed progress made in understanding mental illness, assertion of a mad identity still casts the mad into “a rhetorical black hole.”[166] The only way to assert oneself as a speaking subject after receiving such a label is to declare the surrounding world insane, exchanging a pathological diagnosis for mass social or spiritual condemnation. Lê rejects either option. Her auto-fictional play ensures that tracing textual symptomology back to a biographical anchor will continually be frustrated, since it would bind her to a contract she has no intention of honoring.[167] Her un-raveling also guarantees that a definitive judgement regarding suffering and healing cannot be reached. This is not about settling tensions between the verifiable and the doubtable, but about imploding the barriers that sought to keep each of them contained. When Barnes argues that Lê seeks “legitimacy *in* illegitimacy… a literature that would prefer to be out of place,”[168] it must be viewed in Felman-esque terms: as “unaccomplishment *at work*: the active incompletion of a meaning which ceaselessly trans-forms itself, offers itself to be mis-understood, mis-apprehended.”[169] The rhetorical fund can never be emptied, its bottom never reached. Lê ensures that literature can neither fully assert itself over other discourses as an independent authority, nor serve one of them as a lackey. The narrative will reject nothing, but only denying any definitive endorsement.

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[166] Catherine Prendergast, “On the Rhetorics of Mental Disability,” in J.C. Wilson and C. Liewiecki-Wilson, Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture (Southern Illinois UP, 2001) 198.

Prendergast argues that two movements that might have combatted ableism have instead helped efface the issues still facing any claim of mad subjecthood. The post-structuralist movement’s suggestion that insanity is a discursive construct has led to an elision of difference that silences its embodied subjects. The “rhetoric of rights” advocated by identity politics, meanwhile, erases the legitimate need for medical interventions and institutional reforms in favor of broad statements supporting social empowerment and liberation.

[167] She thus rejects, in de Man’s terms, the autobiographer’s reduction to the “contractual ‘subject’,” and the reader’s simultaneous taking up of a “transcendental authority that allows him to pass judgment” on subjectivity, reality, and truth. De Man 70, 72.

[168] Barnes 213-4.

[169] Felman 54.

Pineau, by contrast, explicitly assumes the role of advocate in her writings: “I have the sense of constructing a coherent work where I deliver the message that is my own, that of a plea for humanity, humanities.”[170] Her style functions in the in-between, just as Lê’s does. Rather than continually re-inscribe and un-ravel the autofictional story of an author-avatar, however, she incorporates incessant reference to details from multiple past and potential lives, playing within the related genre of the autobiographical novel. This form replenishes itself in incessant *renvoi* — a deflection and a referral. Divergent canons simultaneously rely on and influence each supposedly extraliterary realm, while narrative polyphony gives readers the option to simultaneously trust all of them. The plurality of authoritative voices that shuffle over each other without ever fully dominating any is then affirmed by Pineau’s necessarily multi-layering perspective: “My novelistic universe is the translation of my own experience *and my hopes*.”[171]

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[170] Pineau as quoted in Larrier 79.

[171] Pineau as quoted in Ibid. 22. Italics mine.

# CHAPTER 2

## No Way Out: Conflating Lenses and Cannibalizing Genres in Contemporary Russian Literature

> Every storyteller was important and unique. Nothing has changed:
> I am still the shoulder to cry on and the ear to listen.
> — Ludmilla Petrushevskaya[172]

> Now a new generation has come (and I am just of it) of writers
> who no longer want, do not feel the need, and yes, probably, they
> simply cannot "rethink" the Soviet past and the bygone era — and
> until recently it was still the main cultural idée fixe…
> — Anna Starobinets[173]

Unlike in Lê and Pineau, there is never any doubt that there is madness, or at least "sickness," at the heart of Petrushevskaya's and Starobinets' stories. It is how we as readers should approach this sickness that is brought to the fore, as different lenses of interpretation clash within Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's epistolary novella *Vremia Noch': povest'* (Night Time: A Tale, 1992) and Anna Starobinets' dystopian novella *Perekhodnyi vozrast* (Transitional or Awkward Age, 2005). All of these lens, meanwhile, are blatantly intra-literary. Despite characters' attempts to either shield the extent of this indebtedness or avoid it altogether, what anchors the shifting sands of narrative authority are not extraliterary sites of knowledge like the medical or legal establishment but solely the generic templates, generational movements, and canonical texts of literary tradition.

Rather than fictional experimentation keeping epistemological systems in perpetual suspension, then, these novellas hollow out the possibility of any current lens to codify and comprehend. Furthermore, both Petrushevskaya and Starobinets center their stories through monologizing characters that not only strip away outside voices, but cannibalize their own literary nexuses. Readers are left at the whim of authors whose works hold them in a different kind of limbo: relying on a guide who makes no effort to disguise the extent to which their author/ity is both arbitrary and absolute.

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[172] Petrushevskaya and Garza: www.kirkusreviews.com/news-and-features/articles/complete-interview-ludmilla-petrushevskaya/.

[173] Anna Starobinets et al, "Interv'iu s Annoi Starobinets. Besedovali Anna Burk i Barbara Ianish," Novinki 2006: docplayer.ru/35096216-Intervyu-s-annoy-starobinec-besedovali-anna-burk-i-barbara-yanish.html

### Ludmilla Petrushevskaya: “Behind every manuscript…”

Perhaps no work in Petrushevskaya’s extensive collection of drama and prose is as iconic as *Night Time,* a novella told almost exclusively through the diary entries of fired editor and failing poet Anna Andrianovna. Anna lives an impoverished life with grandson Tima in their cramped apartment, occasionally visited by Tima’s mother Alyona and Anna’s other child, Alexei. The miserable Alyona is constantly cycling through affairs and pregnancies; the suicidal Alexei is a deadbeat just released from prison; and Anna’s mother Sima has recently been committed to an asylum. Anna’s life is devoted to two missions: when she’s not manipulating her neighbors or reading at children’s camps for money, she’s trying to present herself, through her diary, as both a literary genius and a saintly mother. Ultimately, both missions fail. Her family remains impoverished, and Anna’s entries reveal nothing but a sadistic pattern of anguish and abuse. When Sima’s relocation to a different facility puts her pension in jeopardy, Anna tries to move her back home, only to break down and abandon the plan. She returns to find the apartment empty, and fears Alyona has killed herself, Tima, and her infant daughter. In fact, they have abandoned her, and the narration abruptly ends after Anna begs characters for forgiveness. The book opens, however, with notes from an editor Alyona called to offer Anna’s diary after her mother’s presumed insanity or death; the editor declines, but Alyona sends it along anyway.

Much critical attention has been paid to how Anna Andrianovna's attempts to establish authority through rigid control of the narrative end up "constructing her as an objectionable object," undermining her desperate desire to be "a reporting subject."[174] Rather than focus on this outcome, I turn to one of the major ways Anna attempts to assert that control: the network of literary precedents she employs as though they were frameworks of assumed knowledge, and the generic expectations that buttress her central claims like legal precedents. Anna attempts to juggle multiple generic templates in a bid to win herself the most sympathy, anchoring them in canonical works spanning centuries of Russian literature. This tactic is especially helpful when labeling threats to her power as purveyors of madness while rewriting her own instability as evidence of either stoic martyrdom or laudable feeling.

Inevitably, her lack of skill allows the gaps in the narrative she weaves to become glaring. Yet it is not just her attempt to "write herself into existence" that dooms her; and the narrative strongly implies that it is her reliance on intra-literary authority that makes this outcome inevitable. Traditions seemingly take on minds of their own, becoming so strengthened by the authority she grants them that it is they, and not Anna, who dictate her story's course. Diving ever deeper through a maze of references, readers as well as characters may well question whether anything has not always, already, been invented by books.

Early in *Night Time,* Petrushevskaya's protagonist notes the similarity of her first name and patronymic to the iconic Soviet-era poet Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966). "Anna, with whom I share almost a mythical namesake," she rhapsodizes, "She's Anna Andreevna, I too, but

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[174] Goscilo "Mother as Mothra: Totalizing Narrative and Nurture in Petrushevskaia" 110.

Andrianovna" (13). In fact, they have more in common than a name: the lives of the two Annas share some striking similarities. Both were prolific poets. Their works were rarely published in their lifetimes. Like Akhmatova, Anna Andrianovna had a husband who abruptly disappeared from her life, leaving her to seek comfort with intellectual peers. Both had a son who served time in prison. Both even had a group of thugs visit their apartments looking for this wayward child, a scene each was careful to capture for posterity.[175]

Anna works to exploit these similarities to the fullest. Russia literature's historic role as a stand-in for socio-cultural fields like history, philosophy, and politics already ensures that the dividing line between constructed fiction and enacted reality will be blurry.[176] She takes merciless advantage of this in her quest to promote herself as an unsung literary icon. As an editor, she praises her prodigious empathic ability, a virtue she suggests was a factor in her bourgeois boss letting her go. "Behind each manuscript," she recalls, "there stood in front of me human beings, before my very eyes… maybe even sick, bedridden like Nikolai Ostrovsky, invalids and hunchbacks!" (*Night Time* 107).[177] In her role as a poet, she envisions crowds of children cowering before the thunderous majesty of her words, rendered speechless by the impact of her agonizing truths. This allows her to attribute the indifference of potential sponsors to the radical nature of her work, and her children's denigration of her mental state as proof of her affinity to the *inakomyslie* (nonconformists, literally "different-thinkers")*,* dissidents whose devotion to the truth led to their indefinite detention in mental institutions.[178]

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[175] For those readers who might have missed these and other references, Petrushevskaya helpfully published Night Time just following centenary celebrations of Anna Akhmatova's birth; the timing is unlikely to be coincidental. Rina Lapidus, Passion, Humiliation, Revenge: Hatred in Man-Woman Relationships in the 19th and 20th Century Russian Novel (Lexington Books, 2008) 141-2.

[176] Literature — while itself a frequent target for censors — was often one of the sole means in the Imperial and Soviet eras through which debate and discussion might be permitted. While it has never been uncommon for fiction to touch on politics, cultural criticism, and philosophy, not to mention religious debate or social science discussion, by the Nineteenth Century literature had come to be the primary avenue for their expression in Russia. Loseff 35-6.

[177] Nikolai Ostrovsky (1904-1936) was a famous writer who suffered from ankylosing spondylitis, eventually blinding him, rendering him functionally immobile, and causing excruciating pain before his death at age 32. Tellingly enough, his best known work, Kak zakalialas' stal' (How the Steel Was Tempered, 1936), is a "fictionalized autobiography" that proved immensely influential to the Soviet Realist canon. Its author's inclusion provides one of several hints that Anna's memories may be as much fabrication as fact.

Reading between the lines, however, readers may deduce that the reasons for her termination were incompetence and bribery. Her poetry is mediocre and unoriginal, its author recycling lines even within the pages of her own journal. The uncanny similarities between Anna Andreevna and Anna Andrianovna, meanwhile, only serve to highlight humiliating differences. The latter's husband was not executed by the secret police, but simply left her for another woman; her son Alexei was not a prisoner of the Gulag, but a would-be gangster who got in over his head. While Akhmatova is heralded as the foremost chronicler of the Stalinist purges, the only title Anna Andrianovna is bestowed by her derisive daughter is *grafomansha*, a term not only associated with the clinical compulsion graphomania but that serves as a synonym for "hack." This writerly Anna is a shell, covering the written Anna as she excuses her deeds in the name of deprivation and trauma. Ultimately, she is only an obvious copy of the Soviet martyr whose legacy she attempts to co-opt — and a poor one at that.

Anna's association with a chronicler of the camps does produce a significant effect on the course of her story. It's just not the one she intended. The asylum as a site of government control haunts her diary's pages from the beginning,[179] and by the close of Anna's narrative seems to beckon in the future. As Helena Goscilo notes, recent Russian women's prose often deploys "the chronotope of the hospital" as a "feminized counterpart" to the camp literature of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) and Varlam Shalamov (1907-1982), where they serve as potential sites of both linguistic experimentation and feminine solidarity.[180] Neither potential will be realized in *Night Time.* The only time readers enter a hospital, when Anna goes to retrieve Sima, is the exact moment Anna's narrative breaks down, devolving into pages of disconnected stream-of-consciousness that ignore punctuation and alternate abruptly between presumed internal monologue and apparent external speech. The asylum offers nothing in the way of either healing or humanity: it signifies "the most terrifying thing that can happen to a person" (88).

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[178] "[There was] a certain grain of truth in the claims of Soviet psychiatrists and KGB officers that everyone in the USSR who decades to stand up against the existing regime is psychologically abnormal," Ukrainian activist and mathematician Leonid Plyushch (1938-2015) remarked in his reflection on the abuse of state-sponsored psychiatry to detain dissidents. "After all, the level of cognitive dissonance required to be a radically different person in private than you were in public was considered a sign of excellent health, while any man 'proclaiming his real thoughts' was branded schizoid." Plyushch as quoted in Brintlinger "Introduction" 4.

Both the final and opening lines of Petrushevskaya's novella leave Anna's fate ambiguous. Both, however, connect the doom that shrouds her final moments to literature's importance in her life, particularly in defining and even creating her own self. Returning to an empty apartment, Anna names the family members who have abandoned her, ending with "Anna, forgive my tears" before the narrative stops, sans punctuation or explanation. It is possible that Anna has become so removed from her own selfhood that she is directing a final apology at her lost identity. A more intriguing and ultimately more plausible explanation, however, is that she is actually apologizing to Akhmatova, as a member of her family and a double of her identity.

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[179] What triggers Sima's physical and mental breakdown is the belief that unmarked government cars had been tailing her. Anna soon discovers that her mother had for months "diligently placed her teeth, loosely taken from her gums, on the sideboard." She solemnly presents her with "a packet of bloody cotton" to indicate how heavily her mouth is bleeding. "What for?" Anna cries in disgust: "To whom, to what Committee are you presenting all this…" (90) Anna's choice of words here is significant. Faced with the horror of her mother's apparently nonsensical self-destruction, she sardonically asks which *komissiia* (committee, commission) would accept what comes out of this bleeding mouth as evidence for her trial.

[180] Helena Goscilo, "Women's space and women's place in contemporary Russian fiction," in Rosalind Marsh and Gerald Stanton Smith, Gender and Russian Literature: New Perspectives (Cambridge UP, 1996) 328.

Before her apparent breakdown, there is one lens through which Anna openly embraces a mad label: that of the irrationally devoted and superhumanly sacrificial Russian mother. "I loved [Alyona] madly!" she raves. "Madly loved Andrushka!" (13). No humiliation is too degrading, no effort too extreme, to demonstrate this affection, or at least its promise on the page. Rapturous descriptions are given of her removal of her son's boots, and her memory of gently brushing her daughter's hair. Such moments inevitably appear when she is attempting to be "literary," and are sometimes accompanied by snippets of poems she is writing to immortalize their childhood beauty.[181] The depth of her motherly affection thus remains closely entwined with her thirst to prove herself as a writer.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the mother in Russian symbology. Philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) argued that "the fundamental category [in Russia] is motherhood."[182] Numerous studies have traced its omnipresence in Russian literature, from pre-Christian folklore to modern interpretations like Maxim Gorky's *Mat'* (Mother, 1907) and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "Matrenin Dvor" (Matryona's Place, 1963). Consistent within these stories is a maternal figure whose spiritual connection to the earth translates into an all-encompassing love, one which triggers spiritual awakenings in the children of Russia who have gone astray.[183] When it comes to Anna, however, the script never sticks. After Alyona gives birth to her bastard daughter, Anna is horrified to see their taxi is covered in amniotic fluid from another woman's water breaking. She tries to reframe the mess as miraculous: this is "holy water," she gushes, "that bore a child!" (60). She is not able to sustain this vision, however, and her tone quickly devolves to one of disgust and despair. "Oh deceiver Nature!" she wails in a different entry:

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[181] Her originality in this department is limited, casting doubt on the sincerity of these hyperbolic descriptions. When she turns her rapturous gaze on her grandson Tima, for example, she notes downy hair and breath like phlox. This is identical to the imagery she employs when recalling Alexei and Alyona as infants.

[182] Nikolai Berdyaev, Russkaia Ideia: Chast' sbornika Sud'ba Rossii (Azbuka, 2021) 34.

[183] Joanna Hubbs, Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture (Indiana UP, 1993) xv-xvii.

> For some reason she needs this suffering, this horror, blood, stench, sweat, mucus, convulsions, love, violence, pain, sleepless nights, hard work, everything seems to be all right! But no, and everything is bad again (32).

It is only at night, while her children sleep, that Anna is able to write over their complaints against her, holding her image together through "the power of words." Yet day keeps intruding, blocking her from sustaining herself as the non-complaining vessel for others' suffering.

Nighttime is also when Anna attempts to take on a related archetype, that of the lovelorn young woman. In her attempts to combine this staple of femininity with that of the sacrificial mother, Anna Andrianovna often turns to Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877). Some years before, her husband had forsaken the family for his lover, a cruel echo of his abandonment of his first wife for Anna herself. Anna recalls being overcome with the urge to throw herself out their apartment window as she watched him leave. This act of vindictive despair echoes the suicide of Anna Karenina, after she sacrificed not only her social standing but the presence of her beloved son to remain by her lover's side. When Alyona comes to visit Tima, however, Anna is forced to remember that she is not Tolstoy's heroine. Witnessing the tearful reunion of mother and child, she reflects sourly that she has now been cast "in the role of Karenin (17)," Anna's rejected husband and her son Seryozha's far-less-beloved father. Anna Andrianovna remains locked in the role of jilted lover, but fails to hang on to either her gender or its attendant associations. Earlier in *Night Time,* meanwhile, readers learn through sections of Alyona's diary that she, too, has begun to rely on literature to guide her responses to love and loss. After being used and rejected by her first lover, she writes that "all that was left was to throw myself under a train somewhere" (29). With seemingly no knowledge of her mother's response to her husband's desertion, Alyona turns to the same canon, and even the same specific scene, for comfort in the face of romantic trauma.

While a psychotic break may be one way to interpret the ending of *Night Time,* an equally likely possibility is Anna's suicide. This is bolstered by Alyona's reticence to divulge what's happened to her mother, and the number of *Anna Karenina* references throughout the work. It is here that Anna's exact wording when remembering her husband's departure should be revisited. She wanted, she recalls, to meet him "as a shapeless carcass on the pavement. To punish him." Observing her mother's fury, a young Alyona offered no comfort. She asked, "Mom, do I love you?", which Anna vehemently affirmed (77). Faced with her family's wholesale rejection of her love, it is not difficult to imagine that her response might emulate yet another literary Anna, completing the plunge she contemplated over a decade before.

"At first glance," Tatyana Prokhorova argues, it is not Soviet martyrdom or Imperial motherhood but post-Soviet "naturalist discourse," in its most grotesque and neo-realist form, that "absolutely predominates in the story *Night Time*."[184] There is cause for this generic ranking. Goscilo regards Petrushevskaya as "the patron saint of 'the new physiology'," also known as "the poetics of gross externalization."[185] *Night Time* shocked readers with its often grotesque depictions of women's bodies, from Anna's comparison of them to rotting leftovers to the brutal details of Alyona's lost virginity. Equally frank are discussions of mental illness. Anna and Sima are not the only ones who endure physical and mental degeneration. Anna's aunt was sent to an institution. Alexei has attempted suicide twice. Tima is increasingly overcome by nervous tics.

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[184] Tatyana Gennadevna Prokhorova, "Proza L. Petrushevskoi kak sistema diskursov" (Kazan Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 2008) 18.

The shadow of *Nasledstvennost'* (Heredity) certainly hangs over Anna Andrianovna's family. The question of whether this threat is a legitimate one, however, and whether the madness plaguing them is rooted in nature, are other matters entirely. It is Alyona, not Alexei or Tima, who is insistently labeled pathological by Anna, an impulse that emerges any time Alyona refutes Anna's version of events or dismisses her opinion. When Alyona correctly accuses her mother of reading her diary, Anna retaliates with a flurry of dismissive diagnoses: "Paranoia and schizophrenia, just a persecution complex" (50). The appearance of these three terms in particular is far from incidental; nor is it a coincidence that they appear directly after a clash over literary privacy. The most common diagnoses given to dissidents via systematic political abuse of psychiatry within the Soviet Union were precisely schizophrenia, paranoia, and a persecution complex. This allowed psychiatrists to check deviation from State thought while simultaneously asserting that patients were imagining their repression.[186] As Rebecca Reich has documented, the most famous targets of punitive psychiatry were often authors, poets, and editors.[187] Yet Anna's instinct to utilize literature in labeling (un)health and (in)sanity has roots that run far deeper than the Soviet period. Irina Sirotkina has chronicled the extent to which late Nineteenth Century psychiatrists interpreted literature as both an indicator of, and a tool for, ensuring the nation's well-being. By the early Twentieth Century, when insanity reached its thematic peak among Silver Age fiction writers, psychiatry had come to rely so much on fiction for its "illustrations of decline, degeneration, mental instability, and lack of ideals" that the field began "identify[ing] in literature an index of mental health."[188]

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[185] Helena Goscilo, Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost (University of Michigan Press, 1996) 95.

[186] Between 1988 and 1989, roughly two million people were removed from their indefinite stay on psychiatric registries, one of the conditions for Soviet psychiatrists' readmission to the World Psychiatric Association after their ejection in 1983. This move helped bring discussion of punitive psychiatry into mainstream conversation in the late Soviet period. Andrei Kovalyov, "Vzgliad ochevidtsa ne predystoriiu priniatiia zakona o psykhiatricheskoi pomoshchi," Nezavizimiy Psikhiatricheskiy Zhurnal 3 (2007): 82-84.

Anna's obsession with *plokhaia krov'* (bad blood) is a markedly fictional one, drawing heavily on Fyodor Dostoevsky. When she warns Alyona of a supposed matrilineal history of sex-triggered mental illness, attempting to scare her into chastity, Anna paraphrases Ivan from *Brat'ia Karamazovy* (Brothers Karamazov, 1880), substituting insect sexuality for feminine hysteria. When wrangling her mother in the asylum, descriptions of Sima's emaciated and excrement-covered body are interspersed with Anna's babbling to a nurse she calls Sonichka, prompting a direct reference to the Sonya who cures Raskolnikoff's monomania in *Prestuplenie i Nakazanie* (Crime and Punishment, 1866). Moreover, while late Twentieth Century women's literature was indeed marked by a stress on the physically and mentally grotesque, these visceral details were novel only to the extent that they described female writing. Andrei Sinyavsky (1925-1997) was among several authors who charted the rise of the grotesque, failing body in later Soviet literature, a figure whose tragicomic dimensions were as metaphorically potent as they were viscerally described. These pitiable, disgusting, and bizarre formations were a potent counter to the heroes of Soviet Realism, whose fictional bodies were by decree youthful, useful, strong, and whole.[189]

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[187] The diagnosis of "sluggish" schizophrenia, a disorder only recognized within the USSR, was especially notorious in this regard. Its asymptomatic form meant there was no need for patients to demonstrate psychotic behavior, since a diagnosis operated on the assumption that such symptoms would inevitably show up later. After release, patients were often deprived of credibility, civil rights, or chances for employment. Rebecca Reich, State of Madness: Psychiatry, Literature, and Dissent After Stalin (Northern Illinois University Press, 2018) 5-6.

[188] Irina Sirotkina, Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880-1930 (The Johns Hopkins UP, 2002) 143-144.

By the end of her narrative, the linguistic grotesqueries Anna utilizes to denigrate other women's bodies, and the literarily-indebted diagnoses she piles on Alyona, take on a threatening life of their own. Hearing her neighbor Nyura chopping bones for soup, Anna interprets the sound as "the blows of fate," a reference to the relentless chop of the axe at the end of Chekhov's *Vishnevyi sad* (The Cherry Orchard, 1903). This connection is only strengthened when Anna discovers that the family emptied out their possessions and left her, an echo of the manservant Firs' fate when he discovers his "family" — his former owners — have boarded him up inside their abandoned house. Rather than the chopping of trees, however, Anna's abandonment is accompanied by the macabre and considerably more visceral image of an old woman hacking up bones, suggesting the idea that her narrative powers are literally about to swallow her up.

When Alyona sends Anna's diary to the editor, it bears the title *Notes from the Table's Edge.* Readers familiar with the Russian canon will immediately pick up the reference to Dostoevsky's novella *Zapiski iz podpol'ia* (Notes from the Underground, 1864), an impression furthered the editor noting Alyona's package is similarly anonymous: "no return address, no surname" (5). It is unclear whether Anna or Alyona titled the diary; regardless, the similarities between

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[189] Inna Tigountsova argues that the grotesqueries of Night Time owe allegiance not only to this counter-Soviet production, but to the nation's burgeoning postmodernist movement. Sima's symptoms strongly evoke "practical schizophrenia," a condition that Russian critic Viacheslav Kuritsyn deems a persistent feature of that movement's early days. Inna Tigountsova, The Ugly in Russian Literature: Dostoevsky's Influence on Iurii Mamleev, Liudmila Petrushevskaia and Tatiana Tolstaia (Lambert Academic, 2010) 11.

Dostoevsky's Underground Man and Petrushevskaya's Underground Woman are starkly apparent. Both take pleasure in manipulation, luxuriate in the pain of their own misfortunes, and write obsessively about their opinions through immersive, monologic diaries. They are deeply aware of, and eager to exploit, generic conventions in illustrating their particular world-view.[190]

Yet the Underground Man also, like so many Dostoevskian anti-heroes to fully, embodies the notion that a mental illness could be *literarily* infected and infectious. Despite his literary reputation as "the psychologist of psychologists," Dostoevsky joined several contemporaries in his doubts regarding the psychiatric illnesses which swarmed Russian society and filled its asylums in the late nineteenth century. He suspected that at least some of these disorders might actually be *caused* by an influx of novel discourses. Beyond the corruptive forces of social Darwinism and Western positivism, Dostoevsky suggests that xome intellectuals, tirelessly over-reading theory and endlessly imbibing novels, could literally think themselves into a mania.[191] All the editor knows about Anna is Alyona's declaration: "she was a poet" (5). The story is all that remains of Anna, and her daughter is the one ensuring it will be read. Yet the very meta-structure of Anna's madness points to the idea that this passing-on is not hopeful or healing, but rather the continuation of a toxic matrilineal preoccupation with the written word.

*Notes from the Underground* ends just as the Underground Man claims that his disease is an awareness of how emptied-out, how sterile, the human race has become. We are no longer born of fathers, but from books — and "soon, we will invent a way to born from an idea."[192]

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[190] Inna Tigountsova, "Ugliness and Family: Liudmila Petrushevskaia's *The Time: Night* and Tatiana Tolstaia's "Night"," in Rosalind Marsh, New Women's Writing in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe: Gender, Generation, and Identities (Cambridge Scholars Publications, 2012) 263-4.

[191] Sirotkina 32-7.

[192] Fyodor Dostoevsky, Zapiski iz podpol'ia (Epokha, 1864) 366.

Petrushevskaya's decision to make *Notes from the Table's Edge* a manuscript that Anna might have titled hint that her mental instability may itself be a literary affect, taken up as a tool of persuasion or aid to dramatic effect. She has made the more hellish prospects of the Underground Man's theory — being born of an idea, and then consumed by it — into a bitter reality.

### Anna Starobinets: "Somewhere I read about this…"

*Transitional Age* embodies all the hallmarks of Starobinets' work. These include not only the mental and physical degeneration that accompany characters' metamorphoses, but also the constant stoking of reader uncertainty regarding whether to interpret these transformations as neo-realist, metaphorical, or even darkly transcendent. That uncertainty is piqued throughout the story of child-victim Maksim, whose family has moved to a suburban apartment on the forest's edge after his parents' messy divorce. The story opens in third-person, as the eight-year-old boy, his mother Marina, and twin sister Vika remark on the birds swarming around the complex eating insects. A day later, Maksim gets a horrible ear infection. While he seems to recover, the boy is never the same: as the story jumps from his mother and sister considering him at age twelve, then ten, then forward to twelve again, Maksim presents as increasingly psychopathic, as well as physically alien and repulsive.[193] The narrative then skips forward to age sixteen, when Vika begins dating Maksim's classmate Lev. One day, her brother attacks them in the woods, killing Lev, taking Vika hostage, and forging a note for Marina claiming the lovers have run away.

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[193] Among the anecdotes noted by Marina and Vika are that their first cat abruptly attacked Maksim and fled; that he likely killed and ate the ear of their second kitten; that he threatened to murder a classmate, Lev, for telling on him after stealing food; that he has been tracking his twin's menstrual cycles; that he hoards sugar under his bed and keeps rotting candies in his pillow; and that Vika left their shared room after she saw insects crawling over Maksim's sleeping body.

When Maksim himself disappears some months later, Marina enters his bedroom and discovers a secret diary within the sticky morass of his pillowcase.

Extracts from Maksim's journal reveal that his brain was infected eight years ago by a colony of ants fleeing hungry swifts. The ant queen planned to use his body to increase their longevity and become parasites on the human race, but has only succeeded in hollowing him out. The narrative shifts back to the third person as a dazed Marina is drawn to the woods. There she discovers a dead Maksim, a dying Vika, and new-born triplets: the result of the ant-boy's incestuous rape. The first baby is a stillborn, but the twins are crying, triggering Marina's maternal instincts. The story ends with her neighbors believing the mother has gone mad from losing her children, since every day she is seen carrying bags of sugar deep into the woods.

At the level of plot, Starobinets' tale is a straightforward blend of fantasy and horror. Unlike other stories in her collection, where government conspiracies or mythic struggles end up dismissed as delusions, the reality of the colony's infestation is wholly supported by the narrative. Maksim's behavior is retroactively understood as the result of super-natural intervention. The novella itself, however, needles at the complacency of that uncomplicated reading. On one level, the queen's literal plan does not erase the story's allegorical, satirical, and transcendental resonance, aspects that characters themselves take care to note as the story unfolds. More compelling, however, is the fact that the ant colony, both in its collective persona and through the mouthpiece of its queen, are not a silent force. The ants are obsessed with writing, and play with multiple registers — the faux-scientific, the messianic, the fanatically propagandic — in an attempt to both justify their infestation and assert themselves as carriers of superior knowledge. Their use of secondary speech genres persistently draws reader attention to the extent to which narrative both constructs our world and cannot fully control it. At war with their stakes in science or philosophy is the author's own casting of their story as mythic using explicitly *intra*-literary tools, which defeats all attempts by the ants to establish an extraliterary sense of authority.

Olga Lebedushkina interprets *Transitional Age* as an adaptation of Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis, 1915).[194] The stories trace a similarly devastating experience: the human being reduced to the verminous. There are even moments in *Transitional Age* that specifically echo *The Metamorphosis.* Vika's revulsion towards her twin harkens back to Grete's rejection of her brother, and Maksim's behavior, like Gregor's, becomes increasingly dictated by alien instincts like hoarding and nesting as the transformation continues.

Building on this reading, Lebedushkina positions the novella as a modern allegory for Soviet oppression. It is easy to see why she declares it "a dwarfed model of totalitarianism transformed into a microcosm." After all, the story centers around a rigidly-hierarchized force, ruled by a supreme leader that is sometimes represented through a homogenous collective. This force is wholly bent on "destroying the human personality" and "transforming the person into a means for "pragmatic problem-solving."[195] Nor do the ants deny this intention: by the end of the story, they whole-heartedly embrace it. The queen's speeches declare grandiose plans for world domination — speeches which, in another nod to totalitarian logic, become increasingly bombastic the more it becomes apparent how flawed her initial understanding was. "You give birth to a new, ideal civilization!" she trumpets while Maksim's body decays around her. "My friends! My children! We accomplish this together!" (*Transitional Age* 55). There is even a moment in Maksim's diary where the the colony, assuming the role of a propaganda newspaper, reports rapturously on the queen's unveiling of a "New Plan," a clear reference to the notorious Five Year Plans of Joseph Stalin. And in a telling moment of foreshadowing, eight-year-old Maksim expresses his distaste for their new apartment complex moments before being infested by complaining the buildings are *odinakovye* (all the same) and *nekrasivye* (ugly). These monolithic micro-districts still stand in Moscow as a reminder of the brutal process of industrialization; in-story, their hive-like structures hint at the ant colony's goal to create interchangeable human "apartments" through rigid subordination.

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[194] Olga Lebedushkina, "Our New Gothic: The Miracles and Horrors of Contemporary Prose," Russian Studies in Literature 46:4 (Fall 2010): Ibid. 89.

[195] Ibid. 88-9.

If readers approach *Transitional Age* as a Soviet allegory, however, they will quickly encounter some stumbling blocks. The ant-human hybrids which Maksim's incestuous rape of Vika produce are far from both the ideal and the horror of the New Soviet Man. This ideological exemplar was meant to be a homogenous representative of a single united people, and was represented, particularly in children's literature and propaganda materials, as physically ideal and psychologically self-mastered. When grotesque figures appeared in Soviet-era literature, they were usually tragicomic figures that rejected the flattening-out of body and mind by State ideals, not an illustration of that appalling ideal itself.[196] On the side of Kafkian allegory, meanwhile, Starobinets' decision to meticulously detail the transformation is at odds with the former's intentions. Kafka was adamant that Gregor's form not be drawn and its exact nature kept hazy, with the aim of avoiding literal readings and of cultivating sympathy for the protagonist's isolation. Starobinets' readers, in contrast, can picture the swarm of ants invading Maksim's body all too well, and the sickening details of his nesting ground and the sickly sweet odor emanating off his obese form do not lend themselves to either easy sympathy or the distance of allegory.[197]

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[196] Evgeny Steiner, Avangard i postroenie Novogo Cheloveka (New Literary Observer, 2002) 54.

Adherents to the Soviet allegorical reading may dismiss these details, or even utilize them as proof of the awful reality of living through totalitarian rule. Alongside Marina and Vika's revulsion towards Maksim's instinctively *wrong* body is the sense that it houses "an inexorable and calm power," a numbing will before which traditional bonds are obliterated. His own mother, pinned under the Maksim-Colony's gaze, becomes "small, helpless, and stupid," aware of but unable to resist the force that "subordinate[s] her will" (15-16). If we accept this reading, however, then the ant colony asserts its ultimate power in a way that undermines their authority over their own narrative. Their seemingly independent initiative to conquer humanity and proclaim themselves masters of the universe has already been dictated by the literary precedents that came before them, guaranteeing their success in such a way that they may only do so through the restrictive lens of a cautionary parable.

This reading of *Transitional Age* as an adaptation of *The Metamorphosis* is further complicated by a second meta-literary framing, one which brackets the first-person sections of the work. It is my contention that Maksim's diary is a direct call-back to Nikolai Gogol's "Zapiski sumasshedshego" (Diary of a Madman, 1835). Presented in the form of a diary, the story traces civil servant Poprishchin's descent into psychosis. Several compelling similarities emerge when reading the two works side by side, particularly the destructive effects of what I term "discursive infestation" on both narrators' minds.[198] While no literal parasite influences Poprishchin's actions, there is a figurative one whose presence is equally invasive: This man named Po-*prishch*-in believes he has a *prishch* (pimple) settled under his tongue, and "in it a small worm" that directs his thoughts.[199] It is no coincidence that this worm is nestled beneath an organ of speech, as Poprishchin is obsessed with narrative production. In the end, Gogol's madman cannot think himself out of Language, in whose webs he gets increasingly tangled. The more delusional he becomes, the more his speech shifts from idiomatic *skaz*[200] and frequent grammar mistakes to sophisticated, highly "literary" writing. The possessed Maksim, in turn, eventually decides that it is only by losing his individuality to the ants' discursive power that he will learn their truth. "Once I don't exist completely," he writes, "I'll discover their goal" (48). This echos Poprishchin's belief that writing down new identities will enable him to absorb their power, as well as his seeming eventual consumption by writing itself.[201]

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[197] Susan Bernofsky, "On Translating Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis,'" The New Yorker 18 June 2017.

Of particular note concerning Starobinets' exchange of the allegorical for the viscerally real are Maksim's nightmares. While the "troubled dreams" that precede Gregor's transformation remain undisclosed, Maksim dutifully relays the repulsive details of his own visions, including one where fangs split open his mouth and the boy eats his own egg-filled excrement. The unflinching specifics of these dreams are matched by the horrific reality of his daily descent into full infestation, his devolving mental state meticulously recorded in his diary.

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[198] At the start of Maksim's diary, the then six-year-old's entries are filled with spelling and grammar errors. Once the colony takes hold in his brain, however, these mistakes disappear — despite the ants apparently having no previous knowledge of human languages, they nonetheless master Language through their destructive infestation. This pattern almost exactly replicates Poprishchin's own turn from a clunky writer to a master of Russian, ironically as his mental state deteriorates more and more. Maksim's dated diary entries, and the third-person narratives habit of jumping back and forth in time, also echo Poprishchin's own obsessive dating in his journal, where the numbers eventually become nonsensical.

[199] Nikolai Gogol, Zapiski sumasshedshego — Knigi, izmenivshie mir (ACT, 2020) 43.

[200] *Skaz* is a Russian literary device that blends oral storytelling with written narrative. It can also be used to mark a character's background through dialect and local slang. Mikhail Bakhtin is careful to note the distinction between its straightforward deployment as a marker of social difference and what he terms Gogol's and Dostoevsky's "double-voiced" *skaz*, utilized for parody rather than authenticity. Mikhail Bakhtin, Sobranie Sochinenii v semi tomakh: Problemy poètiki Dostoevskogo, 1963; Raboty 1960-x — 1970-x gg (Institut Mirovoi Literatury, 2002) 85-87.

[201] Richard Gregg, "Gogol's 'Diary of a Madman': The Fallible Scribe and the Sinister Bulge," The Slavic and East European Journal 43.3 (Autumn, 1999): 446-447.

"Diary of a Madman" has often been interpreted as a cultural satire. Poprishchin's obsession with social climbing and final delusion that he is royalty serves as Gogol's critique of Peter I's civil service reforms and emphasis on public identity.[202] Yet the short story is equally remarkable for the pathos of Poprishchin's descent. As a result, it has also been cited as a searing depiction of the ravages of mental illness: whether due to bitter social realities or biomedical causes, Poprishchin is approached by many critics not as a satirical figure, but as a literal victim of abyssal insanity.[203] Maksim's degeneration may be caused by something out of Lovecraftian horror, yet its effects still imitate (at various points) schizophrenia, dementia, and split personality disorder before settling into severe psychopathy. Nor can readers attempting to read *Transitional Age* as either allegory or satire ignore the ways in which, like Gogol's victim, Maksim's condition becomes increasingly literal in its derangement.[204]

We may manage to balance *Transitional Age* as both a Soviet allegory building off Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and a combined social satire and psychological drama inspired by "Diary of a Madman." This reading only does more, however, to constrict the ants' own quest for narrative dominance. In many ways, they are as much like Poprishchin as Maksim; they too desire not just "copying documents for [their] own pleasure, but in writing a diary to justify

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[202] Ibid. 440, 444.

[203] Scholars have provided diagnoses for Poprishchin that range from megalomania to pre-Freudian repression to "one of [literature's] oldest and most extensive descriptions of schizophrenia." See, for example, Eric Lewin Altschuler, "One of the Oldest Cases of Schizophrenia in Gogol's "Diary of a Madman," British Medical Journal 323.7327 (Dec. 22-29, 2001): 1476.

[204] When Lev is being throttled by Maksim, he realizes the teenager's eyes have transformed: one pupil has almost completely disappeared, while the other eye is fully dilated. "It means that he has something wrong with his brain," the boy thinks. "Perhaps a tumor… somewhere I read about this…" (29). To some extent, he is right. It may not be a clump of cancer cells, but Maksim does indeed have a malignant growth, a parasite like Poprishchin's worm, wreaking considerable psychological and physiological damage.

[themselves] and wreak [their] vengeance upon the world."[205] The queen and her colony are similarly unable to assert any ultimate authority. Increasingly, the ants comfort themselves precisely *by* copying documents for pleasure: specifically, passages from a scientific study that celebrates ants' ecological importance and elaborate social structure. The diary, initially a record of their triumph, becomes an expression of the queen's compulsion to "put things in order" (44), and of the colony's desire to hang on to self-importance in the face of death. Poprishchin's stories entrap him because he cannot separate fiction from reality. More so than Maksim himself, the queen-colony follows Poprishchin's tactics to the point where it may have driven the ants themselves insane. As the years pass, both colony and queen experiment with different discursive registers: sometimes the relationship of a young child to a mother, at others that of a team of scientists to a review board, and at still others that of a conformist mass before a powerful dictator. Starobinets' engagement with Gogol produces a figure for whom the act of writing itself becomes intoxicating and enmeshing, and where madness moves from an abstracted condemnation of the state to a visceral, multiply embodied reality.

Starobinets' references to Kafka and Gogol cast Maksim's transformation through many generic lens, all of which simultaneously support the ants' authority and undermine their justifications for claiming it. After the reveal that Maksim has in fact been infested and hollowed out, however, his madness is given a distinctly mythical weight.[206] The boy's deadened, chilling gaze; the disgusting body that seems as though it cannot have been birthed from a human woman; his maniacal obsessions and horrific eating habits — all these things hint, as his mother Marina notes early on, at something "mournful, painful, otherworldly" (4).

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[205] Richard F. Gustafson, "The Suffering Usurper: Gogol's 'Diary of a Madman," The Slavic and East European Journal 9.3 (1965): 268.

The terror of puberty or sexual release changing one's child into a monster is a common thread in the fairy tale canon, and remains strikingly present in neo-Gothic retellings. Dina Khapaeva argues that the resurgence of monsters in post-Soviet fiction, including parasites like the vampire and drones like the zombie, are patently metaphorical "examinations of suppressed memory and the mechanisms of creating history."[207] Pustovaia similarly casts the "reconceptualization of mythological consciousness" evoked in recent literature as a call back to archaic sensations in the face of brutal historical realities, citing Starobinets as a particular master of this style.[208]

What is strange about this neo-Gothic emphasis is that it both positions the colony's success as inevitable and runs the most counter to the colony's own positioning of their invasion. The ants try desperately to present their project not only as one of political domination but of immense scientific advancement.[209] Yet Starobinets brackets each sections with nursery rhymes, all of which allegedly trace back centuries and all of which anticipate key plot points. Before Marina first enters the woods, a subtitle then appears. Rather than snippets of a nursery rhyme, this is an all-caps date: "YEAR ONE." The apocalyptic finality of this subtitle implies that the ants will be successful in their long-term plan to infect more humans and produce generations of host-hybrids. Yet its framing presence in the story also jolts the fantastic back into the realist, layering the mythological onto actions that, in the minds of those committing them, are nothing of the sort. This outcome produces effects on the reader that are not matched at the level of plot; and the mythic genre, which demands top-down authority, triggers an affect weight even when its is at odds with characters' basic claims.

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[206] Nor is he such a random choice for infestation as he first appears. His grandmother Sara gave birth to "three twin children" during the war, and "the mysterious 'several doubles' gene" is so strong that it is passed on to Marina's children, making Vika's birth to triplets one in a line of at least three such perfectly delineated birth-lines. It is this gene that proves crucial to the ants' success, as the birth of triplets (one genderless stillborn alongside a healthy boy and girl) allows thei colony to move to new hosts. This gene, meanwhile, is linked to "[Sara's] feline physiology" (20). Given that Maksim's metamorphosis goes hand in hand with their pet cats' instinctual hostility — culminating in the first cat's attacking Maksim and then fleeing, and the second kitten's crawling over Maksim before being discovered dead — this characterization can hardly be a coincidence.

[207] Dina Khapaeva, "Soviet and post-Soviet Moscow: literary reality or nightmare?," in Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly ed. Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities (Cambridge UP, 2012) 182-3.

[208] Pustovaia 50-51.

[209] At one point, the colony files its "experiment" under the name *NKPVZH:* Scientific Royal Division "Together — Life," presenting a report on their hypothesis and methods as though they were a panel of government scientists.

Pustovaia argues that the folktale is a direct challenge to the myth. "Opposing the canon's totalitarianism," the modern folktale is especially deconstructionist, so that "deprived of any central support for its events," the resulting story eventually "scatters into a broken necklace of disconnected motifs."[210] In Starobinets' story, however, myth and the folktale act in concert, bracketing the colony's infestation. It is the colony itself that is futilely "scatter[ing] the broken necklace," refusing to accept the idea that they themselves are over-written; this, in turn, deprives their myth of the intentionality it needs to be cast as both fully transcendent and rooted in a great knowledge alien to the mortal world.

When Marina first tries to downplay Maksim's mental disturbances, she relies on the cliché that he is going through a *perekhodnyi vozrast'* — a transitional or awkward age. This euphemism for puberty easily extends to the monstrous transition period through which the ant colony dies and is reborn, heralding a new era of infesting overlords. Yet the title of Starobinets' novella has a third potential meaning: the awkward movement between competing worldviews for readers themselves, embodied in the abrupt transitions between genres that operate in the text. These transitions operate within the broader framing narrative, which contains a story of grotesque realism within the bounds of fairy tale and mythical logic. It is also at work, however, within the manic dialectic transformations of the ant queen and her colony.

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[210] Pustovaia 50.

"Even in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation," Bakhtin argues in his discussion on speech genres, "we cast our speech in definite generic forms, sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic, and creative ones."[211] The colony, in contrast to the everyday human Bakhtin refers to here, appear hyper-aware of the various discursive registers they can employ to claim knowledge, mutate their identity, and justify their actions. Unlike Anna Andrianovna, who attempts to lay claim to fictional tropes even as they undermines her, the ant queen endlessly attempts to resist the literary web on which her existence depends, and through which readers must interpret her to believe the story's ending. Her colony fights, unsuccessfully, to deploy rhetoric from scientific research and political conquest. Yet Maksim's fate is "written out," the ants' success sealed but unearned, through Starobinets' anchoring in Kafka, in Gogol, and in the folkloric and mythic stories that buttress the New Gothic.

## Beyond Worship or Play: Interrogating the Author as Authority

Lev Loseff argues that Imperial and Soviet-era censorship forced authors to create a new style of expression rooted in an unresolvable tension between the outward-facing "social-ideological orbit" and the insular "literary aesthetic." Ambivalence and internal contradiction drove literary output. In a constant race against the censors, their forms were "multifarious and changeable," spurring remarkable innovation and incredible depth of thought within works of veiled dissent.[212] The epistemological destabilization affected by *Night Time* and *Transitional Age*, then, extends far beyond the works' bindings. It points to how the final hollowing-out of extraliterary authorities comes as literature loses its most fervent champion in the form of its bitterest enemy.

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[211] Mikhail Bakhtin, Problema rechevykh zhanrov (Russkie Slovari, 1996) 14-15.

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya is intimately aware of the vaunted status the Author holds in Russian tradition. The title reached its peak when Lev Tolstoy assumed the mantle of spiritual prophet, and continued on through Akhmatova's status as cultural martyr. "I was terribly conscious of the huge moral demands made on writers in Russia, the passion and modesty required of them," Petrushevskaya recalls of her early days as a writer. "As you know,"

> Russian literature has been a kind of religion in this country — a religion based on the moral position of the writers, on their suffering. All our greatest writers have been sufferers and saints: Pushkin, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Bulgakov — all of them.[213]

Anna Starobinets is similarly weighted down by the collective legacies of those writers with whom she engages. She has often fought for her work to be read outside the often-denigrated fantasy ghetto by calling Gogol and Bulgakov to her defense, only to reflexively clarify that she is not "standing in their row… [but] just trying to explain" her perspective.[214]

This traditional deference is countered by their view of themselves as authors. Petrushevskaya has cast Chekhov and Pushkin as "dear, kindred spirits who don't know that I exist," in marked contrast to the "unchanging passion and jealousy" with which many of her fellows still treat the classics.[215] Starobinets similarly finds joy in "conversing" with Russian authors. She frequently places them in conversation with foreign favorites like Kafka and ETA Hoffmann, and compares them to considerably less vaunted writers like the American horror writer Stephen King and British fantasist Neil Gaiman.[216]

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[212] Loseff 36.

[213] Petrushevskaya as quoted in Tatiana V. Keeling, Surviving in Post-Soviet Russia: Magical Realism in the Works of Viktor Pelevin, Ludmila Petrushevskaya, and Ludmila Ulitskaya (Arizona State UP, 2008) 165.

[214] Starobinets and Reiter: www.bbc.com/russian/features-44964400.

How, then, are we to interpret the crucial role of the author as an ultimate authority in both *Night Time* and *Transitional Age*? After all, lackluster poet Anna Andrianovna succumbs to literary traditions in part due to their expert wielding by Petrushevskaya, a woman noted for being an "extraordinarily solid writer" despite intertwining "not only the realistic and postmodern, but also sentimentalist, baroque, romantic, naturalistic, modernist intensities" across her many works.[217] Starobinets, for her part, is an open presence in *Transitional Age* from the beginning. Her excerpted fairy tale rhymes determine reader expectations before any danger comes to the unwitting characters themselves. The ominous interjection of "YEAR ONE" before the closing pages moves her presence from one of passive framing to direct hermeneutic intervention.

From the 1980s onward, Russian writers have increasingly embraced intertextuality as an expression of postmodern rejections of author-ity, swapping the surety of enclosed, pristine knowledge for a glut of multivaried discourses. Works were not only stuffed with literary allusions, but often explicitly framed by and titled after canonical texts.[218] In many cases, their goal appeared to be endless play, exposing the fragmented, hollowed-out nature of these reverent anchors. Examining Petrushevskaya's and Starobinets' novellas in the context of their broader oeuvre, however, hints that while they approach texts as an ongoing conversation"between the writing subject and the addressee, the character, or other narratives,"[219] they do not engage in this conversation simply to up-root authorities and be on their way.

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[215] Petrushevskaya and Garza: www.kirkusreviews.com/news-and-features/articles/complete-interview-ludmilla-petrushevskaya/.

[216] Starobinets and Burk: docplayer.ru/35096216-Intervyu-s-annoy-starobinec-besedovali-anna-burk-i-barbara-yanish.html.

[217] Prokhorova 4.

*Night Time* and *Transitional Age* do assert the emptiness of supposedly extraliterary sites of narrative authority. They place whole systems of knowledge in doubt through their inability to conceptualize characters' sicknesses. Yet they do not allow this to undercut the presence of the author in their works. On the contrary, the presence of some narrative authority, which may or may not be the authors themselves,[220] is omnipresent and sometimes overbearing. While Anna Andrianovna dominates the epistolary form, most of Petrushevskaya's writings are third-person accounts by an unnamed narrator employing an unusual form of *skaz.*[221] This produces a voice that is more collective and knowing than Gisèle Pineau's gossipy interjectors, but one who is also clearly not omniscient. What results is that each story combines a slightly different narrative positioning within some slightly altered generic hybrid.[222] While a bleak fate is likely, how the story is cast — supernatural, realist, satiric — and the subsequent reaction readers have to the characters depicted can vary greatly from text to text. Anna Starobinets' occasional embracing of outright rather than implied supernatural takes this one step further. Each tale within the collection *Transitional Age* provides multiple generic lens through which readers might interpret the story, only for Starobinets to upend most of them by settling definitively yet seemingly arbitrarily on one. She provides readers with a general "key" to reading each story at the end, yet doing so only draws our attention again and again to our powerlessness amidst the whim of the Author.[223] Nor is there much room within each story to budge once this interpretation is laid down: the horror of her stories, as Pustovaia remind us, lie in "their unique documentary quality," the way they unfold in such a matter-of-fact fashion.[224]

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[218] Lyudmila Parts, "Down the Intertextual Lane: Petrushevskaia, Chekhov, Tolstoy," The Russian Review 64.1 (2005) 77-8. Among the examples of this trend that Parts references are: Vladimir Makanin's Underground or a Hero of Our Time (referencing Dostoevsky and Lermontov), Evgenii Popov's On the Eve of Eve (referencing Turgenev), and Sergey Soloukh's Sergeant Prishibeev's Club of Lonely Hearts (alluding to Chekhov).

[219] Kurmann 7.

[220] It should be noted that neither Petrushevskaya nor Starobinets have ever taken up the mad label or disclosed any background of psychiatric treatment, despite the frequent theme of mental illness in their work. The reasons for this are manifold: while it is very possible that their works do not draw on personal experience at all, it is also crucial to remember the prevailing stigma against mental illness in Russia, and the all-too-recent history of psychiatric misdiagnosis being utilize to silence writers. These combined factors offer abundant reasons for why engagement with the author-as-authority in mad literature is here cast not through auto-fiction destabilization but rather an interrogation of the author's presence in general.

[221] This form is marked by "special traits of a non-literary narrator," mixing "official-business" and "ordinary conversational" styles. Elena Nevzgliadova, "Siuzhet dlia nebol'shogo rasskaza," Novyi Mir 4 (1988): 259.

Petrushevskaya and Starobinets bring the tension surrounding the Author as Authority to a head. In doing so, they employ a kind of frame-breaking[225] that emphasizes not just the incompatibility of these layered discourses, but also the imbalance between literary authority's seduction and its outcomes. Stories about the lack of both narrative and discursive control on the part of writerly characters are accompanied by disorientation not so much over what the author really thinks but over whether any answers exist to begin with.

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[222] Intertextual allusion and genre experimentation are nothing new for Anna's author. "If genre is a way of approaching reality," Sally Dalton-Brown argues, "then Petrushevskaia refuses to set her visions of reality in any non-mobile forms." Such relentless subversion and hybridization bring the narrative assumptions that undergird each genre to the fore: "a set of conventions, of mutually agreed communications strategies, and, more significantly, a set of implicit expectations" that establish common ground for readers. These are then overturned, or at least complicated, by Petrushevskaya. Dalton-Brown 15.

[223] One story in the collection, "Yashina Vechnost'" (Yasha's Eternity) centers around a man who wakes up to find his heart is no longer beating. The story spends most of its time masquerading as a Gogolian satire, only to switch genres when the tormented Yasha throws himself out a window. Suddenly, readers are transferred to a quasi-hagiographic genre, where the protagonist is now free of both mortality and time and witnesses the end of the human race. In "Agentstvo" (Agency), a different bait-and-switch takes place. The Agent, having spent the story working for an underground agency that assassinates people based on fiction their clients write, suddenly realizes the Agency is the product of his deranged brain — only to forget this information and repeat the process all over again.

[224] Pustovaia 51.

[225] Nancy Luxon's conception of frame breaking draws attention to modern crises of authority through the friction and sometimes total breakdown that comes from moving claims across different sites, like those of 'science, literature, history, or law." She draws on Judith Butler's definition of iterability — "the operation of that metalepsis by which the subject who 'cites' the performance is temporarily produced as the belated and fictive origin of the performative itself" — to demonstrate the simultaneous reliance and subordination of authorization in declaring a claim. Luxon 268.

### Conclusions

The question of just who (or what) is writing in Anna Andrianovna's journal by the end of *Night Time* is up for debate. Near the end of the novella, her virulent words are for once directed at herself. Alternating between vicious self-recrimination and pitiful moans, she declares herself "scum": "you live like a parasite, you don't think about anything, only your poetry, sure you cry now, howl, to the hospital I don't have time, I don't have time oooo!" (*Night Time* 155-156). Immediately after this seeming wake-up call, however, Anna notes that Alyona is calling for her to stop moaning. Readers are thus reminded that what comes across as spontaneous effusion is a written text, a breakdown being carefully dictated as it occurs. When Anna reaches the hospital, this new writing style returns in force. In sharp contrast to the short, complete sentences that make up the bulk of the work, Anna's breakdown near the close is signaled by run-ons that move quickly through one observation to another, eventually devolving into babbling. Readers are left with two options, equally horrifying in their own way: either Anna is so self-constructed that she is compelled to dictate her own breakdown, or her pen has become so self-reliant that it is, in fact, mapping her reality by itself.

But Anna is not alone in her over-reliance on literary scripting. Her comparison of herself to the Oracle of Delphi when giving a poetry reading at a children's camp is merely a more bombastic version of her mother Sima’s attitudes before he dementia. Alyona’s decision to transcribe Anna’s fight with Sima in her diary like a dramatic production indicates that she, too, is fast succumbing to the lure of authorial distance. Even outside the family, it seems only writers exist in Anna’s world. The story opens with her visit to a friend whose son is marooned in an endless dissertation project, its subject — Lenin — apparently a constant theme in the academically oriented family. Her acquaintances are all poets, editors, and magazine directors. The only direct dialogue readers receive outside the family is her conversation with a fellow presenter at the children’s reading. Wherever the reader may turn, there are only grabs for narrative authority through the assertion of literary genealogies, and only claims to knowledge that ultimately end up rooted in fictional precedents.

*Transitional Age* centers around a boy and his parasite, both obsessive readers and writers. As the infestation worsens, both become increasingly sensitive to what Bakhtin calls “secondary speech genres,” linguistic expressions that arise “in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication” rather than in primary or simple speech. The queen becomes increasingly able to manipulate these complex forms, inter-splicing discursive registers even as she expands the collective voice of her colony to include herself, her children, Maksim, and every combination thereafter. The more skilled she becomes, however, the less able she also is to control how these secondary genres “lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others.”[226] Words that she dictates become less and less her own in direct relation to the authoritative power they grant her.

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[226] Bakhtin Problema rechevykh zhanrov 22.

Marina is not obsessed with scripting like the other "mother." Nonetheless, she is captured by this now-overpowering discourse from the moment she reads through Maksim's diary. When she sees the wailing ant-human hybrids before her, human-oriented approaches to their care are abruptly pre-empted by recitation, specifically a line from the textbook the colony pasted in Maksim's journal. "'The working ants feed themselves and feed the larvae with secretions from their salivary glands,' she said *with her lips alone*" (*Transitional Age* 63, Italics mine). This directive acts in an almost talismanic fashion, becoming the sole focus of her shell-shocked mind. Just as Maksim himself is earlier over-*written* by the narrative power of the queen and her subjects, Marina overcome as much by that lingering power as by any maternal instinct.

G.G. Pisarevskaya argues that Russian women's writing, like its counterparts around the world, often strives toward "the possibility of working out a new word, a new artistic vision." They often attempt this "working out" not through the creation of the new word as such, but through the initial unsettling of old words, overlapping and gutting them.[227] As both Petrushevskaya and Starobinets indicate, this unsettling cannot rely on intra-literary play alone without the risk of folding character and reader back into a solipsistic loop. The final verdicts on Anna and Maksim — "she was a poet"; "he was a vessel" — are uncomfortably close in their ultimate meaning. Both indicate the continuation of a toxic preoccupation with the written word, ultimately as useless an essential authority as what came before it. Without stable methods of either communication or knowledge, Petrushevskaya's characters remain perched on the edge of an existential void, in constant danger of into "that madness in which one loses rational speech and mutters idiotic phrases."[228] Starobinets' victims, for their part, remain trapped in a swirling abyss of facts without foundations, given purpose only through the over-written fates of their generic boundaries.[229]

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[227] Pisarevskaya as quoted in C.A. Vinogradova, "Ideino èsteticheskoe svoeobrazie Russkoi Postmodernistskoi Prozy 70-90 gg.," Mir Nauki, Kultury, Obrazovaniia 4.23 (2010): 39.

Neither Ludmilla Petrushevskaya nor Anna Starobinets desire to leave readers with this level of fatalism. They are not content to rest within a society fueled by a ravenous void, an "insatiable" emptiness" wherein "it is required to throw manuscript after manuscript into this hole, to use all suitable material in writing, so that at least something finally responds."[230] In the next two chapters, I shall examine how they, along with Linda Lê and Gisèle Pineau, work to move beyond the fragile truce or false cover forged by mad literature in relation to epistemic and hermeneutic authority. All four authors, in dramatically distinct ways, are committed to mad literature's potential for channeling, declaring, or even creating truths, an authenticity that is antithetical to authority-as-such and yet carries its own significant weight.

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[228] Dalton-Brown 192.

[229] In a cruel twist, Maksim's fate in Transitional Age had already been written by the boy himself. After learning of his parents' divorce, the six-year-old decides he will no longer confide in his diary, explicitly connecting his rejection of writing with the disruption of the script his life was meant to follow. Before doing so, he composes a story about *toboty* (a misspelling of *roboty* or "robots"). Maksim and his friends travel to a new planet in a spaceship, observe their enemies through the portals of their aircraft, and overcome the robot hoard, using their superior technology and smarts to outwit the automatons. It is not difficult to see connections between this story and Maksim's narrative journey: observed by the colony, infested by the queen, and hollowed out into a robot-puppet.

[230] Anonymous, "Analiziruia tvorchestvo Liudmily Petrushevskoi": www.allsoch.ru/sochineniya/13599.

# CHAPTER 3

## No-Thing To See: Petrushevskaya and Pineau in the Search for Truths To Come

> I always wrote for myself. The story knocked into my head, all at once,
> to the last word. And it was impossible not to write it down,
> just as in the ninth month it was impossible not to give birth.
> — Ludmilla Petrushevskaya[231]

> It's rather my crusade, to denounce:
> this is what we create, this what is around you,
> and we don't look at these people like human beings.
> — Gisèle Pineau[232]

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and Gisèle Pineau are experts at undermining the supremacy of knowledge. Within Petrushevskaya's bleak tales, facts mean little with no authoritative frameworks to bolster them, and no belief in their transcendence beyond desperation. While such frameworks do exist for Pineau, their combined knowledge does not add up to anything sufficient to tackle areas beyond their limited scope. While their use of literary tools help bring these issues to the fore, meanwhile, neither turns to their craft as a replacement authority in and of itself. Petrushevskaya's *Night Time* serves as a powerful attack on the "fetishism of literature," warning against the temptation to conflate fiction's undeniable power with some essential transcendence.[233] Pineau, for her part, ends her novel by emphasizing the tenuous nature of the relief granted by literature's juggling of competing epistemological sites. Words are as parasitic and predatory in *Chili-Skin* as they are comforting, and what guarantee readers have of one poem's supposed capacity for deliverance is tempered by other forms' paucity and perversion in the pages preceding it. Still, denouncing these pitfalls and exposing these traps are not enough. Characters across their oeuvres continue to search for some form of authentic expression that need not be tied to an existing authority. And while the notion of literature carrying ultimate knowledge is rejected, Petrushevskaya and Pineau consistently emphasize the importance of truth to their artistic process, even as neither will define it.

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[231] Petrushevskaya, in response to the question: "What do you think stories are written for? Or for whom: for yourself or for others too […]who are we trying to save - ourselves or someone else?" Petrushevskaya and Birger.

[232] Pineau and Jurney 108.

[233] This is a warning echoed by French philosopher Alain Badiou, whose own approach to literature is placed in stark contrast to the "philosophic cult of poets" begun in Germany and taken up (in his view) by contemporaries Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. Alain Badiou, Manifeste pour la philosophie (Éditions du Seuil, 1988) 47.

The following chapter begins by asking what distinctions these women make between knowledge and truth, on the one hand, and literature's authority and authenticity, on the other. I examine Petrushevskaya by building on the theories of French philosopher Alain Badiou (1937-), and analyze Pineau through the lens of Russian philosopher Lev Shestov (1866-1938). Both Badiou and Shestov see the overriding emphasis on epistemology as a path to truth as an original error of philosophy. They also identify art, and in particular literature, as one method through which to begin correcting that error. The two men differ significantly, however, in the steps they take as a result of this philosophical about-face, steps which serve to illuminate similar divergences in the approaches and ultimate goals of Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and Gisèle Pineau.

## Ludmilla Petrushevskaya: The Void as No-Thing

Despite its iconic status in her oeuvre, and the amount of critical attention lavished upon it, Petrushevskaya's *Night Time* is something of an aberration in form. Thematically, it exemplifies her focus on desperate but predatory maternal figures amidst a host of physically and spiritually sick characters, all caught up in the bleak morass of late and post-Soviet deprivation. Nonetheless, *Night Time* remains her only venture into a purely epistolary format. The claustrophobic sense of time and space collapsing around the narrative is not nearly so stifling in her other prose, nor in her dramas. In no other work are readers so inescapably trapped in the text, with only a monomaniacal graphomaniac to guide them.

Petrushevskaya's "V dome kto-to est'" (There's someone in the house, 1991) is striking in its thematic similarities to *Night Time.* Yet its style signals the author's move to the folkloric-realistic tone that would become her trademark from the mid-1990s onward. "There's someone" is set some years after the breakdown of a family unit. A middle-aged woman grapples with the dissolution of both her marriage and a mother-daughter relationship, though the story never makes clear whether the protagonist was the parent or the child. The plot shifts when, alone with her cat Lyalka, the woman becomes convinced that someone or something is in the apartment with them. She begins a campaign to drive the unseen creature out, in the process destroying mementos and tossing prized possessions out the window. Eventually, she decides even the cat must go, to avoid it being sacrificed. The petrified Lyalka, however, refuses to leave the doorway. Realizing the cat needs her, the protagonist changes gears, retrieving Lyalka as well as some belongings. She can now sense nothing unusual in the apartment, though there are hints this quasi-exorcism may be part of an ongoing cycle. Nonetheless, the cat settles down to eat, having "decided to go on living" ("There's someone" 13).

A crucial difference between Anna and the unnamed protagonist comes at the level of artistic investment. The latter shows little interest in literary pursuits, instead drawn to television for its welcome stimulation and the fleeting sense of attachment it gives her with the outside world. While the Mother initially wanted her Daughter to become a famous pianist, and openly despaired over her mediocre abilities, the current Mother-Daughter of the short story appears to have recognized the waste of energy this fruitless endeavor entailed. What literary references appear, meanwhile, are off-handedly mentioned and do little to directly influence the plot.[234]

Alongside this loosening of intertextual rigidity is an accompanying relinquishment of narrative control. Readers dip in and out of the Mother-Daughter's thoughts, but she does not directly narrate her struggle. That is the role of a narrator whose positioning is difficult to pin down: for the majority of the text, readers are simply given the woman's musings, but another voice frames the story at the start and close with short asides regarding human nature.[235] This inter-diegetic style has become a trademark of Petrushevskaya's later prose. "Despite the fact that many of her works imitate personal testimony, [and] personal acquaintance with the characters," Olga Slavnikova notes, the narrative voice is often so nebulous in its own characterization (beyond its self-apparent speech) that the reader is deprived of any "I" or "with me" to guide them in determining the narrator's positioning.[236]

Finally, and again in contrast to the claustrophobic, collapsing structure of Anna Andrianovna's diary, there is little sense of a grand plan, for good or ill. "There's someone" does not end on what Tatyana Novikov — drawing largely on *Night Time* and the similarly first-person "Svoi Krug" (Our Crowd, 1992) — calls the inescapably "apocalyptic element" of

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[234] These include moments when the narrator makes broad statements about mankind while addressing potential readers as "gentlemen" in a nod to Notes from Underground, and when the Mother-Daughter bolsters her courage by comparing her battle with the Creature to Prince Kutuzov's maneuvers against Napoleon, a historic subplot of Lev Tolstoy's War and Peace.

[235] These bracketing statements are sweeping in their scope, but relayed as though the narrator were sharing a commonly held view rather than making a grand declaration. The Mother-Daughter's decision to reverse course after seeing Lyalka's terror, for example, is accompanied by this statement: "And, as often happens, if one family member is indecisive, cowardly or hysterical, then the other family member cheers up, and literally soars off on their wings, in order to save the day" (11). The effect is less an interjection of individual will, ala Anna Andrianovna, then a reminder of the story in which we find ourselves.

[236] Olga Slavnikova, "Petrushevskaya i Pustota," Voprosy Literatury 2 (2000): https://voplit.ru/article/petrushevskaya-i-pustota/

Petrushevskaya's work, supposedly depicting "the destruction of humanity's very essence."[237] Against the obliterating impact of Anna Andrianovna's finale, "There's Someone" instead offers speculation for growth, a tentative note of hope. This is not due in any way to some special understanding on the part of the protagonist, who offers no challenge to reader assertions that "Petrushevskaya's work has, it seems, not one wise nor even simply intelligent hero."[238] What then, prompts her panic to (at least temporarily) transform into a sense of total liberation? How is literature, removed from its representative role *within* the text, presenting itself to us as readers?

Sally Dalton-Brown, in her overview of Petrushevskaya's late Twentieth Century work, casts her characters as "voices from the void," consciousnesses that are eternally fragile and constantly threatened. The void is a crucial part of Petrushevskaya's work, often cast by critics through the word *pustota* (total emptiness). Approaching it as Anna Andrianovna does, as an enemy to be subdued, produces only "that silence of isolation… that madness in which one loses rational speech and mutters idiotic phrases."[239] The potential to form relationships is severed, and the potential to form sense is canceled out. Nor is there much standing in the way of that fate. Within the "linguistic 'shell'" where her characters operate, "names, dates, and consecutive narration are kept to a minimum," so that readers can anchor no points of safety preventing the sudden and seemingly inevitable "swallow[ing]" of consciousness.[240]

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[237] Tatyana Novikov, "Requiems: Liudmila Petrushevskaia's World of Death," Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature 58.1 (2004): 35.

[238] Anonymous, "'Zhenskaia proza' Ludmilly Petrushevskoi," Free Soch: http://www.freesoch.com/sochineniya-po-avtoram/petrushevskaya-ls/zhenskaya-proza-lyudmily-petrushevskoi.

[239] Dalton-Brown 192.

[240] Ibid. 11.

For all the thematic darkness of Petrushevskaya's oeuvre, however, assuming that the Void whose edges are touched upon in her work may only be construed as Nothing — obliteration, destruction, erasure— would be to ignore the ways in which a loss of individuality and de-mooring of positionality is sometimes welcomed by characters, or at least forces them to a new understanding. While Petrushevskaya is critical of the overwhelming adulation that surrounds the author in Russian culture, she dismisses those who do not, in her view, take seriously the imperative of writing, to "write about what worries most people." This practice, while seemingly descriptive, has an active and distinctly non-fatalistic goal: an exit from the shadows into the light.[241]

Petrushevskaya's "monologue" stories, like *Night Time,* are populated by voices desperate to escape the effacing void. They share a crucial commonality: an emphasis on authority over authenticity. While these may be unheard or overlooked stories, what most binds them is their status as "texts of 'misinterpretation,' in which the narrator sheds a gloss on his/her own actions":

> These fallible narrators describe events which, although authorial irony suggests differing interpretations, are presented with a firm sense of self-righteousness which admits no public correction. The textual silence does not require the absence of others; on the contrary, the silence surrounding the characters is in fact filled with voices. The problem is that they do not hear them as they bellow self-seeking syllables into the terrifying darkness which so threatens self that all must rush to fill it.[242]

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[241] Birger.

[242] Dalton-Brown 62.

Examples from this sub-genre include not just *Night Time* and “Our Crowd,” but also “Slova” (Words), “Gost’” (Guest), and “Noch’” (Night), all from the collection *Bessmertnaia liubov’* (Immortal Love, 1988). The collective result is what the Russian critic R. Timenchik deems “illusory realism,” whereby “vaunted life is something so flat and pale, that it is almost exhausted by its involuntary reflection.”[243]

By contrast, the woman in “There’s someone in the house” and the protagonists in “Materinskii Privet” (Mother’s Regards, 1990) and “Chernoe Palt’o” (The Black Coat, 2003) are deprived of identity and positionality at the very start of their stories. They can no longer rely on empirical knowledge or social structuring. Their stories are presented as if simply found, related, and passed on. Their very status as protagonists — usually defined by individual uniqueness and firm action — is tenuous at best. These characters are forced abruptly into a situation whereby they lose all certainty, and must yield to its consequences; and readers must go on that journey too, even as we are ultimately denied whatever comes to them (or doesn’t) by the end.

Stories like “There’s someone in the house” allow us to reconceptualize the void at the heart of Petrushevskaya’s oeuvre. It is not simply the Nothing to which characters succumb, but No-Thing with which they must grapple. Rather than an empty, consuming abyss, this void is “all that can be presented, within a situation, of pure, inconsistent multiplicity, or be-ing:” all that cannot be counted, identified, defined, and structured before presented as one-ness.[244]

In the following sections, I begin by positioning “There’s someone” as Petrushevskaya’s own grappling with this conception of the void in Alain Badiou’s sense of the term. Against the oppressive *sickness* that suffuses her monologic tales, the seeming *madness* her protagonist undergoes pushes her to the limits of signification. Within the story, “regimes of the real” are held in suspension, triggering the Mother-Daughter’s radical de-individualization. This process, traumatic as it is, is paradoxically liberatory. This story is not a guide for readers to follow. It is rather Petrushevskaya’s attempt at an artistic truth process whereby meaning is subtracted, forcing us to move from the desire to “formulat[e] correct judgements” toward embracing the aim of “produc[ing] the murmur of the indiscernible.”[245]

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[243] Timenchik as quoted in Vinogradova 39.

[244] Peter Hallward, Badiou: A Subject to Truth (University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 65.

The protagonist of “There’s someone in the house” believes herself engaged in direct battle with a literal creature. Still, what threatens her existence and makes the space unlivable is not a visible, tangible thing, but “some kind of living emptiness” (1), a wandering, invisible abyss. The label she eventually places on the creature is *Tot,* an adjectival word roughly translated as “that” or “that one.” It indicates presence, but not context — being specific, without being specified.[246] The absence inherent in the creature’s presence, and the impossibility of limiting its “one-ness” as it stalks the edges of her world, suggests an alternate reading of this present but never embodied void: not as empty, but more precisely as no-thing.

The closer the protagonist gets to engaging directly with Tot, the more she does not so much “lose herself” — the ripping away of authoritative positionality that Anna fears — as potential and simultaneous "selves" begin to occupy the same space: in-cessant, in-consistent, and ultimately in-differentiated. When the story opens, the protagonist is referred to alternately as "Mistress of the Apartment" and "Woman," some of the most generic of all designations. Once she makes the decision to destroy her apartment before Tot can do so, she becomes "Mother-Daughter" (and occasionally the abbreviated "M-D") for several pages, a relation posited on opposites. She is given back the Mistress/Woman designation in a brief moment of supposed victory, then spends the final pages of the story cycling, almost per paragraph, between either "Woman" and "Mother-Daughter," before the narrative settles on "Mother *or* Daughter" in combination with "Woman" and with "Mistress."

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[245] Alain Badiou, Petit manuel d’inesthétique (Éditions du Seuil, 1998) 55, 56. Badiou distinguishes between four procedures — of politics, love, science, and art — by which a truth appears, whose “compossibilities” through philosophy will facilitate their declaration and elaboration. In contrast to the wholly collective procedure of politics and the wholly individual procedure of love, the “mixed” forms of science and art typically come from one person but reach an infinite number of others.

[246] This distinction is crucial when evaluating Petrushevskaya’s story in relation to Badiou’s void and theory of being. The specified is rooted in characteristics or essences that lead it to be objectified. By contrast, presence simply “is,” the specific “a purely relational subjective domain” — subjective in the sense of both arbitrary and immanent. Hallward, 274-5.

Badiou's conceptions of subjectivity and the subjective are radically opposed to most definitions of the term. The subjective is not reflective, but impersonal — not a static, specific being (*être*) but the rigorous, universal expression of active be-ing (*étant*), indifferent to objective difference. The process of subjectivation is thus necessarily an extreme and distressing one. Robert Hughes has convincingly argued that Badiou's void is inextricably linked to Lacan's traumatic encounter with the real, specifically "its 'extimacy' to the subject, its essential resistance to signification, and its radical potential for introducing something new."[247] In this sense, the void initially presents itself as chaotic or abyssal because it "violates a situation's normal way of counting or recognizing its elements": that is to say, our reliance on description and re-presentation, and its associated anchors in both epistemology and hermeneutics. The creature presents itself as so monstrous to the protagonist because she sees it as unnameable and formless. Badiou characterizes this conception of the void as corrupting: a pathway to fascist reactivity through the compulsive designation and elimination of groups. What the following pages of “There’s someone” suggest, however, is that such an initial confrontation with the void may be an essential step in subjectivization. Becoming a subject is not about self-esteem or claiming of individuality but rather “always begins with fear and loss — the loss of identity, of approval, of security, of ‘the little you have’.”[248] Certainly, this is the case for Petrushevskaya’s protagonist. Order and cleanliness are her initial obsession, a way to stave off infection and invasion. She agonizes over how to protect her living space from further encroachment by the creature. “Need to wash, to cleanse, to put everything in order,” she frets, her internal monologue adding the panicked parenthetical “(where?).” She quickly acknowledges, however, that Tot is both impossible to keep out and useless to catch: it “cannot be killed, cannot be crushed under a heel” (3). It is only by embracing the dictates of this new situation that she escapes from fatalism; only by committing to action that she moves to be-ing.

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[247] Robert Hughes, "Riven: Badiou's Ethical Subject and the Event of Art as Trauma," Postmodern Culture (PMC) (2007): pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.507/17.3hughes.html#foot5.

What precipitates the threat in “There’s someone” is unknown, and crucially never specified.[249] It is the result of chance, purely haphazard, which could not be predicted from within the regimes of reality where she was previously held. Acting within it, the subject must not weigh evidence, but rather follow the consequences of the truth that she declares as it unfolds. The protagonist first resolves to clear Tot from her apartment by destroying her home, rejecting the creature and by extension her former life. When she decides that releasing the cat will doom it and so ensure Tot’s total victory, she completely reverses her strategy: yet in both cases, the protagonist seems to follow instinct, working “indifferently and trying not to think” (7). Her story unfolds not through revelation, but decision; not through proofs, but declarations.

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[248] Hallward 266.

[249] Although the presence of Tot is implicitly linked to the desertion of either a husband or a father — and the resulting dissolve of a mother-daughter bond — what indications the story gives of the time since this break indicates it happened some time ago. Furthermore, the story’s refusal to clarify whether the protagonist is the mother or daughter of that situation, as well as whether this abandonment is unique or recurring, further clouds our ability to trace cause to effect.

Moving through the house, either the narrator or the protagonist suddenly takes note of the forgotten records piled near the turntable, where “once someone loved to listen to music in this house… Mother *or* daughter” (10). The simple inclusion of this “or” suggests that the diametric opposition set up between them in the past has made irrelevant, though not erased, by their equally similar qualities. The protagonist exists, as one reader opines, “in this interval, an incredibly thin border that is not visible to the eye lines: between this and this light, between the living and the dead.”[250] Beyond this emphasis on the in-between, however, is its equal potential as no-thing: a truth that cuts through classification and finds subjecthood through indifference to all the stereotypical ways one marks individuality. The tale ends with a new conception of Tot: rather than a “living emptiness,” or a distinct creature,” the protagonist now considers it *nichto* — literally, “no thing” — of which to be frightened.

Tot’s ambiguous portrayal, the open-ended nature of the ending, and the protagonist’s un-placeable identity often lead readers to keep searching for “the meaning [that] arises from heterogeneous elements,” sifting through “slips of the tongue” and “continuous digression” to find a hermeneutic key.[251] Such a temptation for endless interpretation, however, will only slip us into nothingness. There is no guidebook here for readers to follow; no specific truth is broken down or explained. We must avoid nostalgia for a void of inaccessible transcendence, which allows us to loop forever through a speculative vortex: “we can negotiate, to infinity, our being-in-the-world, interpret traces, and interpret the interpretations.”[252] In Hughes’ words, “the fidelity of the subject… is exposed to chance, grounded in nothing, unsupported by knowledge, and nonsensical to the eyes and ears of outsiders.” Just as the protagonist has no firm grounds on which to judge whether there has been a (traumatic) event, so too can readers not “know with certainty whether a given procedure is a proper and faithful response to the event that the subject supposes has taken place.”[253] And yet, the emotional resonance of the Mother-Daughter’s decision to claim Lyalka under her protection, the cat’s return to life after facing death, remain.

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[250] Anonymous, “Zhenskaia proza.”

[251] Nevzgliadova as quoted in Nina Kolesnikoff, “The Narrative Structure of Liudmila Petrushevskaia’s Short Stories,” Canadian Slavonic Papers 32.4 (1990): 444-5.

We are blocked from access as to whether the Mother-Daughter has reached some truth, discovered peace, or begun healing, despite the uplifting note she strikes at the end. Yet what is remarkable about Petrushevskaya’s work is how little “meaning,” understanding as it is commonly thought, feels significant on the final pages. This is particularly true regarding the fates of her various protagonists.[254] Her story appears to operate in Badiou's sense wherein "truth… proceeds as a subtraction from meaning,"[255] and in fact reverses many of its dictates.

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[252] Alain Badiou as quoted in Hallward 18.

An instance of this hermeneutic vortex comes with trying to pin down what, exactly, Tot *is.* Petrushevskaya sometimes structures the protagonist’s musings so that “tot” is rendered “togo” in the genitive neuter or animate accusative case. This shift opens up the word’s meanings considerably. The latter does not just mean “that,” but can also be the colloquial phrases “not very good,” “getting drunk,” and even the seemingly damning “not right in the head.” Before readers jump to the conclusion that the creature is now simply the embodiment of mental illness, however, the use of “Togo” as an *interjection* must also be considered: it has been used, for many decades, as a marker of hesitation, meaning “well,” “sort of,” or simply “um.” The same word that indicates presence and specificity, then, can be reworked so that such indication cannot describe anything about it.

[253] Hughes: pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.507/17.3hughes.html#foot5.

"Petrushevskaya offers no easy answers — indeed, offers no answers at all."[256] In one of her earliest interviews, the author stressed that "a writer's business is not to resolve things but to ask questions." Such writing must be done "as truly, as honestly, and correctly as mathematicians do."[257] Within literature especially, the empirical and authoritative are a poisonous counterpoint to any pursuance of truth.[258] Nor does Petrushevskaya have any interest in conflating art with ideology. She makes a clear distinction both between politics and readers, the latter of whom can "adapt to everything,"[259] as well as between her reputation as a living Great and her goals as a writer.[260] Particularly antithetical to her is the mantle of denouncing prophet. "In general, I am unable to sit in judgement of people," she remarked in an interview, before clarifying: "Literature is not the Office of the Public Prosecutor."[261]

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[254] Petrushevskaya was famously indignant when an early translator of Night Time altered Alyona's opening lines to definitively state Anna Andrianovna was dead. Within "There's someone in the house," we don't know if the protagonist was the mother, the daughter, or has now been both. Yet whether her exorcism was literal or metaphorical, whether it ultimately "worked" or didn't, the emotional resonance of the final scene remains. In "Mother's Regards," meanwhile, the true causes of young Oleg's breakdown and recovery, as well as the nature of his mother's visitation in the guise of his sister, go unanswered. The final "shot" is of a now grown Oleg and his wife giving up their argument over facts and dates to get down to business: weeding the site of the family graves.

[255] Hallward 17-18. Badiou argues truth in the very essence of its operation "constitutes a hole in forms of knowledge." What meanings come later are the afterlives of that truth, what is disturbed and re-distributed following truth's declaration.

[256] Dalton-Brown 13.

[257] M. Zonina and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, "Liudmila Petrushevskaia: Bessmertnaia liubov'," Literaturnaia Gazeta 23 (Nov. 1983): 6.

[258] The *véridique* (verifiable, knowledge-based) suffuses our world, and is rooted largely in the correct application of rules and in rigid methods of identification and classification. Due precisely to their easily admissible, fittable nature, they are "a matter not of truth, but of knowledge." Truth is not something that can be reached by either rumination or by centering the subject: in fact, the process is almost exactly the opposite. Alain Badiou, Manifeste pour la philosophie 89.

[259] Irina Shcherbakova, "Liudmila Petrushevskaia: 'Ia pisala o sud'be sovetskoi zhenshchiny," L'Officiel Russia 03 June 2018: https://www.lofficielrussia.ru/women1/lyudmila-petrushevskaya-ya-pisala-o-sudbe-sovetskoy-jhenshiny

[260] Petrushevskaya frequently corrects interviews who try to refer to her as a "great writer," and refused to accept a prestigious award because of the ostentatious ceremony. In 2008, as her birthday became a nationally recognized holiday and international translations of her work proliferated, she abruptly announced her intention to quit writing professionally altogether and become a cabaret singer. As one of her friends remarks: "Russians have a very linear understanding of what it means to be a writer" — one heavily influenced by prophetic figures like Tolstoy and martyrs like Akhmatova — and "Petrushevskaya doesn't fit into it." Groskop.

She aims, instead, to articulate truths through sensory experimentation, and to declare what she senses but does not yet understand. When Petrushevskaya writes, she draws on a force that "acts through us," one that is not transcendent but pointedly immanent: "the noosphere… from whence come scientific discoveries, symphonies, divine poems."[262] It aims at an opening-up of thought, an opening in Badiouan terms "to the realm of thought[,] the singularity of whatever takes place outside that thought."[263] The result for characters who appear to reach some form of truth is not language is working *through* them, as Anna Andrianovna embodies in its most tragic form. Rather, Petrushevskaya's "use of unorthodox language patterns… belong to neither narrators nor characters, but exist apart with roles of their own."[264] They interact with reader consciousness alongside the fabula, engaging with but never fully subsuming it. The result is a sense of multiple literary languages acting not as competing sources of authority, but rather as differing co-existent registers of reality, declaring "nothing other than its own existence" and yet provoking us through our encounter with it.[265] Rejecting the idea that her works are straightforward realism, Petrushevskaya asserts that "you will never record this on any tape recorder, this language." She does write "in the language that I hear, and I find… the language of the crowd — energetic, poetic, fresh, witty and faithful." Still, the process is not one of transcription but of intuitive selection: "I collect it, these are the pearls of living speech… these fantastic concatenations of words."[266]

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[261] Petrushevskaya as quoted in Maya Johnson, "Women and Children First: Domestic Chaos and the Maternal Bond in the Drama of Liudmila Petrushevskaia," Canadian Slavonic Papers (1992) 101.

[262] Petrushevskaya and Birger. For geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, the "noosphere" was a new phase of Earth's development, following the geosphere (inanimate matter) and the biosphere (biological life), wherein human consciousness as mental activity fundamentally transformed, and transforms, the world. Still, Vernadsky was careful never to give a single strict definition of precisely how the noosphere operates or what it entails, beyond demonstrating the complex interconnectedness of humanity, that Earth was "developing a global mind." Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, What Is Life? (University of California Press, 2000) 170.

[263] Badiou et al, The Age of Poets: And Other Writings on Twentieth Century Poetry and Prose (Verso, 2014) 137.

[264] Johnson 100.

Pairing Petrushevskaya with Badiou opens up the possibility that the "structures of negation" that infuse the former's dialectic, the "paradoxical silent voice" which haunts the margins of her texts, does more than "undermine the communicativity" of each work.[267] Just as her characters "overcome everyday life only by plunging into its depths,"[268] madness breaks the frame, ripping open a trauma that must be passed through to begin hearing the murmur of the uncountable and the unplaceable.

### Gisèle Pineau: Rejecting the Law of Necessity

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's oeuvre encompasses a staggering variety of genres, their combination and narrative positioning often giving readers hints as to the author's own conception of the relationship between literary production and truth process. Gisèle Pineau is in contrast known almost exclusively for autobiographical novels. Yet in each work, her literary characters turn to books, music and the visual arts as a potential source of communal reinvigoration or individual revelation, often with drastically different results within a single text. Suzon is overtaken by the "satanic verses" she sends out into the world, her poetry distorting her love into "the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse" (*Chair Piment* 185); yet Victor's brush with poetic ecstasy appears to produce only beauty. It would be easy to argue, based on the stark differences in their characters, that this is a case of mystical just desserts: Suzon dealt in black magic, while Victor is guided by Bénédicte and M. Vérité. Examining *Chili-Skin* alongside Pineau's earlier work *L'espérance-macadam* (Macadam Dreams, 1995), however, suggests an alternate reading.

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[265] This approach is one Badiou himself attempts to model in his own prodigious output as a literary writer. In the novel Calme bloc ici-bas (A calm block here below, 1997), for example, he "pulled apart the building blocks of the narrative, rearranged the spaces, and allowed [his] prose to explore areas outside its initial scope." By deliberately employing language in multiple distinct registers — as Petrushevskaya does through her use of genre hybridization, differing forms of *skaz,* and narrative play — Badiou hoped that "a few grams of reality would emerge from this clash of styles." Badiou et al The Age of Poets: And Other Writings on Twentieth Century Poetry and Prose 133.

[266] Petrushevskaya as quoted in M.B. Zagidullina, "Petrushevskaia i Dostoevskii," Cheliabinskii Gumanitarii 2.11 (2010): 26.

[267] Dalton-Brown 161.

[268] Vinogradova 39.

*Macadam Dreams,* of all Pineau's writings, is perhaps the most directly invested in the idea of literary genealogies, and in examining the diverse impact of stories, art forms, and music. It may also be the most brutal depiction of *la folie antillaise* in recent history. Savane is a Guadeloupean town ravaged by colonialism and racism, mired in poverty, and subject to frequent natural disasters. It is seeped in secrets that are related to readers in flashbacks, including shameful crimes such as rape, kidnapping, and murder whose stories span generations. These cycles of violence are always accompanied by manifestations of madness.[269]

Like *Chili Skin,* the story's focus is myriad. Having outlived two husbands she never loved and denied the child she craved, Éliette remains traumatized by the devastating 1928 cyclone, which caused a rafter to skewer her belly as an infant and rendered her mute for years. Éliette's neighbors, the middle-aged Rosette and her teenaged daughter Angela, enter the story after Angela's confession to police that her father Rosan has been molesting her. The revelation prompts both Angela's disowning by Rosette and Éliette's sudden decision to intervene, offering the girl shelter. The two travel to Éliette's paternal grandmother to flee Hurricane Hugo, where the old woman reveals that the family's euphemism for the '28 cyclone, "The Beast," actually refers to Éliette's father, who raped her during the storm. Readers piece together that he also sired Angela's father Rosan, before abandoning his new family as well. As the unwitting aunt and niece find shelter, Rosette remains in her house, surrounded by reams of notebooks that Angela has transcribed with Rosette's fanciful folktales. While she faces the truth about her husband, the novel closes with Rosette alone in a shack with the storm bearing down, and opens with Éliette wandering the devastated home looking at the notebook pages covering its floors.

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[269] Before Chili-Skin's Rosalia, there was Hermancia, the developmentally disabled girl whose quasi-rape by a gang of workers is revealed through her songs. Before the murders of Melchior's wives by the demonic Suzon, there was the butchering of Hortense by her husband Governor Régis, driven into a frenzy by emasculating jealousy. And before the question of whether Mina's debasement to a nymphomaniacal shell is madness, the same question is raised here regarding Hermancia's daughter Glawdys, who returns after years of abuse and neglect to toss her baby daughter over a bridge. The "malediction of the black people" in endemic in the novel, expressed through suicide by both direct and indirect means — while some turn to the noose, others passively chose death when they join a Rastafarian cult that retreats to the mountains and eventually starves.

In contrast to the mad-demonic Suzon, Rosette is a deeply sympathetic character.[270] And more so than any character in *Chili-Skin* or *Macadam Dreams,* her self-delusion and eventual destruction seem destined by an over-reliance on fictional narratives. For many years, her daughter has been transcribing stories that begin the same way. "In those days, Hope was not a word," Rosette muses, but a folkloric figure who helped form parts of the world. She was once proud of these stories. "My God, how beautiful the world was in her dreams!" she laments as she weeps over the pages. Yet her retreat into these tales, alongside the records she plays over and over, blinded her to the reality of her husband's decline into bitterness and pederastic obsession.

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[270] Before Angela's confession, she had no idea that Rosan was molesting their child. She regrets her decision to disown Angela almost immediately, not following her only because Éliette takes her in. She believes her daughter's story the moment she sees Rosan's eyes in the back of a police car the next day. It is Rosette's shock at the total upheaval of her life, and her own paralyzing guilt, that keep her from seeking shelter as Hurricane Hugo approaches.

After her struggles to keep her family afloat, all she has left are "sickly stories, idiotic tales, obsolete narratives" (176). The repetition of these dual synonyms hint that these writings have sealed her into a necessarily self-constricting narrative. In choosing to imagine stories about Hope as an actor from the past, rather than seeking means of enacting it in the present day, Rosette has fulfilled the empty promise of the novel's title: hope from *macadam*, a stomach-filling but ultimately empty substitute for real nourishment.[271] It seems, then, that Rosette's mistake was to lose herself in literature, approaching it not just as an authority as a producer itself of authenticity, a better reality that she desperately desires.

So how is one to differentiate between this kind of conflation of literature and reality with Victor's seemingly successful blending of the two? And how can one condemn Rosette for writing out a future through re-imagined pasts when Pineau herself did the same in *Exile According to Julia*? Folkloric storytelling, the blurred lines between oral literature and written forms, and the elevation of Black women's voices are all essential elements of Pineau's oeuvre, and aspects of the Guadeloupean tradition that she has been vocal in praising.[272] The explicitly literary output of these Hope tales, meanwhile, is only one of the forms through which Rosette expresses herself. Music's transmutation through literature is common in Guadeloupean writing, and *Macadam Dreams* is no exception, with "imagery, color, and particularly sound and rhythm" emphasized and echoed in the "altered musical pattern" of language.[273] Just as Rosette would use

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[271] Tellingly, Éliette ties this state of desperate delusion to her own narrative when considering the lie her childhood healer Éthéna told her, about the Beast being the '28 cyclone. Rosette's daughter Angela will have to suffer through the truth, she decides; she cannot risk falling back into "rickety peace / macadam-peace / peace from artifice" (201).

[272] See, for example, Nadège Veldwachter and Gisèle Pineau, "An Interview with Gisèle Pineau," Research in African Literatures 35:1 (Spring 2004) 184.

[273] Karen Smyley Wallace, "Créolité and the Feminine Text in Simone Schwartz-Bart," The French Review, 70:4 (March 1997) 558.

Bob Marley's music to lose herself in her body, Éliette's exposure to "the voice of the *tanbouyè*" — the rising of drumbeats as citizens call on the hurricane to spare them — has a similar effect.

While Rosette's activities are retroactively diminished by her state in the present, however, the older woman's experience with the "Negro music… she had never wanted to hear nor comprehend" is cast as wholeheartedly positive. Overcome by its rhythms, Éliette feels the music penetrate every corner of her body. Creole words breach her internal monologue for the first time as she joins those who "fall to their knees and offer their body to the drum that recounted the bravery of Negros" (194-5). This moment is especially significant due to Éliette's own internalized racism. Throughout the book, Pineau uses irony when describing Éliette's background and dated opinions to challenge the assumptions hat French is a "universal" language, that mastering its grammar indicates a person's level of civilization, and that its written literature is somehow superior to oral storytelling. What seems to distinguish Rosette's fairy tales and records from Victor's poetry reading and Éliette's musical possession is the way art not only works through them, but is taken in without assumption or anchoring regarding its distinct voice. The question is how to accomplish this without accidentally succumbing to a passivity that breeds fatalism, or without transmuting that experience into a dogma of its own.

"The entire work of [Russian philosopher] Lev Isaakovich Schwartzman," better known as Lev Shestov (1866-1938), "is marked by questions about the relationship between *truth* and *knowledge* and, perhaps more importantly, by a ceaseless and sustained inquiry about the relationship between *truth* and its *seeker.*"[274] The same might easily be said of Gisèle Pineau's broader oeuvre. At the heart of almost every work is a quest for truth that is neither totally analogous to nor wholly answered by a desire for particular knowledge. *Macadam Dreams* is no exception. The secret that's haunting both Éliette and Angela is revealed at the end as a pattern of paternal incest; yet this knowledge cannot resolve deeper questions concerning this traumatic legacy. Nor, more importantly, can it provide any avenues beyond itself. The question of literature's role in relation to truth and its seeker is at the heart of these works — and potentially acts as a guiding philosophy all its own.

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[274] Michael Finkenthal, Lev Shestov: Existential Philosopher and Religious Thinker (Peter Lang, 2010) 3.

Pineau first aligns with the Russian philosopher in her identification of a shared enemy: obedience to, and acceptance of, what Shestov terms the Laws of Necessity and Certainty. These assumptions bind us in a closed loop. Some things are eternal and unchangeable, and all other things are impossible and unattainable. Such a worldview fails to capture the intricacies of our world, and denies us both the reality of self-determination and the potentialities of freedom. And in the case of something like Reason, its supposed self-evidence as a universal good often effaces both nuance and complaint.

When Mina first approaches her brother-in-law Douglas about seeing Rosalia's apparition, he instructs her to use mathematical logic to deny the haunting's reality, a decision the narrative openly considers laughable. The teenaged Mina compiles a song to remember his advice, which she models off her memorization of times tables as a little girl:

Je pense mathématique / I think mathematically
Je prie oui c'est pratique / I pray yes it's practical
Car j'ai mon examen / Because I have my exam
Et je suis mon chemin / And I follow my path

Before the end of the page, however, the very ease with which the rhythm of logic spins itself out has overtaken her original aim. More nefarious lyrics supplant this banal, empty approach, "new words substitut[ing] themselves in order to create a macabre complaint":

> Ça me brûle, ça me pique / That burns me, it stings me
> Ça fou, c'est terrifique / That's mad, it is terrific
> Elle me prend par la main / She takes me by the hand
> Et je suis mon destin. / And I follow my fate. (81)

Readers may assume that it is literary "infection" here which has driven Mina off-course. Yet if she proves susceptible to its lure as a replacement for reality, this is only because Douglas's advice offers her nothing else with which to work. When Mina's mother Médée is killed, the young girl furiously rejects her previous love for mathematical formulas and memorized dates. What could these numbers and letters tell her, now that her mother was dead? In doing so, she also rejects pure logic's seduction, its promise of totality and unity. "While the phenomena of life remain ephemeral, inimitable, and subject to decay," Shestov tells us, the dictates of logic are "always correct, consistent, and incorruptible." Yet this is exactly what leaves us wanting. While it ensures we can construct closed problems and reach stable conclusions, logic is "useless whenever real, living beings are involved."[275]

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[275] Brian Horowitz and Bernard Martin, "The Demolition of Reason in Lev Shestov's Athens and Jerusalem," Poetics Today Hellenism and Hebraism Reconsidered: The Poetics of Cultural Influence and Exchange II 19.2 (Summer 1998): 225.

One of Shestov's most famous demonstrations of logic's failing is his comparison of the statements "Socrates was poisoned" and "a dog with rabies was poisoned." Logic can identify that both "concern mortal biological organisms," and can differentiate that each was poisoned in answer to a particular grievance. What it cannot do is explain why the death of Socrates is more *important* than a rabid dog — its methods suggest that there is no difference at all, leading us to reduce difference to meaningless relativism. What Shestov alludes to here is Reason's lack of both the Affective and the Ethical, problems with which Badiou has also grappled in his later work. Lev Shestov, Afiny i Ierusalim (Ripol Klassik, 2017) 362.

Still, Reason is only the most famous of Shestov's targets when he attacks Necessity. The final lines of both stanzas — "And I follow (literally, "am") my path / And I follow (am) my destiny" — imply that both the logical and the mystical are wed to the unavoidability of a single and totalizing path forward. This emphasis on fatalism is key. Shestov was a believer in radical metaphysics. God's greatest gift to us was free will; that freedom must battle not only against traps of logic, but also more culturally constructed concepts like "heredity," "tradition," and "moral ideas."[276] These concepts are erected by human beings as protection against the existential anxieties that stalk Pineau's texts. Rosette's attempts to shield herself from "the life outside of those pages" (176) is undone when Angela confirms she wasn't lying about Rosan's molestation. "With her filthy words," Rosette moans, "she has murdered us all in different ways" (57). Refusing to accept this deviation from her worldview, she kicks her daughter out — and in doing so, produces a word-for-word repetition of her mother's curse when she kicked *her* out, almost twenty years before. "Never, no never would Rosette have thought" that this awful "lesson from history [would] recommence" (78) — yet the words fall from her lips as though they had always been waiting there.

If Rosette's script for disowning her daughter is over-determined, meanwhile, so too are the words through which the community attempts to grasp the horrors around them. Angela's view of Rosan as a "Beast" is identical to both Éliette's understanding of her own rape and Rosan's independent view of the molestation. Both Angela and Éliette view this Beast as something that pierces their bellies and splits their body apart. Rosan even compares his actions to "a cyclone" sweeping through Angela, the same conflation Éliette's mother used to lie about her daughter's trauma. Insofar as the horrors of their world are understood, they are done so only through "the repetitive, the reproducible, [and] the predictable."[277] Alongside Rosette's personal breakdown, Éliette can recall numerous instances where she could have broken out of habit and taken action — innumerable moments when she and everyone around her were aware of tragedy brewing but viewed themselves as somehow powerless to stop it. Such an attitude is not just emblematic of *la folie antillaise* as a genre, but of Shestov's railing against fatalism, encouraged when we forget that the laws by which we understand the world come from us alone. When we embrace fate, those laws become truths. Their retroactive appearance as "uncreated" turns the world itself into "a mad place[,] by making it possible to accept the destruction of loved ones as an unchangeable event."[278] Whenever horror sweeps through Savane, its people can only repeat their refrain on the malediction of the black people, historical facts taking on the status of eternal doctrine. Data and experience have become philosophy: in Shestov's words, "man can weep and curse" these dictates, but "in a world where reason rules[,] it is madness to fight against the given."[279] All that remains for the citizens of Savane is "to turn and re-turn to visions, to brood over the same words" (16), human potential having been limited to cyclical, empty suffering.

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[276] Shestov as quoted in Julia V. Sineokaya and Anton M. Khokhlov, "Lev Shestov's philosophy of freedom," Studies in Eastern European Thought 68.2-3 (2016): 214.

Against *le gouffre* — the chaotic abyss into which Necessity and Certainty have paradoxically thrown us — Shestov identifies literature as the best way to resist its allure. This does not mean that every output is worthy of that potential, or is utilized as it should be. The folktales about Hope that Rosette comes up with can be surprisingly pointed in they reveal about

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[277] Finkenthal 8.

[278] James McLachlan, "The Il y a and the Ungrund: Levinas and the Russian Existentialists Berdyaev and Shestov," Levinas Studies 11.1 (2016): 219.

[279] Lev Shestov, Afiny i Ierusalim 140.

Rosette's worldview; yet after being dutifully transcribed by Angela, they are forgotten in notebooks "without [anyone] ever rereading them" (147). The rote aspect of this potentially revelatory narrative is just another expression of the flattening power of certainty.

Like Badiou, Shestov sees immense potential in art: "the poet reconciles us to life, making clear the meaningfulness of everything that seems to us... meaningless, scandalous, [and] unnecessary."[280] By contrast, however, he does not position its truths as something philosophy draw upon; rather, the unanswerability of literary production should act as our primary philosophical position. He ties literature's greatest expression to a kind of counter-madness, one of infinite Singularity and Contingency against absolute Necessity and Certainty. The realm of "hallucinations, mirages, [and] dreams," so often dismissed by philosophers, can best cut their way across "the ready-made norms" of the world," reacquainting subjects with freedom and spurring them on in new quests for truth.[281]

It is only those moments when both the characters and the readers allow confusion back into their outlooks and uncertainty into their suppositions that the mold may be broken. This is almost always through trauma, something that "challenges the reader's monism… [and] shakes him out of the inertia of his idealism."[282] Especially potent in the works of those writers Shestov most admired — Shakespeare and Dostoevsky — was the concept of paradox, a literary tool Pineau takes up throughout her exploration of Savane. One of her most striking instance of this comes with the story of the childlike Hermancia, whose supposed violation by a group of workers is revealed through a song she sings as she wanders the village. While the narrative assures us that they were gentle, and that she took pleasure in the act, Hermancia's father views the men as rapists, and slaughters them all when she becomes pregnant. This, too, is related in a new song, "her voice grating, too soft, a wellspring, crystal and harmonium mixed." Villagers are perturbed by her existence and drawn to her gift for "fiery, ringing and shimmering rhymes," so that she becomes both a detested and beloved figure in their eyes (41). Readers' own uncertainty regarding how to interpret the encounter is trebled by their disturbance in our inability to fully imagine the "crystal and harmonium" of her tone, the "too soft" recitation of both a potential gang rape and a confirmed mass slaying.

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[280] Lev Shestov, Shekspir i ego kritik Brandes (The University of Michigan Press, 1962) 93.

[281] Shestov Afiny i Ierusalim 5.

[282] James M. Curtis, "Shestov's Use of Nietzsche in His Interpretation of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky," Texas Studies in Literature and Language A Special Russian Issue 17 (1975): 295.

It is the fate of Hermancia's daughter Glawdys and her own child that truly rends the fabric of Savane, with reverberations that carry into the lives of all the named characters. At first, her story appears to be one in the endless string of cruel fates. Seeing the babe abandoned by Hermancia, Éliette ponders adopting her, but delays long enough for another woman to snatch her. This foster mother proceeds to beat the child and tie her to the house with a rope, prompting child services to intervene and take her away. When Glawdys returns to Savane, she has, like her mother, become pregnant by an unknown man. Like so many in the village, she carries the scars of her childhood as though they were "the cord that she still felt around her body (50)." While the villagers initially buy fruit from her out of guilt, they soon grow bored and forget her. It is then that Glawdys commits the kind of crime that Shestov would call so "outside the law" that "it seems only a step shot of madness… the madness for which men are pent in cells."[283] She goes to the bridge and throws her baby daughter onto the rocks below. All who witness the act, and who come to see what Glawdys is looking down upon in the time after, are shaken to their core. Yet the narrator makes sure readers are aware that Glawdys is not, in any satisfactory way we might classify it, "mad" in this moment. *Elle avait tout sa téte* — literally, "She had all her head" (53). Rosan is the one to recover the shattered infant from the rocks, and it is heavily implied that this horror contributed to his molestation of Angela, in whom he seeks both innocence and forgiveness. The tragedy pushes Rosette to briefly embrace the Rastafarian teachings of Sister Beloved, whose party will eventually be drowned on the mountain when they go on a pilgrimage to cleanse Savane of sin. For Éliette, who had once pondered adopting Glawdys, the price of her refusal is so tormenting that it prompts her, completely unexpectedly, to offer aid to Angela years later, and from that act to rake up her own painful secrets.

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[283] Shestov as quoted in Louis J. Shein, "Lev Shestov: A Russian Existentialist," The Russian Review 26.3 (July 1967): 283.

Against a backdrop of "ongoing catastrophe," Shestov urges, the only way to seek truth is within moments of terror or despair, pushing oneself to "go beyond reason in order to think the catastrophe."[284] The painful insights revealed in our deepest sufferings prompt us to re-evaluate all we are and all we believe in. While Pineau does present these scenes of suffering in her works, even more potent are the paradoxical ecstasies that characters experience when art cuts through them. This is the revelation Dodo Farétina experiences in *Chili-Skin* when, escaping from war and wandering silent among the pitch-black countryside, he suddenly sees "the other side of the clouds." This experience births a poem that will change the course of Victor's life, as well.[285] This, too, is the thunderbolt that strikes Zébio, whose muse Hortense is a battered shell after years of abuse by her husband Régis. Through painting this childless, child-like woman, Zébio sees "the mother color, [the] divine and first essence" (72). The suave, erudite artist is reduced to an awe-struck boy before it. Just as neither Farétina nor Victor can explain *why* the poem affects them the way it does, Zébio can only gape, "all amazed," before the truth of color itself. Such moments only come at a point where "explanations lose all meaning … as though we were led by a rope — the law of sufficient reason — to a certain place and left there."[286]

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[284] Matthew Beaumont, Lev Shestov: Philosopher of the Sleepless Night (Bloomsbury 2021) 144. Shestov's quasi-disciple Benjamin Fontane goes further. He calls for us to testify, "by poetry, by cries, by faith, or by suicide" (147), to a principle of "irresignation": a constant needling and refusing in the face of the laws of Necessity.

Instrumental music; visual art; untranscribed poetry; lyric-only song. In each moment of painful and beautiful revelation, Pineau has chosen to present an art form through literature in such a way that readers cannot fully experience it, and so cannot reduce it in translation. Truths are pure, but they are also individual, precisely that which cannot be communicated, universalized, or fully grasped — but which can be glimpsed, and must always be sought.[287] Notably, Mina has no reaction to Victor's ecstatic recitation of Farétina's poem. When Hortense looks over Zébio's shoulder at the supposed "grail of the original essence," she sees nothing remarkable. The narrative neither lambasts her for this reaction, nor dismisses the artist's wonder; Pineau allows both realities to exist in tandem.

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[285] Rather than take the form of mutable *mots parasites*, the "living Word" is both poetic and opaque. After leaving M. Vérité's office, Victor remains befuddled by Bénédicte's final directive: to search out *l'envers des nuages* (the other side of the clouds). When he mentions her words off-handedly to Mina's relatives, they take him directly to her maternal grandfather. One night on army duty, the young Farétina found himself wandering into a nearby field, where the earth "bore traces of ancient furrows." Suddenly, "he saw the unbelievable. The other side of the clouds. It was then that the poem was born on his lips" (264-5). Victor doesn't hear the rest of this poem. Readers are never given access to it. Instead, Victor leaves the party having decided not to ask Farétina for an explanation. He plans to inspect the clouds himself, and wait for his own moment of revelation. The novel ends shortly thereafter by repeating this single known line, alongside a repetition of the counting game Rosalia played with Mina that opened the novel. *Un, deux, trois. / Les bateaux de Rosalia. / Un, deux trois. / L'envers des nuages.*

[286] Lev Shestov et al, "The Theory of Knowledge," Shestov Phono Archive: Penultimate Words and Essays: http://shestov.phonoarchive.org/all/pw4_1.html

[287] Shestov almost exclusively uses the word *istina* when discussing "truth," not *pravda*. While both words roughly translate into English as "truth,"their uses and significance are often starkly different. As Anna Wierzbicka notes, *istina* is traditionally viewed as a higher form of truth, as well as the one most linked to an objective reality — someone has a "real talent" or is a "real friend." While something can be *nepravda* (not-true, a lie), there is no *ne-istina*. The word *pravda* is also utilized most frequently in communication, i.e. "telling the truth." *Istina*, by contrast, concerns "what is hidden, perhaps inaccessible, and yet important and of general interest; something worth searching for." Anna Wierzbicka, "Russian Cultural Scripts: The Theory of Cultural Scripts and Its Applications," Ethos 30.4 (2002): 414-415.

This is the great paradox of Shestovian truth. Any attempt to objectify and categorize what we have experienced will only debase it, the desire to expand personal truth into a universal law being something he found especially seductive and especially corrupting. "Such is the power of *istina*: "these ultimate truths die by being expressed in the words and structures of language that attempt to transform them into rational, necessary, comprehensible, and obvious judgments 'for ever and for all'."[288] This is the mistake made by Rosette's childhood friend Édith, who returns to Savane leading a Rastafarian cult under the name Sister Beloved. She and her followers turn Bob Marley's music into holy scripture, claiming that "Truth writes itself in letters of fire" and that "the Verb is a sword that must pierce impure hearts" (170). Initially, Rosette falls under their spell. Not understanding a word Marley sings, she is overtaken by his music, yet also proves herself susceptible to whatever translation Sister Beloved provides. As a result, individual revelation is hammered out into religious condemnation, decrying "the system of Babylon… the works of Babylon… [that] Hell-Babylon" (177). It is Sister Beloved's conflation of the fluidly artistic and the rigidly religious that ends up dooming her followers when they retreat to the mountains following Marley's death.[289] When Sister Beloved's tribe prepared to ascend to the mountaintop, she urges Rosette to join them. When the latter demurs, Sister Beloved turns to Angela, then a toddler, and informs her that her mother is weak and blind: she will not reach heaven, for she refuses to leave a world of dreams. Stung by the truth of this statement, Rosette nonetheless senses that Sister Beloved may be just as lost and scared as her. "Perhaps among the mirages of supposed Knowledge will suddenly open a great void," Rosette thinks, where a terrified Édith will crouch "behind her sermons as a great shepherd-prophetess" (136). This sad fate is exactly what transpires. The group succumbs to drowning and starvation when the peak is flooded. Their path, as the narrative wryly notes, "had not been inscribed in any way" (128) in their own holy writ; and yet their destruction was still over-written by their allegiances.

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[288] Andriy Vasylchenko, "Istina," in Barbara Cassin, ed. Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon (Princeton UP 2014) 514. This impulse was what Shestov saw as a fatal flaw of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a philosopher he much admired. Kierkegaard could not accept that the truth he glimpsed must remain individual to be real. Instead, he returned it to logic, dissipating its power into abstract principles.

This is the pitfall into which many authors, as well as characters, can plunge, particularly those who believe their duty is to be a prophet. These authors, Shestov grumbles, "transform [their truths] into judgements and, having thus killed them, make them necessary always and for everyone, that is, comprehensible and 'evident'."[290] We must return to the affective, not the intellectual — seeking authenticity without fully giving in to the lure of authority. This approach is one Gisèle Pineau openly takes up in her writing. "I am a writer who writes with her senses," she relates. "I advance in an intuitive manner, I feel things, I perceive them." This attitude places her against Martinican contemporaries Patrick Chamoiseau (1953-) and Raphaël Confiant (1951-), who are outspoken about having "a much more cerebral approach to their craft."[291] The latter approach risks losing what swirls around the edges of our seeming abyss: life itself, paradoxical, incomprehensible, and vital. Our points of departure cannot be a theory, which flattens out life and diminishes the unrepeatability of difference. It must be experience: not the data-driven summary form to which we cling, but the endless wealth of distinct, solitary voices.

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[289] Her choice of moniker will alert Toni Morrison fans to her eventual fate long before this disastrous decision. The titular character of Morrison's Beloved (1987) is a ghostly daughter returned to haunt her mother Sethe, who killed her as a baby to keep her from growing up in slavery. Édith's cult initially camps at the base of the very bridge where Glawdys threw her infant daughter to her death, and Édith returns to Rosette as though reincarnated decades after their last meeting. Rosan is as dismissive and ultimately fearful of Sister Beloved as Sethe's partner Paul D is of the ghost in Morrison's novel, and the cult's tragic ending, and Rosette's subsequent disillusionment, is strongly reminiscent of Beloved's exorcism and Sethe's resulting breakdown. In taking up the mantle of Sister Beloved, perhaps even as a conscious tribute to Morrison as well as Marley, Édith succumbs to to over-scripting of "fate" and "malediction" just as surely as Éliette before and Rosette after her.

As with Chili Skin, an over-reliance on literary authority, to the point of elevating it above and conflating it with other sites of knowledge, is ultimately disastrous. Yet rejection of artistic revelation is not the "answer" either. Rosan, despite frequently belittling Rosette's music and fairy tales, also ends up scripted over, from the start of his obsession with Angela. As he sits in the back of a police car the day after his daughter's confession, the narrative provides its only glimpse into his inner monologue. His justifications are an almost verbatim retelling of Cholly's thought process after raping his daughter Pecola in Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970), a book Pineau admits devouring while plotting out Macadam Dreams. Consumed by the same feelings of failure and self-loathing that grip Cholly, Rosan then re-enacts the fictional character's most shameful crime, seemingly with no knowledge of its "true" source. Succumbing to the cultural stigmas of anti-Blackness that surround him, and rejecting all avenues of artistic liberation, Rosan ends up destroyed by a narrative meant to expose and alleviate this exact form of suffering.

For more discussion of Pineau's indebtedness to Morrison, see Gisèle Pineau Christiane and Makward, "Entretien avec Gisèle Pineau," The French Review 76.6: Special Issue on Martinique and Guadeloupe (May 2003): 1208.

Such is the world Pineau layers into her works, where multiple voices do not produce a cacophony but rather allude to the rich plurality of our world. Both *Chili-Skin* and *Macadam Dreams* incorporate multiple narrators, comprised of third-person perspectives and an outside narrator that sometimes presents itself as omniscient and in other moments directly intervenes as an additional perspective on the happenings. *Macadam Dreams*, however, goes even further than *Chili-Skin*. While Éliette's story appears to be the central one, it is Rosette's family who drive the narrative. Perspectives from Éliette and Rosette predominate, but are interspersed with glimpses into the minds of both Angela and Rosan, and the narrator often immerses readers in side stories that include details none of the characters likely know. Additionally, Pineau shifts between a first and third-person voice for both Éliette and Rosette with no clear indication of why, switching from one paragraph to the next from the more removed "she" to the intimate "I" and then back again. Pineau enacts what Shestov aims to accomplish in his own writing, "to take our minds outside the constraints of preconceived limitations and judgements."[292] Each character's seemingly static role is further layered in paradox — the cold widow who is also the traumatized child, the naive mother who is also the insightful writer — and shot through with moments of unexpected choices. Contingency interrupts routine, forcing actions few readers would expect — triggering revelations that all readers can sense but none can pin down.

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[290] Shestov Afiny i Ierusalim 264. This was particularly a criticism he makes, in several later essays, of both Lev Tolstoy and to a lesser extent Fyodor Dostoevsky, arguing that their attempts to be moral philosophers ends up undermining the immense philosophical impact of their artistic endeavors.

[291] Bonnie Thomas, Connecting Histories: Francophone Caribbean Writers Interrogating Their Past (University Press of Mississippi 2017) 55.

## Faith and Fidelity: Literature's Never-Ending Search

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and Gisèle Pineau both make an apparent distinction between knowledge and truth in their works, alongside an avowed belief in literary power. In their rejection of authority, their understanding of truth's declaration or discovery becomes rooted in literature's ability to produce singularity — Badiou's "coming-to-be of that which is not yet"[293] — or reintroduce contingency — Shestov's "right to participate in that divine 'let there be'."[294] Both these two writers and these two philosophers align themselves against what is predictable and reproducible in favor of points of absolute rupture. Petrushevskaya and Pineau employ madness in their texts as these ruptures, avenues into and through suffering. The subjectivization of the protagonist in "There's someone" can only be achieved through the trauma that strips her of anchored individuality, while the characters in the *Macadam Dreams* must grapple with paradoxical moments of terror and ecstasy, despair and rejuvenation, that strike us like stars whose blaze we see “only in the gloom of the night sky.”[295]

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[292] Marina Jijina-Ogden, "Readings of Dostoevsky in 'Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy' by Lev Shestov," The Oxford Philosopher: Inclusive, Accessible Philosophy: theoxfordphilosopher.com/2015/11/20/readings-of-dostoevsky-in-shestov/.

[293] Alain Badiou, L'éthique: essai sur la conscience du mal (NOUS, 2009) 45.

[294] Shestov Afiny i Ierusalim 19.

I now turn from the philosophic resonances within Petrushevskaya’s and Pineau’s works to consider literature’s role on the *reader* for them in more detail, specifically through the lens of Badiou’s theory of fidelity and Shestov’s conception of faith. Despite diametrical oppositions in approach, Badiou and Shestov are unlikely allies when it specifically comes to promoting truth, and its associated hope and healing, as a never-ending and often exhausting process. This is both expressed through Petrushevskaya’s and Pineau’s works, and meant to help galvanize their readers to open themselves to that struggle.

### *Petrushevskayan Fidelity: The Courage to Rebel*

“In the poetics of Petrushevskaya,” A. Ostrovsky asserts, “it is possible to overcome everyday life only by plunging into its depths.” This plunge, I have argued, forces a reconceptualization of the void from empty nothingness to Badiou’s empty set, of “no-thing.” Psychic dissolution serves as a potential pathway to truth by stripping us down to the naked stance of subjectivity. Those characters who touch the edges of this void do not think, but act. A reader taking in her work must then see what truth, by cutting through the everyday, might be in the process of being declared — “if, of course,” against the brutality of Petrushevskaya’s prose, she “has enough courage and strength.”[296]

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[295] Jijina-Ogden: theoxfordphilosopher.com/2015/11/20/readings-of-dostoevsky-in-shestov/.

[296] Ostoevsky as quoted in Vinogradova 39.

In the words of Nevzgliadova, "Petrushevskaya needs no readers."[297] Her work is deeply personal, aligned to the individual fidelity of creation. Yet the texts that come from this production is fundamentally dialogic, hinging on "active reading work, co-creation with the author."[298] The truth is still being declared. And for all that her characters are often dominated by the opinions of others, drowning in a sea of monomaniacal voices, she openly encourages rebellion against prejudice, collective memory, and homogenous thought. She "wants to challenge the reader's courage to stand up for his or her beliefs" as they are formed:

> The voice of rumour, the voice of gossip, the voice of the crowd, the voice of banality, the voice that belongs to the sober people that no longer have any beliefs — a voice with which the author can enter into polemic, evoke as a spirit, so that this voice presents the story instead of the author. In this way, the author is able to play with his/her reader, so that you, as a reader, want to rebel.[299]

While an artistic procedure does not trumpet ideology, any truth must always be "productive, inventive, creative, [and] anticonservative."[300]

While the creative and anticonservative elements of the truth procedure have already been noted, the "productive" and especially "inventive" nature of the procedure deserves further examination. For a philosopher so opposed to religion, Badiou's discussion of ethics does engage with a form of faith: fidelity, and particularly the subject's fidelity to an event in the declaration of truth. This specificity is crucial. Badiou does not intend fidelity to be dogmatic, but rather a continual exploration of the formation of a new set according to its generic place: to believe, without outside guarantees or the veil of knowledge, that something in there is worth following. To be faithful is to *think* the situation "according to the event," to commit to occupying the moment around which a new truth is declared from an endless multiplicity.[301]

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[297] Nevzgliadova 256.

[298] Zagidullina 27.

[299] Petrushevskaya as quoted in Johanna Lindbladh, "The Quest for Narrative Identity: A Textual Analysis of Petrushevskaia's 'The Wall' and 'The Storyteller,'" in The Arts in Dialogue. Essays in honour of Fiona Björling, Johanna Paulsson Lindblagh and Karin Terho Sarsenov Eds. Slavica Lundensia (2009): 142-3.

[300] Hughes: pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.507/17.3hughes.html#foot5.

Petrushevskaya appears to enact this strategy in relation to her texts, and prompts us to do the same, in two distinct ways. First, in addition to the generic hybridity within her works — causing readers who revisit them to approach them from varying angles — it should be noted that Petrushevskaya "frequently changes the classification of her texts (as well as regrouping them)" in the years after their initial publication.[302] The effect that may have on a text's exploration cannot be downplayed. Stories such as "Our Crowd," when viewed alongside *Night Time,* may read as viscerally realist explorations of predatory motherhood; when regrouped alongside "There's someone in the house," however, the tale is recast as a study in family sacrifice. As this chapter has demonstrated, meanwhile, it is by bringing Petrushevskaya's texts into conversation that the stark differences between *Night Time* and "There's someone" come to light, and provoke new thought.

Perhaps the quintessential Petrushevskayan message, however, it is the ending of "There's someone in the house," where what uplifts readers is solely the quiet, tentative decision by the cat Lyalka to "go on living." For Petrushevskaya herself, this seems to involve a continuing search, wholly personal even if communally shared, to keep searching for "the possibility of developing a new word, a new artistic vision."[303] In the meantime, however, one must survive, holding true at least to "the saying of 'again,'" even of "*plus mèche encore*," if only for "the imperative of saying as such."[304]

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[301] Badiou L'ethique 62.

[302] Dalton-Brown 61.s

### *Pineau's Faith: Freedom in Search of Healing*

As we move from *Chili-Skin* to *Macadam Dreams,* the endings of Gisèle Pineau's autobiographical novels become more and more open-ended, even as the questions they ultimately raise become less and less linked to the accumulation of knowledge. If we are unsure Victor, Mina, and Suzon have truly found peace, we are left with even less assurance that Éliette will recover from the secret that's turned her world upside down, or how Angela will fare now that her family has been torn apart. At close of *Chili-Skin*, meanwhile, the central characters are only given parts of the story, and must assemble the pieces and patch over gaps as best they can. Éliette is not even given that much. Searching for both a validation of her recovered memory and some sense of why it happened, she asks her aunt Marraine to tell her story. The old woman refuses to speak, repeatedly hovering over the edge of spilling out "the secret's poison" before concluding that there is no need, as Éliette "already knows it all." Yet as both narratives strongly imply, merely confirming trauma is not enough. While relinquishing ourselves to despair may grant us an "absolute freedom that is outside the laws of reason," this is not sustainable. Perhaps more importantly, it is — appropriating Nietzsche's terms — "freedom *from*," not "freedom *for.*" It cannot lead to as our deepest hope in the quest for truth, the "creation out of nothing."[305]

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[303] Pisarevskaya in quoted in Vinogradova 39.

[304] Aspects of Petrushevskaya's work, particularly her stripping down her short story characters to a kind of "generic humanity," evoke Badiou's discussion of the playwright Samuel Beckett. The quotes above are "what remains to be said as the truth of languages;" in essence, to keep sustaining the 'again,' "to sustain it without naming it," and asserting surrounded by ruin that "then I can, I must, continue." Badiou Petit manuel d'inesthétique 133.

Such a result is unsurprising to Shestov. Glimpsing truth is an arduous process, "and, to tell the truth, one cannot *do* anything with these truths."[306] We have spent so many centuries chasing the widely applicable or ultimately practical that charting paths to truth, if such an approach were even possible, would not come naturally to man as he is now. "In order to discover authentic truth," metaphysics must reverse its original tenets: it must give up "the sword of necessity" that demands claim to "a valid universal truth."[307] It is here that paradox may turn us from despair to revelation: "it may be that our abortive attempts to penetrate into the world which is forever hidden from us," placing value in sitting with our existential despair and seeking out what lies outside unified systems, will ultimately have "more value than the progress we make in the study of the world" apparent to all.[308]

This re-orienting of metaphysics requires a radical re-casting of faith as the recovery of freedom, an ascetic state of "trembling, expectation, yearning, fear, hope" antithetical to any triumph of self-satisfaction."[309] Religious existentialism, and literature's role as its own philosophical practice, are not meant to comfort, but to provoke. They must teach people to "live in uncertainty," to reject the permanent and the necessary at all costs.[310]

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[305] Shestov as quoted in Shein 280.

[306] Shestov Afiny 264.

[307] Shestov as quoted in Vasylchenko 51.

[308] Shestov Afiny 264-5.

[309] Shestov as quoted in George L. Kline, "Skepticism and Faith in Shestov's Early Critique of Rationalism," Studies in East European Thought 63.1 (2010): 26.

[310] Lev Shestov, Apofeoz bespochvennosti: opyt dogmaticheskogo myshleniia (Zakharov, 2000) 59.

Such a vision of the spiritual, affective world has great resonance with the landscape that Gisèle Pineau consistently and consciously evokes in her writings. She has frequently remarked on her fascination with a worldview wherein "the devil is never far," and a hurricane may be cast as "a punishment that will wash away people's sins."[311] Her engagement with Guadeloupean folklore and religious belief, however, has never been one of a convert; rather, her works consistently draw on over a century of Caribbean literature wherein the Christian God of binary order and absolute law has crashed against figures like the Yoruba trickster Eshu or the devil of the Carnival, whose "cunning and subversive" natures are always ready to toss all assumptions and "taunt those who appeal too much to the established order."[312]

Beyond this specifically spiritual lens, Pineau also appears to heartily endorse the idea that engaging with literature does not solve our problems, but helps us most in generating more questions. We may re-examine Pineau's consistent return to trauma narratives less as "a kind of talking cure," then, the psychoanalytic exorcism of suffering, and more as the articulation of a journey toward healing without end, finding hope not in ultimate revelation but continuous re-opening of possibility.[313] For all that the ambiguity of *Chili-Skin* and *Macadam Dreams* denies readers a satisfying close to the tale, it is important to contrast these unknowns to any absolute endings in Pineau's books, which are universally negative. In this pattern, she aligns with Shestov's broad assertion that "existence is the opposite of finality," and that literature most clearly allows us to see that "everything begins, but nothing ends."[314] In the face of the abyss, healing is inexorably bound to truth for both Shestov and Pineau, and yet there is no point at which the search for either can end. Rather than view this as a tragic quest, however, Gisèle Pineau has her characters embrace the salvation that lies in eternal un-ending. In this way, to adapt Éliette's assertion, "No one is [for]ever lost! No one!" (203).

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[311] Pineau as quoted in Loichot 336.

[312] Christiane Bougerol, "Sorcellerie, malédiction et justice divine à la Guadeloupe," Ethnologies française 20.2 Figures animales (Avril-Juin 1999): 175.

[313] A striking example of this may be found in the recurring pattern of threes in both Chair Piment and L'espérance-macadam. Initially, they appear to lend weight to the fatalism suffusing both Mina's family line and the inhabits of Savane, with their recurrent appearance in moments of both tragedy and comfort. Rather than produce a unified, comprehensible pattern, however, tracing these groups only generate questions and contradictions. While she refuses to speak directly about Éliette's molestation, Marraine Announcia does relate that she saved the woman's father *three times* when they were children. "And why, Lord," she asks, were these trials placed before her? She thrice spared a man who would grow to destroy one family through rape and devastate another through abandonment — setting up his own son Rosan to rape his daughter Angela. "Perhaps," she muses, unable to produce a satisfactory reply, "I was not supposed to save him."

## Considerations: Social Community and Artistic Communion

Alain Badiou's conception of the Subject relies on the elimination not just of re-presentation, but also of the related "forces that objectify and compromise,"[315] leading him to be deeply suspicious of any philosophy that relies on the unknowable nature of the Other. He also rejects any model that hints at group essentialism or cultural relativism. Every invocation "of custom, of community, works directly against truths," he argues, producing "catastrophic statements… [like] only a homosexual can 'understand' what a homosexual is, only an Arab an Arab, etc."[316] Lev Shestov, for his part, "refused to seek the essence of Being or even to consider the question regarding the evolution of a 'being,' be it authentic or not." These kinds of questions are rooted in a framework "which does not dare to rise above autonomous knowledge and autonomous ethics," still clinging to what can be found within an object-ified world and self. Moreover, the very concept of an essential Being lures us back to the false unity of One universe, denying contingency, singularity, possibility, and paradox.[317] Shestov's *istina,* wholly individual and essentially inexpressible, is at odds with any attempt to create communal standards or to gather selfhood over a communal umbrella.

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[314] Shestov as quoted in David Patterson, "The unity of existential philosophy and literature as revealed by Shestov's approach to Dostoevsky," Studies in Soviet Thought 19.3 (1979): 229.

[315] Hallward 9-10.

[316] Alain Badiou, Saint Paul: La Fondation de l'universalisme (Presses Universitaires de France, 1998) 13.

Such strident rejection of community models may raise some red flags for Petrushevskaya and Pineau scholars. The gynocentric narratives of Ludmilla Petrushevskaya have received considerable attention from the moment she became publishable. When asked if it's true "that a writer has been writing one story [her] whole life," Petrushevskaya responds in the affirmative, adding that her story is about "the life of Russian women."[318] In most of her prose works, including *Night Time* and "There's someone in the house," seeking out and pledging fidelity to truth comes alongside an equally potent desire for community, be it the "will against will" of a common enemy or the grateful protectiveness of maternal bonds. Pineau has been even more strident in her call for the need to tell the stories of black women in the Caribbean, specifically.[319] Her characters are often explicitly suffering from their alienation from a broader community, and their quest for truth is almost always accompanied by some kind of attempted homecoming.

Nevertheless, both Petrushevskaya and Pineau firmly reject the group essentialism of both gender determinism and national allegiance. As their works hint, obsessive ontological introspection will only devolve into a maddening trap. As Helena Goscilo has documented,

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[317] Shestov as quoted in Finkenthal 9.

[318] Petrushevskaya and Birger.

[319] As she has stated multiple times in interviews, Pineau cannot write "without taking into account these histories, which oppress." She especially notes slavery's legacy on both gender identity and violence against women, frequent topics in her novels. While she does not view herself as a cultural memoirist, "this past still has flagrant repercussions." Gisèle Pineau as quoted in Paola Ghinelli, Archipels littéraires: Chamoiseau, Condé, Confiant, Brival, Maximin, Laferrière, Pineau, Dalembert, Agnant (Mémoire d'encrier, 2009) 113.

Petrushevskaya's texts often lack both "an authentically celebratory dimension" and any real sense of lasting community.[320] This is especially true in relation to her relentless deconstruction of the mother-savior trope in Russian literature, turning the female figure that marks her as "gynocentric" into a site of continual interrogation.[321] Without this central figure to bind traditional communities together, "in story after story Petrushevskaya's characters look to the group for support, for companionship, and for a sense of identity," and "inevitably they are rejected."[322] The drive for effective communication is omnipresent, but almost always falls short. It feeds on the transmission of data and the reduction of truths; little wonder, then, that "communication is both a social linkage and yet a bar to real communality" in her tales, an attempted "intimacy thwarted by form."[323] There is also her marked tendency, noted by several critics, of "the author's escape" into "some form of… impenetrability." Even in first-person tales, and particularly in third-person narration, the author as an authority, a judge, or even a distinctly reliable source of information is denied. Rather than result in an overflow of contradictory information, however, "the splitting of the author" results in "mutually exclusive hypostases" — underlying realities, as opposed to the parts from which they are comprised.[324]

The experience of writing for Pineau is an intensely personal one, driven by strong intuition rather than obsessive reflection. "I really write with my body," she confesses. "With my belly, with this Creole language mixed with French, with my history, with my life."[325] Yet Pineau's very stress on the women in Guadeloupe and across the Francophone Caribbean emphasizes the breakdown in communality that comes from a rigid adherence to culture-as-such. Many of the most egregious acts committed in her novels are done by men, who are explicitly driven either their guilt at failing to achieve a certain standard of masculinity or their fury at it being challenged.[326] The lines between blacks and whites similarly remain both rigid in structure and porous in texture. Men cannot understand women, and so ignore their warnings; blacks and whites do not mix, and so avoid one another.

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[320] Goscilo as quoted in Dalton-Brown 12.

[321] It should also be noted that, unlike contemporaries who similarly reject the label "woman writer" or the mantle of "ladies' prose," Petrushevskaya has also never identified as a feminist. This places her writing apart from both traditional femininity, on the one hand, and the "New Amazon" archetype of the 1990s, on the other.

[322] Adele Marie Barker, "Women without men in the writings of contemporary Soviet women writers," in Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis (John Benjamins, 1989) 444.

[323] Dalton-Brown 165.

[324] Vinogradova 40.

Yet their rare interactions sometimes yield miraculous results. The most hopeful endings in her novels come from recognition across these lines; still, this recognition does not erase individual revelation. It remains an unknown voice that interjects when Éliette is struck by the realization that she was brutally raped as a child. "*Dis-lui la bête!*" the voice shouts (173). While this translates as "Tell her about the beast," the immediacy of the call indicated by the sentence's structure suggests the monster is almost being called into existence: "Speak the beast to her!" Revelation comes not from exercising judgement but in recognizing the weight of existence.[327] This aligns with Shestov's own interpretation of truth, which draws on centuries of Russian thought marking "a fundamental opposition between *istina* as true existence and *istina* as true judgement." It is the former that is primary: "what is, what truly exists."[328] And it is their quest to navigate, not to solve, the complexities of "what truly exists" — a fundamentally paradoxical world — that propels those characters who begin to heal somewhat forward.

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[325] Pineau as quoted in Anglade Chantal and Françoise Simasotchi-Brones, "Planter mes racines dans la terre créole… déracinée pour l'éternité…," Dossier sur Gisèle Pineau (Décembre 2003): remue.net/cont/Pineau_01entretien.html.

[326] When Governor Régis learns of the painter Zébio's supposed affair with his wife Hermancia, his thoughts become as brutally rote and rhythmic as the machete swings he later uses to commit the crime. "He would show the American that there are Negroes and *Negroes*," he fumes, and that "he, Régis, governor here, was from the race of Negros who stand tall… Cleave, chop, cut! … Cleave! Chop! Cut!" (74)

[327] This also sheds new light on an oft-quoted line from Pineau's "To Write as a Black Woman," where she claims that "to tell, to dig out, to recount again and again the existence of these black women" who struggle, suffer, and survive despite all, who are "not in vain and not obsolete," is the paramount task of her work. To declare "these women exist" does not mean to define them.

Petrushevskaya's work operates on the tightrope walk towards such a community, forever stymied by an essential conflict between "persona" and "self": the former being what faces outward in any social environment, the latter "an individual, internal beginning."[329] This falls broadly in line with Badiou's take on "the only community consistent with truth": one that would be "a 'communism of singularities,' a community of 'extreme particularity'."[330] Pineau, meanwhile, along the lines of Shestov's call for endless plurality and possibility, draws on three interrelated traditions that themselves embrace pan-cultural perspectives — Francophone, Afro-American, and Creole literature — alongside simultaneous engagement with the canonical French tradition, religious and folkloric texts, contemporary philosophical texts, and musical movements that cross the boundaries of all of the above.[331] Through these interwoven reference points, Pineau moves from battles of authority to the bursts of light that shine through gaps in her webs, following Shestov's call to search for stars in the blackest night.

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[328] Vasylchenko 513.

[329] Yue Wang, "Psycholinguistics of the Myth in Contemporary Female Prose," Philological Sciences. Issues of Theory and Practice 1-2 (2018) 226.

[330] Badiou as quoted in Hallward 26.

[331] Alongside Guadeloupean author Simone Schwartz-Bart (1938-) and African-American writer Toni Morrison (1931-2019), Pineau's adolescence was greatly shaped by American writer Richard Wright (1908-1960).
Yet Pineau does not limit herself to black writers. She has repeatedly valorized French novelist and journalist Émile Zola (1840-1902) as a voice of righteous denunciation, once even declaring that "Zola… was my domain" as a budding writer. While she does not emulate his strict Naturalist approach, Zola's influence can be traced in her meticulous depiction of the miseries of poverty within France as well as in Guadeloupe, from domestic abuse to alcoholism. "That was what he did, Zola, he showed people: here is Humanity, it is here, and it is dying." Pineau as quoted in Makward 1208.

In contrast what he saw as the wholly individual truth procedure of love and the wholly collective one of politics, Badiou sees art and science as acting "mixed situations," individually sparked but with collective significance. Shestov similarly acknowledged that it was through the communal act of publishing and distribution that readers glimpse the "singular, unique, inimitable knowledge of themselves" that Shakespeare's and Dostoevsky's protagonists stumble upon, the lightning that strikes in the dark.[332] And from the singular voices of Petrushevskaya and Pineau, new currents of artistic expression and philosophical thought appear to be emerging. Ludmilla Petrushevskaya is among several writers who have radically changed what is traditionally thought of as women's prose. If Petrushevskaya does offer "the possibility of developing a new word," it is a vision that several authors have begun to follow. The reinterpretation of the literary fairy tale as a lens of psychological realism, in particular, has been taken up by strikingly divergent voices within a new generation of writers, among them Alisa Ganieva (1985-), Evgeny Babushkin (1983-), and Dmitri Akhmatshin (1987-).[333]

Gisèle Pineau has likewise become something of an institution within Francophone literature. Younger writers, such as Marie Ndiaye, have taken up her innovations in the autobiographical novel to explore mad truth outside the culturally constricted realm of *la folie antillaise* or diaspora, without effacing the current political realities that still oppress. These younger writers continue to struggle with what Petrushevskaya and Pineau have cast into the light: "a way to talk about broader discourses that is neither outside of time (by virtue of being ahistorical, mystical, or transcendent) nor one that lapses into a yet-more-esoteric scholasticism that makes scholars into the new clerics."[334] A truth for both women is something is authentic, individual, and rooted in traumatic upheaval; still, intersubjective commitment is required to sustain any sense of hope or healing, to keep up the struggle for truth, in the face of the mass sickness plaguing our world.

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[332] Horowitz 158.

[333] These authors are specifically highlighted as followers of her literary innovation in E.A. Plotnikova et al, "Traditsii otechestvennoi klassiki v tvorchestve sovremennoi molodezhi," Vestnik of the Mari State University 11.2 26 (2017): 64.

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[334] Luxon 290.

# CHAPTER 4

## Abandoning the Theater of Representation: Becoming-Mad and Becoming-Monstrous in the Work of Linda Lê and Anna Starobinets

> Possessed, I shed my molt of the wise infant and
> take up the robe of Nessus, so that the dead kill me, the living me,
> and so that I die of my deaths that kill me, and so that I die
> of the words that want to resuscitate the dead. I wait for peace.
> I sow discord inside myself and outside of myself.
> — Linda Lê[335]

> It seems to me that if a person knows how and loves to write,
> the switching of genre registers is imperceptible and painless for him.
> In fact, it was much more difficult for me to switch from journalism to fiction.
> That is, to move from fixing reality to its invention.
> From studying the world to creating worlds.
> — Anna Starobinets[336]

Postcolonial and women's writings seem dogged by problems of representation. Certainly, that is the predominant focus of many literary studies and cultural surveys. "How can identity be thought and represented outside of the oppositional categories" of a particular culture? How might experiences be expressed without relying on a stereotypical lens through which to frame them?[337] This representational approach, however, is what French philosopher Gilles Deleuze accuses of undermining the very questions these scholars attempt to raise. While potentially a worthwhile *political* ambition, the organization of minority groups remains traced along the molar line, a production of the State machine to categorize and control. It is the trap in which

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[335] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 86. The centaur Nessus, shot by Heracles, convinced the hero's wife Deianeira to soak a robe in his dying blood to ensure her husband's fidelity. The robe absorbed the Hydra's poison that had coated Heracles' arrow; when Heracles donned it, it burned him alive. In Greek mythology, Nessus is a figure of both doubled death and painful rebirth: his death also ensures the death of his killer, yet his robe completes Heracles' legend and ushers him to Mount Olympus, where he is welcomed among the gods.

[336] Anna Starobinets and Anna Pravdiuk, "Anna Starobinets: My budem stavit' zadachi na grani vypolnimosti," Lit School 26 October 2016: litschool.pro/intervyu/starobinets-interview/.

[337] Britto 1.

Deleuze believes that psychoanalysis has also been caught. Rather than take up the unconscious as an endless factory of production, the field froze it into a theater of representation, capable only of structural expression.[338] This outcome proves particularly detrimental to those already grouped as minorities. The more "the colonized resist[s] Oedipalization," the more "Oedipalization tends to close in around him."[339] Women may expect to be doubly over-written: by the philosopher, who seeking truth ends up bowing to the State, and by the psychoanalyst, who seeking to deliver her may end up reducing her to stasis.

In my final chapter, I take up this radical rejection of representation and expression in my analysis of Linda Lê and Anna Starobinets. I argue that both approach literature as Deleuzian factories of unconscious production, as abstract desiring machines.[340] Lê reworks the autofiction into a schizo-analytic process, enacting Becoming-Mad through her work in a search for "adequate truths." The superficial movements of simulation, metamorphosis, and will in Starobinets' writing instead trace potential lines of flight through the frustrated process of Becoming-Monstrous. While both women join Petrushevskaya and Pineau in rejecting knowledge as a pathway to truth, the hyper-differentiation of meaning forces their readers to confront being as an ethical criteria of truth — even as ontology can be conceived only through its instability in the form of constant transformative becoming.[341]

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[338] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, L'Anti-Œdipe, (Éditions de Minuit, 1972) 33. It should be noted that while they single out "myth, tragedy, and dream" as the limiting foci of psychoanalysis, Deleuze's writings often draw on these same areas when discussing literature. The key difference is that rather than approach the three as sites of interpretation, they are presented as abstract machines of production.

[339] Ibid. 203.

[340] Abstract machines are not mechanical structures; the machine aspect here refers to the flowing of forces across endless abstract circuits and breakers. In this configuration, desire turns from an imaginary symbol rooted in lack to a real, productive force in the world. Ibid. 33, 35-36.

### Anti-Oedipus in Action

In *Slander*, the niece operates almost exclusively as the lacking vessel which male guidance can fill. When she is not valorizing her uncle, she is reflecting on her romantic history. These traumatic elements are attributed by her friend Ricin to her unconscious desires: "You always needed to be someone's doll."[342] It is unsurprising, therefore, that psychoanalytic interpretations of Lê's work remain popular. Within almost everything she has written, there seems to lurk an Elektra-esque obsession with an abandoned father by a penitent daughter. And as a genre, the history of autofiction is undeniably indebted to Freud's teachings.[343] Some scholars will even combine psychoanalysis with post-colonial studies' equal emphasis on representational battles. After all, her protagonists are openly "haunted by their native town… their family dispersed by war, the end of French colonialism," and their own "sentiment of culpability for having left."[344] At its most extreme, this has led to interpreting incest in Lê's texts as the result of bonds "solely based on [characters'] ethnic background," even as they simultaneously express narcissistic longing: "love for the other is also a form of self-love."[345]

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[341] Both Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, as Hallward notes, "are philosophers of the radically new, of the as yet unrepresentable, of experiences that call for genuinely creative thought — thought as opposed to the more or less habitual processes of recognition, expectation, classification, representation, comparison, [and] manipulation." Badiou, however, accuses Deleuze of falling back into transcendentalism through his engagement with ontology, and argues that Deleuze secretly adheres to a philosophy of One-ness. Deleuzian supporters would counter that Badiou misreads Deleuze's approach to the relationship between multiplicity and univocity. Deleuzian becoming rejects all notions of stability or end, and life's underlying processes of hyper-differentiation reject all calls to hierarchy or judgment. Hallward 175-6, 178-80.

[342] Lê Calomnies 70.

[343] Serge Doubrovsky was a staunch advocate of psychoanalytic therapy, and was treated by a psychoanalyst for over a decade. Jean-Pierre Boulé, "Gender Melancholy in Doubrovsky's 'autofictions'," L'Ésprit Créateur 49.3 Serge Doubrovsky: Life, Writing, Legacy (Fall 2009): 66, 68.

[344] Maryse Fauvel, "Déterritorialisation de l'identité et de la langue des personnages de Linda Lê," Romance Notes 42:3 (Spring 2002): 331.

Starobinets' readers have been less eager to combine psychoanalytic and post-Soviet lenses. Instead, her stories have been approached almost as split cases. Those tales whose hermeneutic keys point readers in the direction of mental illness are less analyzed by literary scholars. They are taken up by magazine writers as hyper-realist depictions of biomedical maladies, "boring into irrational depths [and] embracing the point at which mental illness devours people."[346] Academic analyses have tended instead to focus on those stories that incorporate folklore or myth. Seeking to rehabilitate her popular but less vaunted status as a mere "horror writer," these interpretations stress the "uniquely disquieting sense of modern Russia," encapsulated in allegorical or evocative forms.[347] The meaning of her work lies in the shadow of totalitarianism still haunting the margins, necessarily cloaked in the garb of fantasy.

In my dissatisfaction with these readings, I build on a starting-part in Deleuzian theory: that the molar aggregations encouraged by representational approaches flatten out "all of the endless variation on what it is to be human (not to mention inhuman)." Lê and Starobinets fight against being "folded into a limited grid of repetitive categories, which have folded yet again into the reproductive family unit."[348] To battle this suffocating enclosure, some creative side-stepping is needed: a "transversality" that operates along margins and via borderlands. In the first section of this chapter, I will examine Lê's and Starobinets' exploitation of Oedipal and socio-cultural expectations as a paradoxical resistance to the *idées fixes* that dominate their receptions.

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[345] Tess Do, "From Incest to Exile: Linda Lê and the Incestuous Vietnamese Immigrants," in Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee eds. France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations (Lexington Books, 2005) 160, 173.

[346] Guzeva: https://www.rbth.com/literature/2012/05/12/describing_schizophrenia_from_within_15625.html

[347] Lebedushkina 88-89.

[348] Brian Massumi, A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia (The MIT Press, 1992) 78.

### *Linda Lê: "In the direction of the ill-formed and incomplete"*

"I always feel like I'm standing before doctors instead of critics, doctors who ask, 'So, you aren't better yet?'"[349] Lê's statement is directed primarily at those scholars who interpret her work as a medical testimony rather than literary text. Yet her objection to their fixation on a cure is also an objection to finality: to placing origin, securing identity, and permitting closure. It is this temptation that the uncle in *Slander* fears will consume his niece.What she is after when she first writes the Uncle is "not a father, but an *idée fixe*… a plagiarism of the father" (165). Her potential bastardy means she can choose which father to claim; and this choice is one that the Uncle, tellingly, casts as a choice between books. The first, the love story between her mother and the American officer, is overflowing with compelling phrasing, "written with [an] ease… whose reading enchants you." It promises closure, nourishment; the clear narrative "of a novelist *à la mode*." Her Vietnamese father does not offer a counter-narrative, even one of betrayal or suffering. His book contains nothing "other than a bit of dried blood," "saying" nothing but its wound (176). It is this latter confirmation-of-nothing prompts the niece to set off in a new direction — though, tellingly, not a directed one. The Uncle, anticipating this choice, therefore marks his allegiance to the Niece. He does so not through blood, but through their common *lack* of filiation: "We are from No Where, she and I… Our roots are those of water flowers" (173).

Such a description of un-rootedness is what Deleuze characterizes as a "fascicular root" in his joint work with Félix Guatarri. It is a model pitted against the arborescent ideal of essential origin and homogenous unification. In such a radical system, unity can only subsist “as past or yet to come.” The abortion of origins thereby permits, “grafting onto it, an immediate multiplicity of secondary roots that undergo great development.”[350] Lê supports this reading of *Slander* in her discussion of the autofictional novel. This story, wherein the author “slander[s] [her]self,” was intended to produce “a family romance” where all “becomes uncertain” rather than revealed. She uses the text to recount and to refuse any “question of origins”: preoccupation turns from who she is to “who *can [she] claim* to be?”[351]

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[349] Lê as quoted in Barnes 196.

Autofiction in general works towards “the self escaping itself.” Its foundations were built on the notion that self-image is a fictive construction.[352] Lê’s production, however, is less the articulation of an identity forever in process than it is a purposeful up-rooting, de-authorizing, and il-legitimizing of identity as a representational concept at all. Its claiming is deliberately made impossible. “When [she] make[s] the decision to write,” she relates, she must “mourn the loss of [her] native tongue.” Yet this is not a passive reaction to loss. Pen hits paper only after she herself “ha[s] killed the mandarin,” guaranteeing that “its phantom haunt[s] my inkwell.”[353] To write is both to place a sacrifice and to commit a crime, to reject a place and to be denied one.

Such an attitude is strikingly similar to that of Michel de Certeau, who asserts that “writing is born from and deals with the acknowledged doubt of an explicit division, in sum, of the impossibility of one's own place." More than the impossibility of its closed, interiorized form, the subject "is *never authorized* by a place" — it always "comes up short or in excess," a "debtor of death… indebted with respect to the disappearance of a genealogical and territorial 'substance,' linked to a name that cannot be owned."[354] Lê's writing process reflects this in her role as both victim and perpetrator. The double(s) here are not external unknowns, but what Deleuze defines as "a self that lives in me as the double of the other."[355] It is difference *in* itself rather than from itself. "It seems to me that I exist only when I write," Lê remarks; and yet this tenuous existence is predicated on a "duplication in me, between the one who writes and the one who, the rest of the time, tries to live."[356]

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[350] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Mille Plateaux (Édition du Seuil, 1994) 12.

[351] Lê and Loucif 885. Italics mine.

[352] Dominique Rosse, “Autofiction et autopoïétique: La fictionnalisation de soi.” L’Esprit Créateur 42.4 Les Nouvelles Autobiographies (Winter 2002): 10.

In his battle against the lure of introspection, Deleuze focused a surprising amount on writers who endlessly recounted parts of their own lives. Nonetheless, there is in his readings of Thomas Wolfe, Henry Miller, or Virginia Woolf always “an attempt to make life something more than personal, to free life from what imprisons it.” Deleuze as quoted in Daniel Smith, Essays on Deleuze (Edinburgh UP, 2012) 193.

[353] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 51.

This emphasis on mourning and murder may seem to undercut any sense of creation or originality in her oeuvre. As Leslie Barnes has convincingly laid out, however, what presents itself as negation and erasure in Lê's work plays out as stylistic exercise, one of considerable generative potency.[357] Defect becomes weft: the rendering-strange of oneself becomes a condition of innovation, the illegitimacy of one's place its central drive and most potent desire. Whatever *moi* exists must come only from "substituting the mirror with the blank page,"[358] a constant experimentation with reality and rapport that constructs the unconscious even as the unconscious provides its fodder. Such an attitude is strikingly similar to Deleuze's own conception of literary innovation, which rejects the imposure of finality. "Literature moves rather in the direction of the ill-formed and incomplete… always in the midst of being formed."[359]

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[354] Michel de Certeau, L'Écriture de l'histoire (Gallimard, 1975) 327.

[355] Deleuze as quoted in  Keith Ansell Pearson, "Living the  the Eternal Return as the Event: Nietzsche with Deleuze," Journal of Nietzsche Studies 14 Eternal Recurrence (Autumn 1997): 67.

[356] Lê and Loucif 883. The word Lê uses here, "dédoublement," means duplication. It can also, however, indicate a split (as in split personality), or even an unfolding.

[357] Lê views "the double, to whom every utterance is addressed," and "the defect… [that] cannot conceive of itself as legitimate" as twin forces of creation. Her literature "does not find its place," but refuses to "legitimize itself by celebrating an idealized notion of unbelonging." Writing is a parasitic twin, "which horrifies because it is equally recognizable and alien, its development is incongruous and adventitious." Barnes 213-4.

[358] Lê Calomnies 33-34.

### *Anna Starobinets: "In the sense of — incomplete?"*

In contrast to Linda Lê, Anna Starobinets firmly distinguishes her writing from her self.[360] Fiction is an exploration of the relationship you have "with yourself and with what you produce in yourself." Still, real life remains objective, its actions external to you. Her writing process is not about deterritorializing subjecthood, nor externalizing irrationality. It is a blatantly introspective process. She ventures into a "basement" in her soul, and crawls about "with a flashlight and mask from time to time [to] report from there." The "zone of nightmares" she wades through acts as a necessary catharsis; it may even serve as "a form of psychotherapy."[361]

Starobinets' assumptions regarding subjective interiority, and her emphasis on structural zones of the sub-conscious, seem far from the more radical notion of Gilles Deleuze. Nonetheless, her work forces readers to endlessly acknowledge the virtuality of meaning. Readers are not simply baited by the author at random, cycled through stories that may have monsters, may hold miracles, or may have madness. Traversing the whole of her collection *Transitional Age* is to be held in an "interworld." This borderland is populated so often by characters that are children because “they themselves [are] still so inconclusive,” living “on the very edge of reality” and so far more attuned to the hyperdifferentiated chaosmosis which Starobinets marks as the ideal positionality for readers.[362]

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[359] Gilles Deleuze, Critique et Clinique (Éditions de Minuit, 2013) 1.

[360] Writing her 2017 memoir Posmotri na nego (Look at him) — about aborting her son after discovered he had a fatal birth defect — was difficult not just due to the painful subject matter, but because she herself was the focus of her writing. "For a long time I hesitated over writing this book. After all, it was too personal. Too real." Anna Starobinets as quoted in Irina Evgenevna Adelgeim, "Ia khochu govorit': Autopsikhoterapevticheskie funktsii povestvovaniia F. Bargel'skoi i A Starobinets o perinatal'noi potere," Slavianskii Al'manakh 3-4 (2019): 433.

[361] Anna Starobinets and Irina Lukyanova, "Stalker: Anna Starobinets," STORY: story.ru/istorii-znamenitostej/lichnoe-delo/stalker/.

No matter what hermeneutic key we are granted in the final page of each Starobinets story, we cannot efface the churning, enveloping sense of meaning as both an unfathomably dense network and an unending process.[363] While literary markers trip readers through cross-generic minefields, Starobinets’ characters openly grapple with the fact that words lack any subjective interiority. Far from being “a closed, self-reflective system,” linguistic expression reflects, as Deleuze argues, “only a redundancy of outsides”: an interrelation of relations external to their terms.[364] Throughout *Transitional Age,* Marina is tormented in her quest to *make* sense of Maksim’s condition, sifting through a language that can offer her immanent context but not internal essence. An especially merciless puberty, she assures herself, “would explain a lot” about her son’s deteriorating condition. Still, “could all this be attributable to an awkward age?” (*Transitional Age* 12)[365] Neither she nor the school nurse are convinced; yet here again, the endless production of meaning can only be cut through via the assumptions at hand.

— Is your family broken?

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[362] Starobinets and Podolsky: darkermagazine.ru/page/anna-starobinec-mezhdu-sumasshestviem-i-chudom-vybiraju-chudo.

[363] Starobinets came up with the idea for Transitional Age as a new mother, asking herself “What if my beloved person, my child, changes, goes crazy, turns into something else?” Yet the final story refuses to allow any comforting distance. Despite the “universal fear” at its heart, the story as it plays out is wholly singular; nor can its conten/xts be exhausted in the direction of either analogy or introspection. Starobinets as quoted in Lukyanova.

[364] Massumi 27.

[365] I wish to draw particular attention to the verb *ob’iasniat’sia*. Just as Transitional Age has multiple interwoven meanings — the literal translation of the title, the teen-associated “awkward” or “difficult” age, and the straightforward, culturally assigned meaning of “puberty” — so too may *ob’iasniat’sia* be read in multiple directions. On the one hand, it can indicate a sure cause: “is due to,” “owes to.” At the same time, however, it is frequently employed as a likely guess: “might/can be explained by.” The semiotic middle ground, “is attributable to,” captures the tension between these definitions but cannot reconcile them.

— In what sense?

— In the sense of — incomplete? Elena Gennadevna explained in a sincere voice and gave her dull brown eyes, resting on bifocals, a still more questioning expression.

— And what's that to do with it? … — Marina said gloomily. (6)

Language has proven itself fundamentally non-discursive. It is revealed as, "at bottom… what the circumstances say," not the words themselves.[366] At the same time, however, the scene between Marina and Elena is echoed throughout the novella by the excess meaning it leaves behind, and which paradoxically constitutes it.[367] When Marina refers to Maksim's fear of cats as the result of a "childhood psychological trauma," thinking she means when the kitten Fedya attacked him, she simultaneously envelops the potentialities of that statement and cuts through it to the interpretation most aligned with her constructed reality. Meaning is the aftermath and continuation of a battle of forces, "the sphere in which [one] must already be settled in order to perform various possible designations, and even to think their conditions."[368]

Yet as the ant queen learns to her frustration, meaning is not an origin point; it is itself a process of translation, endlessly continued. It can have "no absolute designation or manifestation," no "fixed and stable objects or subjects," and is "devoid of any irreversible relations or implications."[369] Again and again, she and her children cling to books to buttress their position, casting themselves in the process through a dizzying series of ontological postures: pathbreaking scientists, devoted revolutionaries, the destined generation of evolutionary progress. This “self-redundancy,” this multiplicity of deterritorialized signs, what Deleuze terms *signifiance,* only secured by interpretive force.[370] It is a force that must be endlessly generated; and it is one driven by desire.[371] It also acts as an inverse of Badiou’s assertion that meanings collect around a truth one it is declared. Meaning as it functions is concerned with designations, and endlessly replacing and reconfiguring relations; it “must be indifferent to questions of truth or falsehood.”[372]

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[366] Massumi 31.

[367] "A thing has as many meanings as there are forces capable of seizing it": this is an infinity of processes enveloped in one sign, "even includ[ing] the paths not taken… all the forces that could have seized the thing but did not." Ibid. 10-11.

[368] Ronald Bogue, Deleuze and Guattari (Taylor & Francis, 1989) 70.

[369] Deleuze as quoted in Horst Ruthrof, "Deleuze and the Body: Eluding Kafka's 'Little Death Sentence'," in Ian Buchanan ed. A Deleuzian Century? (Duke UP, 1999) 570.

The process of meaning-making is enmeshed, within Starobinets’ tales, with an endless fabulation on ontological instability. Her central characters are forever in a state of transformation, whose identification at each moment must move across “an unbridgeable abyss of fracturing.”[373] “How shall we name her now?” the colony muses about Marina halfway through their infestation. “We don’t love Mother. We love Mama” (47). While this appears to be a straightforward divide between a Mother figure (Marina) and a true Mama (the Queen), the splintering between largely interchangeable words is further complicated by the presence of Maksim as a voice at this stage in the narrative, who views Marina as both “Mother” and “Mama” even as the two are *also* becoming linked to the Queen. Naming, relation, and interrelation are all that can construct a subject that is, ultimately, articulated by what surrounds it. “We I love the Queen,” the diary reads earlier, before declaring “I - am Queen” (45). While we may approach abstract machines as “a unique object,” and even “give it a name and individualization,” this act is the result of forces, not the origination of essence.[374]Against, amongst, and throughout this ontological instability is the virtual, the “future-past of the present.” It is not an undifferentiated void, a world of empty sets. It is a hyperdifferentiated, pulsing chaosmosis; “a hypervoid in continual ferment.”[375]

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[370] The potential and actual processes here could be analyzed indefinitely, from any direction. Under the mask of total control lies no unity or totality, but rather an interaction, *corps à corps*, forcing clarity. “The ultimate signified is therefore the signifier itself, in its redundancy or ‘excess’.” Deleuze as quoted in Ibid. 566.

[371] Keeping a diary is good,” the queen-colony reflects, before clarifying, “keeping a diary is *essential*.” Written apparently for no one but themselves, their compulsion to write “puts things in order;” it “streamlines thoughts” (44). This repetition-impulsion function of language harkens to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of an “order-word,” in the sense of both issuing an order (commanding) and establishing an order (positioning bodies in a force field). As binary and simplistic as the queen’s demands appear, they can only be furthered by continuous interaction and interpretation. “What brings these formations — the infinity of forces, some willed, most fortuitous together — is the ‘abstract machine,’ interpretation’s meaning-process, “the formal diagram of forces extracted from the encounter in question.” Massumi 17.

[372] Ruthrof 570.

[373] Massumi 16.

### *Tsvetaeva and Kafka: Triangulating Deleuzian Thought*

At one point in *Caliban Complex*, Linda Lê cites three radically different women — American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Danish writer Karen Blixen (1885-1962), and Spanish essayist and philosopher María Zambrano (1904-1991) — as exemplars of dissidence:

> Three *solitaires* (recluses, rogues) who refuse to be captives of their ego and prisoners of their epoch. Three *irréductibles* (irreducibles, irreconcilables) who contributed to scrambling definitions, opening borders, geographic or mental, and to putting schematisms back into question: feminine and masculine, literary genres.[376]

Their characterization indicates the true scope of Lê’s ambitions, as well as the distinctly verbal thrust — to scramble, to open, to question — of her approach. If we accept that her oeuvre focuses “on literature *as* exile rather than on a literature *of* exile,”[377] then we must take up her engagements with unconscious production not through any “problem of sense,” but through “problems of usage;” in other words, reading Lê with the aim “not [of] ’what is it that this wants to say?,’ but *how this works*.”[378] In the following section, I will ask these questions by bringing Deleuze into conversation not just with Linda Lê, but with a major influence on her writing: the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva. Through this triangulation, I ultimately argue that Lê combines Tsvetaeva’s Antigonian stance with Deleuze’s concept of Ariadnian affirmation in her work, fueling her commitment to Becoming-Mad.

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[374] Deleuze and Guattari L’Anti-Œdipe 342-343.

[375] Massumi 37, 66.

[376] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 143.

[377] Barnes 197.

Again and again, Anna Starobinets’ stories plunge us into worlds where signs collide, proliferate, and envelop; where signification is reversed and unraveled; where bodies are made monstrous and subjectivities hollowed-out. Following Deleuze’s call for literature to demystify, to experiment, and to create, my middle section on Starobinets will examine how her works might generate “lines of flight” — churnings out from the literary desiring machine that “never consist in running away from the world,” but do succeed in “causing runoffs,” places where even the most rigid social system will reveal itself as an assemblage of machines and not a static structure, “leak[ing] from all directions.”[379] This approach draws on Deleuze’s reading of Franz Kafka, a writer for whom Starobinets also holds a deep admiration. Rather than attempt to *interpret* her writing — “whether the interpretation takes the form of parabolism, negative theology, allegory, symbolism, ‘correspondences’ and so on”[380] — and so rely on dualisms, adherences, and rifts, I therefore employ the reversal Deleuze and Guattari undertake in Kafka study, marking the "superficial movements" that emerged as patterns.

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[378] Deleuze and Guattari L’Anti-Œdipe 132.

[379] Deleuze and Guattari Mille Plateaux 204.

[380] Réda Bensmaïa, “Forward,” in Deleuze et al, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature (University of Minnesota Press, 1986) xiv.

When the literary machine is plugged into another, worked through by writing to such a degree, "an intensive trait" like Kafka's bureaucracy, "starts working for itself." These obsessive foci do not enclose themselves around the story, but rather signal potential "points of undoing, of dismantling."[381] In particular, I draw on how Starobinets "grafts" traditions like American horror onto her short stories to examine the specific superficial movements of simulation, metamorphosis, and will.

### Linda Lê: Marina the Salamander and Becoming-Mad

In Lê's work, debt and despair fuse with the literary creation of a plastic subjecthood, producing an immanence that lies only in the moments where it is presented, denied, and reworked again. "At the origin of each of my works," she writes, "there is an anxious interrogation over my relation to the world."[382] In navigating this process, she compares herself to an amnesiac seeking her memories. Nonetheless, whatever comes to her is accepted regardless of perceived actuality or accuracy. She maintains her assertion that "the self is like nothingness, like illusion."[383] What she maps out through unconscious production is not the recovery of a life, but a ceaseless re-engagement with relation, an experiment to which she never desires an end. Such an approach harkens to Deleuze's (non-)conception of fiction: it is "never a scholarly exercise in search of what is signified, still less a highly textual exercise in search of a signifier." Instead, he links literary to schizophrenic production, as each is “a pure process that fulfills itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds.”[384]

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[381] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure (Éditions de Minuit, 1975) 83.

[382] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 83.

[383] Ibid. 148.

To take up this position as a writer entails both total uprooting and some paradoxical acts of allegiance.[385] It is here that Lê’s cast intertextual network fully comes into play. On the one hand, drawing on writers from almost every continent and period in the modern era allows her to “displace— spatially and temporally — both the text and intertext within a larger literary domain.”[386] Rather than align herself with a particular movement, or position herself an inheritor to a particular lineage, her references map out spatiotemporal borderlands through an endless series of cross-anchorings. At the same time, they also permit her to carry on dialogues through a collective interrogation of the movements within each oeuvre that resonate with her, regardless of their now-aborted origin points. Unraveling in itself becomes an act of re-linking: “literature helps me weave connections with my own kind.”[387] These kindred are composed solely by the writings they produce, or which has produced them: Kafka via his diaries, or Antigone via Sophocles’ *Oedipus Cycle*.

Amongst this mass of differing backgrounds and allegiances, there is a prominent group whose combined influence is both strikingly significant and largely overlooked: Russian authors and philosophers, particularly those writing in the early Soviet era. While French, German, and Classical writers make frequent appearances in *Caliban Complex* (alongside the occasional Asian or American), it is to Russian writers that Lê consistently turns when elaborating on her writing process, interrogating the task of the writer, and exploring the relationship between writing and identity.[388] It is not my contention that Russian writers are the "true," "sole," or "most crucial" interlocutors of the intertextual interrogations Lê carries out in her work. Rather, I argue that examining their persistent presence within her oeuvre, both through direct "correspondents" and indirect cameo, may shed particular light on Lê's approach to mad literature as a pathway to ethical truths. There are enough crucial differences between her own history as (not) a post-colonial French-Vietnamese writer and the lives of her selected Soviets to avoid the risk that their discourses will be flattened and conflated with her. This permits her to forge an allegiance with those writers whose native land had become alien to them; those men and women who, amidst creative entropy and facing a life "incredible in its horrible simplicity" (135), plumbed the morass in which they were immersed in order to chart a course through the unknown.

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[384] Deleuze as quoted in Smith 219.

[385] Deleuze and Guattari make a clear distinction in L’Anti-Œdipe between filiation, on the one hand, and allegiance, on the other. The first assumes the kind of obvious, essential grouping that hyperdifferentiation refuses, and implies a static conception of being that their ontology rejects. Allegiance, on the other hand, carries with it the assumption of linkage without erasing difference, and allows Deleuze and Guattari to examine becoming on its own terms.

[386] Barnes 26.

[387] Lê as quoted in Kurmann 5.

In these depths, insanity becomes a line of flight — not an escape, but a sizable burrow, a refusal to accept the reality demanded of them. "Oh! What madness to be a man and search for the truth!" Leonid Andreyev declares; and yet he commits himself to that search. Creation, ethics, freedom, movement; these things are birthed from that descent. The mad man “makes *the* lie into *a* truth,” and restores “in its austerity the sacred truth of *his* life.” In Yevgeny Zamyatin’s words, he is simultaneously a prophet and a heretic, “break[ing] the husk of dogma and fight[ing] against calcification and sclerosis.”[389]

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[388] She evokes the deluge of Golyadkins featured in Dostoevsky's "Dvoynik" (The Double, 1846) to buttress her argument that "all literature is ex-literature, in the sense that it aims at the annihilation of the ego." (Caliban 142) The generative necessity of the monstrous double and haunting defect appear similarly indebted to the existential fervor of Dostoevsky's later works. Nineteenth century absurdist Nikolai Gogol also appears throughout, as a figure of both movement without direction and madness against falsehood. Lê quotes both the final passage of Dead Souls ("Russie, où te précipites-tu?") and Russian émigré Vladimir Nabokov's assessment of Gogol as "a master of illusion," a "vampire" and "ventriloquist," a "fool" and a "mystique." She then blends her own voice with that of Nabokov to applaud him for "demasking his characters, all dedicated to the cult of the lure, Gogol unmask[ing] himself by revealing the most obscure parts of his personality and revealing us to our selves." Lê Le complexe de Caliban 147.

She devotes the most space, however, to considering Expressionist Leonid Andreyev (1871-1919) against the backdrop of the Russian revolution, his voice intermingled with those of poets Aleksandr Block (1880-1921) and Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938), science fiction satirist Yevgeny Zamyatin (1884-1937), and composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). Rather than focus on the USSR's political repression or on the cultural upheaval that surrounds them, she instead draws attention to Andreyev's desire to "give shape to those 'nocturnal conspiracies, these half-conscious thoughts and feelings,' which are the lot of his generation." Ibid. 135.

These are the statements that prompt Lê to declare: “all the suicidal poets form my ideal family.”[390] And if one suicidal poet may act as both mother and sister in that family, it is undoubtedly Soviet-era exile poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941).[391] In addition to numerous oblique references in her autofiction and the deference in interviews she has paid other creators, Lê published a selection of Tsvetaeva’s writings entitled *Marina Tsvétaïéva: Comment ça va la vie?* (Marina Tsvetaeva: How Goes Life?, 2002). The significance of this is hard to overstate. Over a publishing career spanning two decades, this is the only non-autofictional work to which Lê has put her name. Prefacing poems, extracts from letters and essays, and photographs of Tsvetaeva alongside friends and family is the writer’s own 39-page tribute to the poet, in which is it easy to see parallels between Lê’s work and the impression she has of Tsvetaeva.

Like Lê, the Russian poet cannot find a home, and refuses to claim what is falsely offered as one. Speaking of her exile in France after fleeing the USSR, Tsvetaeva remarked, “here, I am useless; there, I am impossible.”[392] The choice between the two was obvious: in the prose work produced outside the Soviet Union, Lê traces the poet's defiant claiming of illegitimacy, as well as a continuous exploration of the outcast. These draw on ancient sources, both to avoid containment within contemporary tradition and to subvert their ossified messages, scramble their codes. Cast by Lê as "a being of contradictions, that is to say a being entirely turned toward the refusal of dogmas," Tsvetaeva is cast as a woman who, "well before her geographic exile," had "forged her interior exile in disdaining to choose her political camp."[393]

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[389] Ibid. 137-138. Italics mine.

[390] Ibid. 71.

[391] It should be noted that both Alexandra Kurmann and Leslie Barnes note the apparent significance of Tsvetaeva in to Lê in their work. Kurmann, however, mentions her only briefly before turning her attention to Austrian poet-philosopher Ingeborg Bachmann. While Barnes does address the importance of Tsvetaeva’s silencing in “On Writing and Not Writing,” meanwhile, her article focuses on a close reading of two of Lê’s autofictional novels rather than an interrogation of Tsvetaeva’s particular role as a literary muse. Nor have either discussed Lê’s writings on Tsvetaeva in her extensive foreword to Marina Tsvetaeva: How Goes Life?, or analyzed the similarities between what Lê claims Tsvetaeva is doing in her work and what Lê proclaims of her own process in Caliban Complex.

[392] Tsvetaeva as quoted in Linda Lê, Marina Tsvétaïéva: Comment ça va la vie? (PLACE NE, 2002) 11.

To this day, critics reading Tsvetaeva accuse her "of a subjectivism that is extreme, even irresponsible," and her defenders still sometimes employ her suicide as a form of posthumous rehabilitation.[394] Her work purposefully and insistently eschews the socio-political specificity of something like Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* (1935-1961) on the Great Terror. Those expecting her to tackle the ongoing "woman question" amidst burgeoning feminist movements, meanwhile, were met with exasperation.[395] In recent decades, this seeming retreat into interiority has been viewed more kindly against the retrospective backdrop of a subjectivity-eradicating Stalinist state.[396] Several critics now cast her as a champion of the individual. After all, in a period of unceasing persecution, what could be more radical than to declare "the only form of judgment for a poet is auto-judgment?"[397] Her silencing via exile, the losses her family suffered, and her death fall similarly easily within this narrative of personal martyrdom.

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[393] Ibid. 16.

[394] Ute Birgit Cosima Stock, "L'Art à la lumière de la conscience (Une appropriation sélective de la pensée de Nietzsche)," in Véronique Lossky and Jacqueline de Proyart eds. Marina Tsvétaeva et la France: Nouveautés et Inédits / Marina Tsvetaeva i Frantsiia: Novoe i Neizdannoe (Institut d'études Slaves & Ruskii Put', 2002) 156.

[395] "Ever since my birth I have had an aversion to all that is marked by some kind of female (mass) separateness," she wrote, ultimately declaring "There is no woman's question in creativity: there are women's answers to human questions." Tsvetaeva as quoted in Donald Loewen, The Most Dangerous Art: Poetry, Politics and Autobiography After the Russian Revolution (Lexington Books, 2008) 129.

This quote is striking in its rejection of gendered *distinctions* within creativity while still allowing for *difference* within humanity. This perspective both aligns with Lê's own reflections on gender in her memoir, and *with* Deleuze's championing of the transversive over the discursive.

[396] After a baffled if not hostile reception by the country when she was in exile there, France has now embraced Tsvetaeva as a romantic martyr to an outstanding degree. In the past three decades, numerous re-publications of her poetry, translations of her essays, and conferences and collections on her work have emerged; there have even been stage adaptations of her writings. French writer Agnès Desarthe asserts that "she is constantly quoted, so [that] it is absolutely evident that Tsvetaeva's verses serve as a source of inspiration even today." Vera Medvedeva and Agnès Desarthe, "Renaissance of Russian Literature," Russkiy Mir: russkiymir.ru/en/magazines/article/143767/.

Lê casts Tsvetaeva somewhat differently. In her *Marina*, the poet is "Marina the salamander," a designation that deserves to be unpacked further — not as the key to interpreting Lê's work, but to mapping out of how her oeuvre might function. The first and most obvious attribute of the salamander is its amphibious status. Lê has claimed the strategy of the "amphibious writer" as her own, drawing on the title character of *Caliban Complex* to do so.[398] For all that she is praised or denigrated as the exemplar of subjective interiority — a label to which critics have also tried to affix Lê — the various "camps" Tsvetaeva rejects surprisingly includes that of self-reflection, at least as it is traditionally understood. "I write," she reflects:

> … not for the millions, not for a particular person, *not for myself*. I write for the work itself. The work writes itself through me. Have I time for others, or for myself?[399]

This the power of lyric poetry. In Deleuzian terms, the distilling and re-resonating of impression into affect "enables the subject to transcend the homogenizing pressures of the social, and carve an ‘I’ from the indifferent stone of the universal.”[400] Tsvetaeva *is*, as she has, nothing but her pen. Yet rather than an enclosure, this opens her to an experimentation that is in constant rapport with the world around her, even and especially in their non-relation. There is no room for ego, only relation: “this fear of influence is an illness,” for “how can I lose what is mine when it is different every day?”[401] The act of writing, which “transmutes the drunkenness of being oneself into lucidity, the vertigo of individuality into universal chronicle,”[402] is similarly Lê’s goal. It is also rooted in a true, if not necessarily spiritual, form of transcendence. The poet re-turns, but always toward the future. They are not just an Orpheus “who descends into the flames;” they are also “Eurydice, overtaken by the shadows.”[403] The declaration of “I” becomes pluralistic and suffusive. By neither adhering to hegemonic identification, nor replicating the classical interiority of jealous authorship, this “I” is the ultimate divorce from claimed subjecthood, chasing instead an exteriorized liberty. In Lê’s eyes, Tsvetaeva’s “home was the world,” “the world, poetry,” and “poetry, her utopia realized and unceasingly reinvented.”[404] Her opposition to Law, Authority, and Dogma, then, is not that of the fixed noun but of a verb, reoriented to its infinitive state and spread across its reality: “the verb made flesh, the song of resistance conceived as an ethic.”[405]

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[397] Stock 162.

[398] The middle chapter of Lê's Caliban Complex openly cites Aimé Césaire's Une Tempête (A Tempest, 1969), which recast Shakespeare's Prospero as a villain and the black-coded Caliban as a rebel slave. Prospero represents the Western philosophical and literary traditions which Césaire castigates and which Deleuze and Lê will later rejects. He exploits his position as a "man of books" to force the world into binaries, and rejects everything that cannot adhere to his own identarian markers. Caliban, in contrast, "has no need of words"; he rejects the polemics of Prospero, tearing himself from "from what makes an individual root so as not to anchor his writing." As inspiring as this move may be, however, Lê notes that it still operates as a re-action, a negation that affirms its enemy. "There always comes a time when you [will] ask him how he defines himself," and his lack of answer will support Prospero (102-3). It is here that Lê turns to Ariel as a source of inspiration. While "Caliban makes works of sabotage, Prospero of vengeance," Ariel makes *ethics.* As a spirit of air and myth, finding unexpected freedoms in the very conditions of their exile, they are "the momentum towards liberty" incarnate. One must reject Prospero; this much is certain. But the writer's starting point can only be to don "an amphibious suit," both rejecting origins *and* moving out from one's given starting points. In short, Lê declares, one must be "half Caliban, half Ariel" (104-5).

[399] Marina Tsvetaeva and Angela Livingstone, Art in the Light of Conscience: Eight Essays on Poetry (Bloodaxe, 2015) 51. Italics mine.

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[400] Ruthrof 491.

[401] Tsvetaeva as quoted in Olga Hasty, “Marina Cvetaeva on Influence and Other Russian Poets,” in Sibelan E.S. Forrester ed. A Companion to Marina Cvetaeva: Approaches to a major Russian poet (Brill, 2017) 41.

[402] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 86.

[403] Ibid. 95.

[404] Lê Marina Tsvétaïéva: Comment ça va la vie? 17.

[405] Ibid. 37.

As indicated by the quote above, the salamander's amphibian versatility — occupying both land and water, always between and never fixed — is only part of the equation. The same message could have been accomplished through "Marina the Ondine," referencing the water nymph whose love for a mortal means she must choose between immortality and an immortal soul. The mythic import of this designation suggests a different reading of the salamander. Its association with fire for the Ancient Greeks gave them a phoenix-like ability to be recreated from the ashes of their destruction. Lê declares that it is "in the beginnings and in the end" that "Marina the Ondine and Marina the salamander come together,"[406] a vehement defense of her idol's triumph precisely through — not in spite of — death, silence, and exile. If Marina Tsvetaeva's suicide joined her within a broader "martyrology of Russian poetry," this martyrdom was "in the same manner that the daughter of Oedipus went to death: to remain faithful to the brothers who had no burial."[407] Lê has little interest in Oedipus himself; actual brethren are beside the point. What she terms "the paradox of Antigone" is what fascinates her, for she deems it "the paradox of all creators: it is a question of dying to one's self in order to permit the birth of language."[408] Rather than position Antigone as the voice of the (collective, ordered, and still more ancient) law of the Family, this conception of ethics refuses dualism. The protector becomes the creator, a process that works language through silence, and births an "I" through a subject's death.

Lê's oeuvre exhibits a striking fascination with "the mystery of forced or deliberate silence." She admits that Tsvetaeva's fate haunts her especially, for "without writing, life no longer makes any sense."[409] Yet this haunting is not rooted in the fear of negation; it is instead a necessary instrument whereby negation is embraced so that death may be refused. What links Tsvetaeva to both Lê and her fellow "suicidal poets" is their status not as exiles but as "writers who have betrayed their native tongue."[410] The betrayal at the heart of Antigonian defiance is crucial, for "the verb of Antigone brushes against mutism;" it calls for a final judgment endlessly deferred, and a future towards which we march in darkness.[411] At the heart of this interaction between the seeming binaries of writing and silence are also those of life and death. Marina Tsvetaeva wrote extensively on the death of the poet, in both poetry and prose, both obliquely and directly addressing her chosen "brothers" by name. "The function of these works," Olga Hasty argues, "extends beyond commemoration" to an exploration of poetic responsibility, "an extension of her denial of a strict separation between a poet's life and his art — not in the narrow biographical sense, but in the fact of the dedication of both to *bytie.*"[412] Against one form of madness, marked by stasis, inflexibility, hegemony, Tsvetaeva offers what may well be taken as mad. "To your insane world," she writes, "I say only: refusal."[413]

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[406] Lê Marina Tsvétaïéva: Comment ça va la vie? 27.

[407] Ibid. 6-7.

[408] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 156.

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[409] Linda Lê and Leslie Barnes, "Literature and the Outsider: An Interview with Linda Lê," World Literature Today 82.3 (May-June 2008): 56.

[410] Lê as quoted in Kurmann 1.

[411] Lê Caliban 162.

[412] Olga Hasty, "Reading Suicide: Tsvetaeva on Esenin and Maiakovskii," Slavic Review 50.4 Winter 1991: 836.

As Hasty elaborates, Tsvetaeva makes a pointed distinction in her writing between *byt'* (to exist) and *bytie* (being). *Bytie* does not just mean existing, but the existence of a reality independent of our individual or collective consciousness. It is a somewhat "pre-rational" conviction, the "fundamental opposition between truth as authentic being (*bytie*) and truth as true judgement." The latter will never be able to channel truth as transfiguration; judgement alone can only back into a "fallen state of objectivation." Nikolai Berdyaev as quoted in Vasylchenko 513, 515.

[413] Tsvetaeva as quoted in Lê Marina Tsvétaïéva: Comment ça va la vie? 7.

Tsvetaeva’s decision to quit writing before taking her life has been read as a last gesture to her commitment to poetic autonomy. Yet Tsvetaeva’s own words force us to question the finality of that expression. “If there is such a thing as suicide in this life,” she muses in “Iskusstvo v svete sovesti” (Art in the Light of Conscience, 1932), “then it is not where people think they see it, and its duration was not just the instant… [and] it is not singular.” Writers like Vladimir Mayakovsky spent years killing what was true in themselves before “the poet rose up and murdered the man.”[414] Death for Tsvetaeva is not passive effacing. It is an expression “of life itself, conceived as a dynamic and differentiating power.”[415]It enacts ethics-as-project rather than morality-as-tenet. That expression comes from her work: not just a space between, but as a continuous spatio-temporal becoming. Hasty casts Tsvetaeva’s lyric verse as a process, where “each poems reshapes the meaning of the poems that precede it.”[416]

Yet Lê does not see the death of the poet as an end to this unfolding, but rather the dynamism of new creation: Antigonian, not Oedipal. This is not a death-drive powered by “brute repetition” and driven by regression, the “reactive, internalized violence of a self on itself.”[417] What Lê evokes in her discussion of Tsvetaeva as an Antigonian figure is far closer to Deleuze’s “thinking beyond death,” wherein repetition acts not linearly but between, at the border, and on the edge. If this kind of repetition “makes us ill, it also heals us; if it enchains and destroys us, it also frees us.”[418] The “event” of death is alway open, problematic, forming and pulsing.

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[414] Tsvetaeva as quoted in Alyssa W. Dinega, A Russian Psyche: The Poetic Mind of Marina Tsvetaeva (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001) 178.

[415] André Pierre Colombat, “Deleuze and the Three Powers of Literature and Philosophy: To Demystify, to Experiment, to Create,” in Buchanan 587.

[416] Hasty 836.

[417] Pearson 73.

[418] Deleuze as quoted in Ibid. 73.

Barnes has mades the compelling argument as to how Lê' "thwarts the cathexis necessary to move part trauma while simultaneously resisting the lure of regression." Yet her argument still rests upon points of dialectical negation and reconciliation. In arguing that each work "engenders its own satisfaction through the double movement of destruction and creation," Barnes casts Lê's exercise as one of "the pleasures of repetition," a structure that ensures its own retelling in its defeat.[419] This structural, essentially repetitive approach limits Lê's ambitions to the satisfaction of rejuvenation, and her works' actions to the simultaneous un- and re-raveling of the same threads.[420] This is at odds with both Lê's avowed commitment to speaking truth through madness, and the ways in which she incessantly deterritorializes the auto-fictions she has created. "The word generates defiance": it refuses assimilation not just by scrambling codes but by making new tracks.[421]

I now turn from Lê's thoughts on her writing process to explore how it might *work,* turning from the interpretive question "What does it mean?" to the productive "How does it function?". To begin this inquiry, I examine one part of what is loosely deemed an autofictional "trilogy": the middle text, *Voix: Une crise* (Voice(s): A crisis, 1998).[422] The novella opens the narrator in a female asylum, where she takes in the overlapping monologues of inhabitants "named" by their physical characteristics (Le Barbue, La femme au chapeau) or their incessant refrains (Sidonie-n'a-plus-d'un-amant and la philosophe). After only a few pages, however, the narrative shifts to sections related either after the narrator is released or before she enters the asylum. The narrator is hunted by the Organization, which communicates through her nerves and forces her to both hurt herself and destroy her work, demanding she write only "about US." To appease them, she burns her father's letters. This prompts a series of horrific visions: blackened and bloody letters dance around her in the ruins of her native village; she sees her own dead body, and is chased by decapitated heads and multi-headed dogs; above all, her father appears and re-appears, asking why she "has killed him again." Fleeing to an acquaintance's apartment, she soon becomes convinced that "B" has become an agent of the Organization, and plans to sacrifice her to cover his crimes. On the periphery of Paris, she eludes the agents long enough to remove a fiery mantle from the vision of her father and cover his wounds with snow. Hearing a voice declare, "You have saved him," she lies down in the cold as a deep peace descends upon her.

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[419] Barnes Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature 170.

[420] Dialectic negation ensures not creation but resurrection; it "supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 188)." Nondialectical negation is absolute; "not in the sense that everything is negated but that what is negated is attacked with full, unrestrained force." Actual risk "clears the terrain for creation" without the "synthetic movement" that would still hold life in structural stasis. Michael Hardt, Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy (University of Minnesota Press, 1993) xii-xiii.

[421] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 160.

As with *Slander,* a considerable amount of critical attention has been paid to the role of identity in *Voice(s),* several of which examine representations of alterity in literature by taking up the Organization as a stand-in for both critics and readers.[423] I take a different path from this reading to consider the working-out of madness and maddening in the text, rather than what it or its antagonistic forces necessarily represent. Lê claims that "great literature grazes the irrational."[424] It is clear from *Caliban* and her autofictional oeuvre that she strives to enact a similar relation in her own writing. But in what ways might a work do this, and where might its abstract production take us? I argue that *Voix* is an immersive acting-through of the uncle in *Slander* claimed to *be*: "borderlands, between madness and lucidity."[425] It is a literary experimentation in Deleuzian becoming, and specifically in Becoming-Mad.

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[422] The first in the series, Les Trois Parques (The Three Fates, 1997), is voiced by three Vietnamese "princesses" whose grandmother took them to France when Saigon fell: the eldest pregnant and capitalist, the younger libidinous and self-involved, their middle cousin disabled and quasi-prophetic. As they await their long-lost father, nicknamed "King Lear," over the course of an afternoon. The daughters' supposed celebration reveals an underbelly of resentment for his abandoning them. The cousin, the only first-person voice in an otherwise third-person stream-of-consciousness telling, attempts to fully "slice the cord" of the poisoned past embodied by her stump of a hand.

The third work, Lettre Morte (Dead Letter, 1999) is instead a first-person letter to a friend that obsesses over the narrator's dead father and the end of her relationship with the psychological abusive Morgue. She is overcome with guilt for not replying to her father's letter or seeing him before he died, driven to masochism in response to an unbearably intense sense of corporeality. Still, she suggests that her father's inability to discourse or respond has paradoxically produced a deep connection with his daughter that never existed beforehand.

The narrator is trapped between two impossible choices. Against the Organization, "little girls must die, or lose their heads" (*Voice(s)* 56). Its agents promise a way out, but if she becomes a *tabula rasa*, wiped clean of the past and made to fit their idea of the present. This price is far too great: not only losing her father, but any differentiation from the overlapping voices that drown her thought and place her before judgement. She will be sacrificed to those all too eager to stuff her with their crimes and then condemn her for taking them on.[426] Yet the "zero intensity" of the asylum offers no refuge from this assault; it is itself another interruption, a devolving schizophrenia on the opposite pole of a consuming neurosis. The women are trapped in solipsistic narratives, and “suffering, and boredom, and death accompany” their solitude almost as surely as it would if she became a dupe of the Organization (17). The choices facing the narrator are not distinct poles but an enclosed circle: either path draws on the same negating sources, and both lead to hollowness and despair.[427]

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[423] See, for example, Leslie Barnes, "Linda Lê's Voix and the Crisis of Representation: Alterity and the Vietnamese Immigrant Writer in France," French Forum 32.3 (Fall 2007): 123-138

[424] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 147.

[425] Lê Calomnies 85.

[426] The role of her friend, the older painter "B", is especially significant here. Hailing from the same unspecified childhood village, he is roughly the same age as the narrator's father. His method silencing her is to declare her mad. In doing so, he takes on the mantle of an Organization that both produces sickness (running along her nerves and infecting her dominant writing hand) and judging the world as sickly — what Deleuze, and Nietzsche, might call "an exhausted and degenerating mode of existence," that devalues life itself in the name of illusory "higher" values, rather than the positive sickness, categorized as true "health," of the visionary writer. Charles J Stivale, Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts (McGill-Queen's UP, 2005) 191.

Lê must take a third option for her narrator, and by extension the self is she creating: one which necessarily skirts sideways and simultaneously comes and goes from both modes of action. The breaking-down of madness, for Lê as for Deleuze, carries with it always the potential of breaking-through; a loss of ego wherein to be mad is not necessarily to be sick, and to be sick may in fact precipitate a cure. She must therefore enact becoming-mad. This is not an imitation, and still less an identification; “a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself,” forming a bloc of a reality specific to that becoming rather than a being she will never reach.[428] With no authority to which she can turn — “I begin to pray — to whom?” (30)— and no safe path to trace — “I am caught between blood and fire” (41) — she must force endless, often traumatic deterritorialization.

The structure of *Voice(s)* is disparate even by Lê’s standards; in addition to a lack of section markers, sections are often short and composed of only loosely connected visions, so that thoughts and impressions seem to float on each page. In burning both her novel and her father’s letters, the narrator has opened herself up to the Organization; yet she has also produced a destruction of her old self that opens the way for a new, wrenching beginning. The death of the subject is necessary to open herself up to "the multiplicities from side to side in [her], to the intensities running through [her]."[429] Against the voices that objectify her, the narrator begins producing a different "she," one that cuts through and sometimes replaces the "I" hounded by agents yet never fully takes its places. In briefly escaping the voices that overcome her, a Voice is then produced, one which warns her not to give in and later declares her father saved. The visions she endures move from passive to active: rather than cower against what she sees, she becomes determined to travel through them, to "make a miracle… I will say to death, raise yourself and walk. He will raise himself and walk" (43).

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[427] The link between the neurosis of the Organization and the schizophrenia of the asylum is exemplified by the woman labeled The Philosopher. “If suicide is permitted, then all is permitted,” she muses, before declaring, “if God pays her a visit, she will spit in his face.” Dostoevsky readers will recognize the first quote as an adaptation of Ivan’s famous declaration in Brothers Karamazov, the second a more visceral interpretation of his rejection of God’s plan. The Philosopher’s further bemoaning creation’s defects and the impossibility of love further evokes Ivan’s abhorrent disciple Smerdyakov, whose extreme nihilism eventually devolves into sadism, manipulation, and murder. The Organization’s agents, however, are also dubbed the Grand Inquisitors, a blatant reference to the story Ivan tells in Brothers to support his claims, and act, as in that tale, as enforcers of the norm that block any movement toward ethical exploration and its radical truth.

[428] Deleuze and Guattari Mille Plateaux 291.

The serenity that reaches the narrator at the end has no guarantee, and this themes will be acted out again in the next works. This is not a symptom of regression, however; it is simply that becoming-other is not a progression to some *thing*. Deleuzian becoming "produces nothing other than itself… what is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which passes that which becomes."[430] What comes from the encounter between one term and another, the excess between sanity and madness, is what Deleuze terms a "monument." This is not a commemorative structure. Rather, it is "a bloc of present sensation," one which "incorporates or embodies" the virtual event of literature, to "give it a body, a life, a universe."[431] The monstrous images that spring to the narrator's eyes, and the scope of her attacker's power through her understanding, surpass her experience almost as soon as she conjures them. Yet what we are left with is not, against that effaced subject, some towering icon of the Organization itself. It is those distinct images, and what they in turn conjure for us: The head and limbs that detach from a corpse "like rotten fruits" and chase her through sacked cities; the bloodied letters (the ambiguity of *lettre* in French suggesting individual symbols in addition to missives) that swarm and blacken with fire; the sacked village and its great boulders of stone.

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[429] Gilles Deleuze, Pourparlers: 1972-1990 (Éditions de Minuit, 1990) 16.

[430] Deleuze and Guattari Mille Plateaux 291.

[431] Deleuze and Guattari as quoted in Ronald Bogue, "The Art of the Possible," Revue Internationale de Philosophie 3.241 (2007) 273.

When we ask "How does it function?", we cannot look only to Lê's defiance of "rendering [trauma] coherent and manageable" within a distinct text. We must also consider how her texts carry on conversations across one another, enacting not a discursive circle but a trans-cursive inscription.[432] Exhausted by the agents crowding out her nerve signals, the narrators hears them "mocking me, aping me, laughing behind my back" (22). This exact expression was used by the uncle in *Slander,* but described the singular, sexually sadistic monster who stalks his fantasies. Among the physical agents she sees on the street, meanwhile, is "the man with his dog," the same figure who prompts paranoia in *Slander*'s niece. Figures and words reappear, but they are not just in radically different configurations (which would still imply a structure). They enact different scenes. They take the narrative in radically different directions. It should be noted, for instance, that in *The Three Fates,* the father is alive and resented, while in *Voice(s)* he is long dead and revered, and in *Dead Letter* only recently dead and until recently ignored. The suicidal, maddened uncle of *Slander* appears in *Dead Letter* as a recovered psychotic who is still looking after the hospital library, and instead of being overcome by sexual urges instead acts more like *Slander*'s Monk, blessing passerby and declaring his bottled urine holy water.

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[432] Rhizomatic writing is "flush with the Real," polyvocal and never biunivocal and linearized. The transcursive is best produced in Mille Plateaux, where "the assembler-reader" is faced with "no other mediation than a broken line of hybridized and boosted concepts (starting with the concept of the 'rhizome' itself) that make intensities from different plateaus resonate together." The book is "given back its status as a multiplicity" in such a way as to undo the function of the author "to to the profit of a functioning (with what and in connection with what does it function?): 'a book only exists by the outside and on the outside', by virtue of the becoming of the forces that animate it and that animate the requirement of a 'Thought from the Outside'." The same could be said of Lê's constant engagement with exteriority out of interiority in her auto-fictional play. Éric Alliez, "Rhizome (with no return. From structure to rhizome: transdisciplinarity in French thought (2)," Radical Philosophy 167 (2011): 40.

With each critical reading, Lê's autofictional world is mapped out across a new territory of signs; and with each new work, Lê creates lines of flight, an openness that prevents the text from "closing in on itself" and instead "forc[es] it to extend itself into a larger set, to infinity."[433] She is an artist who, "rather than trying to *realize* a possibility" — the resurrection of the father, the healing of the wound — chooses to "remain within the domain of the possible and attempt to *exhaust* logically the whole of the possible, passing through all the series and permutations of its included disjunctions."[434]

This kind of constant breaking through borderlands and experimentation with realities requires continuous effort to further itself. "Signifiance clings to the soul," Deleuze and Guattari write, "no less than the organism clings to the body, and it is not easy to get rid of either":

> And the subject, how can we unhook ourselves from the points of subjectification that secure us, nail us down to a dominant reality? To tear the conscious away from the subject in order to make it a means of exploration, to tear the unconscious away from signifiance and interpretation in order to make it a veritable production, this is assuredly no more nor less difficult than to tear the body away from the organism.[435]

Yet it is a battle that much be waged. It is the schizo-analytic process of bringing ourselves right to the edge, but holding on to just enough signifiance that you can "turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it;" keeping some scraps of subjectivity "in sufficient quantity to be able to respond to the dominant reality."[436] In a sense, Lê's oeuvre can be cast as a plateau, "a pitch of intensity that is not automatically dissipated in a climax" whose "afterimage… can be reactivated or injected into other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exists."[437] The consistency of her work comes not in its ability to coalesce and homogenize, but to hold together what is disparate in continuing becoming.

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[433] Smith 198.

[434] Ibid. 203.

[435] Deleuze and Guattari Mille Plateaux 198.

Here Tsvetaeva the Antigonian and Deleuze the Ariadnian meet. Deleuze's approach to critique through affirmation is embodied in Dionysus' lover Ariadne, who affirms being and so is the only one who "can affirm affirmation itself." After Dionysus refuses conservative negation in favor of "destruction without reserve," her "spiraling affirmation" in its aftermath "feeds on its own power" in the ethical act of love.[438] This affirmation is timeless, but only to the extent of the eternal return of *will.* Experimentation on ourself is our only identity; the will that wills becoming is our only real re-turn. This is the lesson Lê takes from Tsvetaeva. Her poetry is "the expression of a dismemberment that aims without cease toward fusion," yet that fusion does not erase multiplicities of be-ing but elaborates them: "between past and present, between here and elsewhere… between asserted nostalgia and the certitude that the future is the homeland of creation."[439]

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[436] Deleuze and Guattari Mille Plateaux 199.

[437] Massumi 7.

[438] Hardt 116. It should be noted that Lê herself casts Tsvetaeva as an Ariadne in addition to an Antigone in Marina Tsvétaïéva: Comment ça va la vie?. "Tsvetaeva the Nietzschean" unites love, will, and poetic expression in a festival of senses that "find their incarnation in the couple 'first-born, eternally promised' that form Ariadne and Dionysus" (28).

[439] Lê Marina Tsvétaïéva: Comment ça va la vie? 13.

Tsvetaeva sees “the truth of poets” as “the most elusive, most invincible, most convincing and most unproven truth.” It is “truth that lives in us only for some primary *glimmer* of perception (what was that?) and remains in us only as a trace of light or loss (*was* it something?).” In writing, “one of the innumerable faces of truth” may brush against us as we explore without ceasing; but we will only know it, in that moment, as some plus-value to the code, some excess from the meeting of terms in process of becoming.[440] The instability that allows Antigone to “write death into life and life against death”[441] also opens Ariadne to “a total, thoroughgoing critique that pushes the forces of negation to their limit.”[442] Doing so will perpetually create new, undecidable equilibriums, new ethical tangles, new processes of Becoming-Mad that brush against the faces of truths determined by their time and their calling.

## Anna Starobinets: Plugging Traces Back Into the Map

The titular novella of *Transitional Age* teases readers from a psychological lens of interpretation before revealing itself as a fantastic horror tale in its final pages. Starobinets’ opening story, “Agentstvo” (Agency), takes the opposite path. “Agency” opens with an unnamed Agent killing a little girl by convincing her to swallow glass. He explains that her death is part of a larger contract taken on by the Agency, a shadowy organization that arranges “realistic” disasters or accidents for targets according to the scripts of their murderous clients. The assassin’s guild is run like a TV agency: editors and actors across the globe have been playing out these lethal dramas for decades. With this most recent case, the Agent finally gets the chance to “direct” the assignment, not just workshop the script. His excitement is tempered by his client, whose glee at the impending deaths and grossly disfigured face — one eye permanently open, half his mouth a constant grimace — deeply disturb him. Nonetheless, he researches the girl's father, a famous novelist, and successfully frames his murder as a suicide. When he delivers a message to the widow however, she begins screaming, and he cannot finish the job. Confronting the Client in his apartment, the Agent demands, "Where does such hate come from?" before seeing his reflection and realizing Agent and Client are the same. Some years before, he had been a screenwriter, and the widow his girlfriend; he left him when she became pregnant with the writer's child. The narrator relieves his breakdown, and the resulting car crash that triggered his elaborate delusions. His final lines, however, indicate that this re-living has started the cycle all over again: despairing of himself as nothing, the narrator quotes the start of the story by declaring his nondescript self is the secret to being an ideal Agent.

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[440] Tsvetaeva et al, Art in the Light of Conscience 171.

[441] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 160.

[442] Hardt 115.

Anna Starobinets' sensitivity to "alien reality" has been deemed "almost neurotic." This neurotic sensitivity, in Pustovaia's eyes, produces forms of "archaic fear," rooted in ancient mythological binaries, that have since been splintered out, abstracted, and thus "neutralized by cultural symbolism."[443] Certainly, alien realities abound Starobinets' writing. It's not every day that an ants take over your son's brain. Nor does it seem likely that — as in other stories— you fall in love with rotting groceries, cause your father's death by resisting compulsive counting, or accept a new identity that retroactively triggers both amnesia and the literal erasure of your former life. What I want to draw attention to, however, is the linking of neurosis with her writing process. "Why [is there] such a dreary parade of sucked-dry, catatonicized, vitrified, sewn-up bodies" in mental wards, Deleuze and Guattari ask us, when the schizo-process, the intensive reality of the body without organs (BwO) "is also full of gaiety, ecstasy, and dance?"[444] Because, Deleuze answers, neurosis —like that of the obsessive Agent — and psychosis — literalized in the ants' attack — "are not passages of life, but states into which we fall when the process is interrupted, blocked, or plugged up."[445]

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[443] Pustovaia 68.

Attempting to search *Transitional Age* and "Agency" for meaning will reveal many differences in generic anchors, in plot points, and in references. Yet approaching them as abstract machines instead of structures — as producing, rather than defining — reveals something else. In her short story and her novella, Starobinets traces the lines of frustrating Becomings; of movements that begin within inhibition, trigger disconnection, and briefly operate out of joint and in-between. Across these stories are what Deleuze and Guattari term superficial movements, "points of undoing, of dismantling" that run throughout, regardless of theme. What Law, Guilt, and Interiority were for Kafka, so Metamorphosis, Simulation, and Will are for Starobinets.

Anna Burk joins several readers of *Transitional Age* when she calls the young writer's prose "something completely new in Russian literature." Reflecting on this declaration, Starobinets claims that she utilizes "the techniques of Western fiction," but "adapted to Russian literature and Russian realities": "That is, these are texts that grew up on Russian soil, but are as if 'grafted' by Kafka and King."[446] Her conception of literary hybridity as one of grafted roots is significant, for she implicitly contrasts this style of production with more poorly constructed,

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[444] Deleuze and Guattari Mille Plateaux 161.

[445] Deleuze Critique et Clinique 3.

[446] Starobinets and Burk: docplayer.ru/35096216-Intervyu-s-annoy-starobinec-besedovali-anna-burk-i-barbara-yanish.html.

“amorphous” texts by contemporaries in Russian fantasy and horror. These authors are trying to produce straightforward genre tales, but their cultural milieu lacks any stability to be overthrown, any engagement with “the coordinate system in which this very ‘real life’ is located”:

> [In America] you can set a certain initial "given": for example, that Jack (doctor) and his wife Mary (housewife) with their two adorable babies live in a country house with a swimming pool. Then something terrible will happen, tentacles will crawl out of the walls or the ghost of an innocently murdered patient will be found in the basement, it doesn't matter - but we well imagine the normal life that the heroes lead before plunging into an abnormal one. Well, what do we have? The doctor and his wife live in a country house, excellent. Where did they get such a house? Where did he steal so much, this doctor? Did he take bribes? Or is he treating the prime minister?

Trying to efface the differences between cultural norms, to lay out an initial sense of stability, will not work. Readers will simply refuse to go along. Russian perception, at least, is that “John” has a framework to be overthrown; “Vanya is too shaky and ambiguous.”[447]

This attitude is reflected within the media-driven world of the Agent-Client, familiar to Russian readers precisely in both its emphasis on falsehood and illusion being furthered through American imports. At one point, the Agent mentions James Cameron’s *Titanic,* less than a decade old at the time of Starobinets’ writing. Everyone wants to copy the film, the Agent moans, and sink all their enemies in one go. He then drops a bombshell: “The agency only accepted this order once, in 1912, when someone — I won’t name names — actually invented it” (7). A real-life tragedy inspired a Hollywood blockbuster that stands in for, and for some is better known than, the disaster itself. That disaster is here revealed to, itself, be a screenplay: but one that may have originated in Russia, not either England or America.

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[447] Starobinets and Podolsky: darkermagazine.ru/page/anna-starobinec-mezhdu-sumasshestviem-i-chudom-vybiraju-chudo.

It would be easy to dismiss the Agent-Client's claim here as a sardonic aside, wrapped in a madman's delusions. Yet alongside these industry tidbits are the ways the narrator's recycled scripts and hackneyed scenarios are made parallel to the Russian Writer's bombastic goals. Supposedly, the Writer is a novelistic genius, whose bestselling works lay bare contemporary Russian society. Yet descriptions of his books feel pointed by more than the Agent-Client's admitted jealousy. Recalling one critic's declaration that "the Writer is 'The voice of a generation,' or 'The voice of a new generation,' or 'The generation of a new voice.' Something like that" (10), the Agent-Client buys his novels, only to find the first saccharine and second near-unreadable.[448] For all that his searing prose supposedly "battles the cult of consumption," the Agent-Client must shoulder past many a Deleuzian zombie shuffling en masse to buy his latest must-have bestseller. And in an interview, the Writer not only hits every beat of his stereotype — he will work in a provincial town with no telephone, as his family has "no use for superfluous links to the outside world" — but assures readers, as though launching a new production line, that "the most pressing problems of modern society would once again be broached in the new novel" (9).

The result is a subjecthood both reduced to caricature — the Agent, the Writer, the Widow — and dictated solely by performance. "How amusing," the Agent reflects as he watches the girl's funeral. "I have already described all this more than once": the rainy funeral, the stoically grieving couple, the lonely figure behind the trees. There is little difference, in truth, between his contracts, the Writer's lauded work, or the scenes that play out endlessly around him: "endless sad stories about orphaned children, separated lovers, beauties who have lost their memory, and greedy wicked suitors" (4). Will is out of the question: there are only clichés, probabilities, and the narrow bounds of realism with which to contend. What results is a world where everything is not only over-written, but written *already*, sapping what surrounds it.[449] The reason the Writer's suicide will likely not be challenged is less about his daughter's recent death, though this provides grist for the rumor mill, than his status as a Writer at all. "No one will be surprised. No one will suspect a thing," the script reads, since "Writers, like all creative types, have volatile psyches" (13).

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[448] It should be noted, based on the jacket descriptions, that it's unlikely Starobinets' readers would disagree with the narrator if they had the chance to skim the books themselves. The first novel, Death at the Supermarket, is about an old woman overwhelmed her memories in a new society who — "see the name of the book" — dies at the supermarket. The second, "about a manic serial killer, a member of the Greenpeace movement, who was destroying everyone who didn't love nature enough," speaks for itself.

This is the language of good sense; everyday language. Such registers "restrict us to the lowest level of our virtuality" by limiting us to only certain registers of the possible, an already-limited potentiality consigned to stable being.[450] The degree to which the Agent-Client is bound by scripts is revealed when he discusses clients' obsession with (who else) Stephen King, and how difficult it is to adapt supernatural horror for murder. In one instance, a billionaire supposedly demanded a reanimated dead cat like that from King's *Pet Sematary* (1983), only for the Agent to tell her such a thing is impossible. Even in the midst of a psychotic break, he cannot go so far as to accept what lies outside the bounds of strict realism. When the narrator recalls the breakup that led to his accident, meanwhile, he is horrified as much by the *way* his girlfriend reveals her affair as anything she says. She not only fails to even appear guilty; she also cannot genuinely express her supposed love for the Writer. She acts “like a diligent schoolgirl reading aloud a poem that she memorized without delving into the meaning,” hitting the script beats with “false intonation” and “accents in the wrong places” (17). Despite not being a writer herself, nor in the midst of any real trauma, she is just as willing to regurgitate lines she’s memorized as the man breaking apart in front of her — and perhaps, solely able to do so.

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[449] Nothing matches expectation in the Agent's world. The little girl, intriguing in photographs, in life is "nothing special;" far from a cherubic figure, we are introduced via her grubby hand cutting open insects as she plays doctor. Nonetheless, her death easily places her back into the script.

[450] Massumi 40.

When the narrator in “Agency” first threatens to kill his girlfriend, her lover, and her unborn child, she laughs in disbelief: how could he murder anyone, when he “can’t even do to me… can’t even…”His implied impotence envelops his identity as an extension of masculinity, which then determines the related actions of murder and vengeance. Her response, meanwhile, is not unexpected, she is acting exactly like the disdainful female should: “She, clearly, is also following one of my scripts” (“Agency” 18). The colony has similarly cast a veil of monism over an abyss of hermeneutic fracturing. “We love Mom very much,” it writes:

> She gave birth to us all. And she’ll give birth to us again. Our mother is the Queen.
>
> When we grow up, we’ll marry her.
>
> I mean, we’re mostly sexless… but still we’re getting married. (*Transitional* 43)

Having read books on both ant and human behavior, the colony quickly absorbed socio-cultural gendered terminology — mother, marriage, sex — that are alien to their original way of life. Yet the “us” in question represents both present and future; the mother will be, and so is, the mate, and being sexless becomes irrelevant to the act of marriage. That’s setting aside the fact that this “collective” voice, from the ant-children, is frequently merged with that of the Queen and of both Maksim-the-boy and Maksim-the-vessel.

The Maksim-Colony-Queen immerses us in the intensive reality of the body without organs at “intensity zero”. The disfigurement and breakdown of both bodies goes beyond the warning by Maksim’s nurse that mind, soul, and body are interconnected. The body, in a literal sense, is no longer theirs. Maksim *feels himself in* the organism he is cut from, but it is in the process of a wholly alienating transformation. In his dreams, he crawls naked on all fours, excreting eggs which he then devours for sustenance. Looking to the mirror, he sees that his “face [is] all over the place,” his eyes “not blue like mine, but black and solid.” His face is no longer his own. Grasping for anchor, Maksim then clarifies: “I mean, squirrels’ [eyes] are also black and completely blend in with these round ones, which in life are blue” (*Transitional* 40-41). He is unable to describe the differentiation he is experiencing as simultaneously neither and both: ant and boy, animal and human, supposedly collective and allegedly singular.

The centrality of eyes as the primary site of distortion and indifferentiation re-appear in the Agent’s autoscopia. His being is cast through *a* face, adjacent to and continually constructing its own unavoidably distorted self. He hates looking at the Client’s half frozen visage and his hare eye, unblinking and cruel:

> But it’s almost impossible not to look. It called, it hypnotized, it bullied, that face. It attracted, fascinated, and sucked out the soul — and then repelled. It was hideous. A mockery of a clown. (“Agency” 12)

The use of the word *bezobraznyi* for hideous is significant. This word, difficult to translate, implies as ugliness that is not incidental but unholy — it lacks *obraz*, the unity of image found through God. The Agent’s simultaneous repulsion and fascination with its visage anticipates the recognition-through-distortion he will experience when he sees the Client’s face double and then merge with his own. The final description, meanwhile, "a mockery of a clown," takes the narrator's playacting to its delusional heights. His face is a mockery of a mockery — pure simulation in pure action.

What sickens us, Deleuze asks: the process of illness, or its interruption? As horrific as Maksim's fate is to the reader, its tragedy is less his transformation than its foregone conclusion, less about the metamorphosis as it unfolds than the appalling results of the Queen's failed imagination. Readers cannot help being mesmerized by Maksim's diary, its conscious enmeshing in a hyperdifferentiated chaosmosis. He is the queen; the queen is a colony; the colony is Maksim; yet none of these groupings are wholly themselves. "Divergences, bifurcations, and incompossibilities now belong to *one and the same universe*, a chaotic universe in which divergent series trace endlessly bifurcating paths."[451] The end does leave us with Maksim's reduction to a husk, and the birth of new, more ready-made hosts. Still, these processes, traumatic as they are, force the reader open to the interchangeability of individuality, to breaks in the object-ification of specificity through the subject-ification of claiming.[452]

Against this model is the neurotic cyclicality of "Agency". Yet here, as in *Transitional Age*, demanding meaning is a boundary to creation rather than a pathway to truth. *Chto-to ne tak*, the Agent repeats after his explosive encounter with the Writer's widow. Something is not right; or, more literally, something is not so. All attempts to remove his will from the equation — "Of course, to me, in general, it's all the same, it's not my business, it's simply my job" (14) — cannot shake that ungraspable feeling. It leads him to his uncharacteristic confrontation with the Client, resulting in the unleashed memories of his fight, breakdown, car accident, and treatment. It was during the fight that his former self began to recognize how over-written his life is. "How," he moans, "did these damnable scripts get out of their harmless parallel world and into my nefarious reality?" (18). Not only is the cheating-partner scenario straight out of a soap opera, but he cannot seem to stop regurgitating his own lines when attempting to grapple with its actuality. Realizing he has already "become a ghost" to his partner, he clings desperately to "a sense of self-esteem… a sense of self-respect." In doing so, he cycles through sanity and insanity, the male and the female, sincerity and script. He is "a madman" and a *baba* — a derogatory term for an old woman that can also mean "sorceress." He is "proving something to the mirror," convincing his reflection, yet cannot recognize his own voice (16).

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[451] Smith 201.

[452] A more chilling example of this comes in Maksim's diary during the ants' initial takeover. The child writes his name and age at the top of the page, marking his identity, then begins to share his fears. Only one line in, however, his voice is cut off — only to return as the ants' claiming of his identity exactly one year later.

"Maksim. Nine years old."
I'm afraid. I feel, that I
He is ten years old." (43)

This scene is a moving opening to embracing becoming-other, the potentiality at least of radical transformation. Yet the narrator cannot resist a return to meaning. As he's reliving his breakdown, he abruptly cuts the process off, demanding "to understand, why it all happened this way (18)." This is the impulse that returns him to his old role as an Agent, the job ironically removing his "agency" from the story once again. Through simulated certainty, he may return to the safety of undifferentiation.[453]

"Verisimilitude has been replaced by simulation as the explicit operating principle of individual existence," Brian Massumi argues in his analysis of late-stage capitalism. Belief is no longer necessary; “all a body need do is desire,” and all machines need produce is their own association.[454] The Agency both literalizes and exemplifies that production. The problem is not lack of belief, but the limitations of its replacement. Verisimilitude ultimately aligns with molarity; it demands resemblance, and so restricts mutation. Postmodernity’s code-based economy can produce nothing radically literary: capitalism is “profoundly illiterate.”[455] Rules explicitly guide the Agent’s world, and shape his only identity. In a different sense than his delusions about his face, then, he is at bottom “nothing”: not just lacking connections, but choosing undifferentiation in order to be unremarkable in all things.

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[453] Disfigurement appears frequently in Starobinets' stories, but with differing connotations. Maksim's eyes chart a horrific downward spiral; yet the Agent's face, for all its apparently repellent qualities, actually serves as a breaking-out point for the narrator. Before he can re-assume his delusions, this mask of hyper-differentiating impulses — in its own way, the truest face possible — must be forgotten. Even being nothing and nobody is preferable to monstrosity, especially because it provides him with so many ready-made scripts to absorb.

Thought, then, consists in reintroducing potentialities and recognizing multiplicities. It is “an unhinging of habit;”[456] less a willful action than it is the willingness to be *affected*. Deleuze urges us as readers to “trust the author [we] are studying.” Such trust functions not as a passive acceptance, but a heightened sensibility. Freeing oneself as much as possible from preconceived representations, “one must ruminate, gathering and regathering the notions,” and “silence the voices of objection within you.”[457] To trust Anna Starobinets is not to assume that our generic assumptions are correct; it is to be attuned to the fracturing that occurs through both their assertion and their mixing. It is not to unify her work under one viewpoint; it is to acknowledge how the collection forces “the coexistence in the same sentence of an infinite series of viewpoints according to which the object is dislocated, sets up a resonance or is amplified.”[458]

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[454] Massumi 136.

[455] Deleuze and Guattari L’Anti-Œdipe 289.

[456] Massumi 99.

[457] Deleuze as quoted in Colombat 584.

[458] Ibid. 585.

In both stories, naming holds the empty subject together, bracketed by “an infinity of causal lines on countless levels, all fractured by chance,” yet all operating across a specific social field.[459] Both Maksim and the Agent are able to successfully operate as unified figures, adopting the ontological posture needed to drive their desires. Yet each story lays bare, albeit in radically different ways, how this monism is “produced meaning,” no more (or less) than an “optical effect.”[460] The colony’s singular-collective voice forces us to confront the indeterminacy of the body’s threshold states. The Agent-Client’s obvious binary splitting similarly hides the essential fluidity with which, at the moment of breakdown, the narrator slips in and out of assigned categories and choses one of an infinite multiplicity of paths.

For all that their characters’ journeys have been interrupted, meanwhile, “man’s nonhuman becoming” remains in process within both literary works. As Deleuze instructs, a multiplicity is defined by its edges, its points of relation, its thresholds. Moving across the two stories, readers can enter “a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility,” like that between Ahab and the Whale in *Moby Dick,* where characters “endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation.”[461] Singularity, in Deleuze, has nothing to do with individuality or particularity against the group. It is remarkable because it is different *in* itself. It ruptures established categories, continuing to become what it, and we, cannot know in advance.

As Starobinets herself is quick to point out, Russian greats like Gogol and Bulgakov used fantasy and horror not to acquaint us with a particular world, “but for the purpose of a universal statement" that cannot yet be conceptualized, a call towards "something much broader."[462] And so she will continue to sound out caves that may well be rhizomes cut apart to form roots. In returning again and again to simulation, to metamorphosis, and to will, Starobinets has taken to thinking of her psyche less now as a basement than a zone, a space unmarked and outside hierarchical stacking. It is "a dangerous area filled with strange, unpredictable and evil magical items that you can, nevertheless, sometimes drag out and put to some use," she notes, "although definitely not for their intended purpose."[463] Following the superficial movements of these interruptions allow us to try a "reverse but nonsymmetrical operation" to Lê's incessant deterritorializing: we may instead attempt to "plug the tracings back into the map, connect the roots or trees back up with a rhizome."[464]

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[459] Massumi 26.

[460] Ibid. 22.

[461] Deleuze and Guattari Qu’est-ce que la philosophie? 193.

## Considerations: Adequate Truths for Unknown Futures

"To Lê," Alexandra Kurmann asserts, "seeking the truth necessarily ends in an encounter with the clarity of madness."[465] By contrast, Starobinets — despite her reputation as an expert depicter of mental illness — asserts that "when I ask the reader to choose between miracle and madness, I tend to lean toward the version of the miracle… the miracle is more interesting."[466] The two women are bound, however, in their prioritization of the ontological, in its transformative instability, as a pathway to creation. Deleuzian philosophy reorients us from the quest to

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[462] Starobinets and Reiter: www.bbc.com/russian/features-44964400

[463] Guzeva: www.rbth.com/literature/2012/05/12/describing_schizophrenia_from_within_15625.html.

[464] Deleuze and Guattari Mille Plateaux14.

[465] Kurmann 67.

[466] Starobinets and Podolsky: darkermagazine.ru/page/anna-starobinec-mezhdu-sumasshestviem-i-chudom-vybiraju-chudo.

"discover pre-existent truths outside of time" towards the creation of "non-pre-existing concepts within time."[467] This is not an excuse for relativism, but rather to formulate truths *adequate* to their creation. Through this expression, "it increases our power of thought… such adequacy is infectious, giving rise to always greater expression,."[468]

Mad literature, then, is not madness *in* literature, a sickness to be overcome, but itself a process: one which Lê enacts, and which Starobinets expresses in its frustrations. They turn us from wondering *what* to think towards the infinitive verb. Yet their approaches still differ in key ways. For Linda Lê, I suggest Deleuze's formulation on truth, replacing the abstract question 'What is truth" with 'Who wants truth, when and where, how and how much?'"[469] Essence is rejected for movement, ordering principles replaced by a defiance of either negation or finality. This "who" (*qui*) brings us to the realm of the ontological, but is no longer centered in the subject; the "I" effaces its individuation for the dynamism of becoming. In this way, she comes to embody a patient-physician hybrid, a modified interpretation of Deleuze's producer of "healthy" literature. This patient-physician is not healthy in the sense of being dominating or robust. On the contrary, she "possesses an irresistible and delicate health" thanks to the process working *through* [her], "which stems from what [s]he has seen and heard of things too big for [her], too strong for [her], suffocating things whose passage exhausts [her]."[470] Its production is differentiation, and through it potentially liberation and creation. The ontological instability she embraces "neither wills what occurs nor is willed by its occurrence," but rather " [is] willing something 'in that which occurs, and as 'something yet to come.'"[471]

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[467] Jeffrey A. Bell, "Philosophizing the Double-Bind: Deleuze Reads Nietzsche," Philosophy Today 39.4 (Winter 1995): 381.

[468] Hardt 88, 90.

[469] Deleuze as quoted in Hardt 30.

[470] Deleuze Critique et clinique 3.

Starobinets instead focuses on molecularity, on futures that we cannot envision, because there is no place for it yet. Amidst the horror, not in spite of it, is its own virtual experimentation, "extracting and producing singularities and placing them in constant variation… inventing ever new relations and conjugations between those singularities."[472] While her work on the edges of horror remains understudied, her focus on degeneration and decay amidst simulated normalcy is necessary to grow new health — "a health… that allows for repetition *and* difference."[473] Truth should change how we think. Her question, then, "is not: 'is it true?' But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think? What new emotions does it make possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?'"[474]

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[471] Pearson 78.

[472] Smith 198-199.

[473] Pearson 77.

[474] Deleuze paraphrased by Massumi 8.

# CONCLUSION

> "Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie
> comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him,
> and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love."
> — *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)*,* Fyodor Dostoevsky

Academics joined a growing chorus at the close of the Twentieth Century in declaring that the post-modern, post-structuralist age had obliterated the power of transcendence, and was on its way to fragmenting all sense of communal values. Philosophers had long grappled with the problem of how or whether one could *access* truths; as the latter half of the century made increasingly clear, however, it was truth itself which was now "problematic." The universality of any sort of claim, the existence of any "unique reality exterior to us," and the presumption of any call to objectivity or correspondence was put into question, if not rejected outright.[475] The explosion of long-simmering social and economic fractures within France's national consciousness, and the seeming descent into chaos following the dissolution of the USSR's totalitarian regime, brought the consequences of these contemporary anxieties into stark relief. Truth's philosophical foundations had been maddened by decades of interrogation; the process of engaging with it in any meaningful sense had now become maddening.

This was the political and social climate facing Linda Lê, Gisèle Pineau, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, and Anna Starobinets when they wrote the texts under consideration here, which span from the early 1990s through the early 2000s. Acknowledging the inadequacy of systems of knowledge outside their limited scope, all four chose to exploit the mutability and radical potential of madness in literature to legitimize voices without placing them within authoritative frameworks. Rather than ask "What is truth, and where can we find it?", they present a different question for us to grapple with: How might the deliberate disruption of knowledge and meaning through mad fiction begin to enact or create truths — not in the sense of a relativistic free-for-all, but as an anti-conservative interruption, a bid for transformation?

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[475] Jeff Malpas, writing the same year that Steve Tesich coined "post-truth," uses the same word to describe the ripple-effects of Nazism and the rise of relativist thought. In the sense of truth itself coming under attack, "the post-modern era is also post-truth — it is an era in which the possibility of truth has been relinquished, rejected or, perhaps, simply forgotten." Jeff Malpas, "Retrieving Truth: Modernism, Post-Modernism and the Problem of Truth," Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal 75.2/3 (Summer/Fall 1992) 288, 297-8.

Initially, these women's works were interpreted by critics as expressions of personal and intergenerational trauma. Lê's autofictional texts *Slander* and *Voice(s)* and Pineau's autobiographical novels *Chili-Skin* and *Macadam Dreams* were placed within a growing sub-field of post-colonial women's writing, cast as richly evocative descriptions of the mental anguish triggered by alienation from one's homeland and identity. Petrushevskaya's novella *Night Time* and short stories like "There's someone in the house" were greeted as examinations of the maternal figure and family home in crisis amidst the deprivation of late-Soviet existence. Starobinets' novella *Transitional Age* and stories like "Agency" were similarly read as metaphorical or absurdist depictions of a haunted and threatened modern-day Russia. These approaches can yield productive readings. There is little doubt that Lê's formative experiences color her autofictional experimentation. Pineau embraces the stance that literature can elevate the underrepresented voices of Black women. Petrushevskaya and Starobinets, for their part, do not deny that they are responding directly to the shifting cultural landscape around them, the former citing Russian women as her life's work and the latter acknowledging her role in inventing realities for the future.

To stay within the bounds of these readings, however, would be to ignore how each author is deliberately engaging with and advocating for literature to answer the challenges set out by the collapse of traditional authorities. In recent years, more nuanced investigations of Linda Lê by Leslie Barnes and Alexandra Kurmann, and of Ludmilla Petrushevskaya by Sally Dalton-Brown and C.A. Vinogradova, have challenged the emphasis on reading their works as descriptive expressions of trauma. Even Barnes' suggestion that Lê approaches her work as a "literature *of* exile," however, keeps the scope of Lê's intervention to the level of personal destabilization and self-creation. Dalton-Brown's rich engagement with Petrushevskaya's generic hybridity, meanwhile, nonetheless closes with the conclusion that she depicts the "crisis of truth in Russia" as it is, not where this crisis might lead us.

My dissertation analyzes the *implications* of these interventions, moving beyond the specifics of each author's biography to interrogate for what purpose they lay bare the inadequacy of knowledge systems to combine or hierarchize themselves into truth. I have argued that Lê, Pineau, Petrushevskaya and Starobinets experiment with literature's ability within the destabilizing atmosphere of fictional madness to search for truth: not as an ideological demand or transcendent savior, but as an anti-conservative disruption that could produce a declaration before its understanding, an enactment before its framing, a creation before its affirmation.

In my analysis of their works, I have drawn on several texts by Alain Badiou, Lev Shestov, and Gilles Deleuze, as well as considerable theoretical work that engages with the significance of their writings to "post-truth" debates and the shifting face of mental illness. As part of this approach, I have declined to bring Badiou and Deleuze, favored rivals concerning these subjects, into direct conversation, preferring to split my engagement into separate chapters according to their resonance with a particular author. This approach is rooted in my commitment to analyzing my primary texts first and foremost. While Badiou, Shestov, and Deleuze help illuminate new aspects of these women's writings, I do not seek to tailor my readings of Petrushevskaya, Pineau, Lê and Starobinets according to whether they fit every aspect of these men's theories. To do so would risk enclosing them within new constraining frameworks, rather than embrace the experimental approach these women take to literary forms.[476]

Such an approach feels especially crucial given the historical specificity of this moment for my authors in post-colonial France and post-Soviet Russia. Françoise Lionnet has argued that women writers are often "especially aware of their task as producers of images," to either affirm dominant narratives or revise existing scripts.[477] Yet in responses to and assessments of their work, more ambitious "revisions" to these scripts can be overshadowed by emphasis on their gender. Stereotypical doubts regarding women's ability to engage in philosophical quandaries and push the limits of literary experimentation remain. "Behold the woman humble, effaced, terrorized," Lê grouses in *Caliban Complex*. If she dares leave the realm of battered victim or deified virgin, abandoning her post as object to take up a pen, she will quickly be dismissed for a "'lack of originality,' so characteristic of her sex."[478] Lê's perspective shares many similarities with Pineau's comments on the misogynoir faced by black women, and the frustrations of both Petrushevskaya and Starobinets when they have been saddled with the derogatory name

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[476] In doing so, I draw on the measured response of Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih to worrites that "theory with a capital *T*," when placed ahead of in-line analysis, only "commits 'textual harassment' on literature while promoting the 'stardom' of theorists." My approach of "theory with a lower-case t" thus aims to place theorists in service of literature, rather than using fiction to prove a particular approach to truth as the "right" one. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, The Creolization of Theory (Duke UP, 2011) 5.

[477] Françoise Lionnet, Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity (Cornell UP 1995) 101.

[478] Lê Le complexe de Caliban 84.

Interestingly, this attitude not only plagues the men in Slander but is hinted to be one reason why they all end up devolving rapidly so by the book's end. "At twenty-five years old, her mother was honey and bile, drug and poison," the uncle reminisces, before concluding: "At twenty-five years old, her mother was a woman" (Calomnies 30). Only a few sections later, the uncle begins fixating on the underage prostitute before spiraling into sadistic fantasies.

"authoress."All four women express discomfort with, or outright reject, scholarly approaches rooted solely in gender or race studies. I have therefore chosen to engage with their sex only insofar as it impact their play with literary depictions of madness and their subsequent interrogations of truth. My work can contribute new perspectives to the considerable scholarship already devoted to analyzing Lê, Pineau, Petrushevskaya, and to a lesser extent Starobinets as women writers within post-colonial France and post-Soviet Russia.

In 2016, "Post-Truth" was declared Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionaries, the term having exploded in popularity following the election of Donald Trump and the growth of the Brexit movement in the UK.[479] Its usage reflects the tremendous influence of new information and communication technologies on political discourse. This includes the rise of "astroturfing" and government-backed influence operations,[480] the globalization of conspiracy theories,[481] and the mass proliferation of social media echo chambers.[482] It is important to remember, however, that the origins of the term “post-truth” are older than the technologies blamed for its rise, and extend far beyond the Anglophone world in their implications. This dissertation serves as an initial exploration of what reconceptualizing women’s mad literature could produce when engaging more fully with the global intertextual networks through which they operate.

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[479] It defines "post-truth" as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." The term's usage increased in documented conversation by 2,000% in 2016 compared with 2015. Allison Flood, "'Post-Truth' named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries," The Guardian 15 November 2016: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries

[480] "Astroturfing" refers to the practice of presenting something as a grassroots movement when its growth has been bankrolled by a powerful sponsor. Considerable research has been devoted to this practice in American political contexts. Increasing attention, however, is now being paid to how government entities around the world bankroll "influence operations" that sway global opinion on issues. Recent controversies include Al-Jazeera's documentation of Israel's "Young Friends of Israel" campaign in the UK and Russia's use of "rumor bombs" in the US and Syria,. See Al Jazeera, "Al Jazeera Investigations — The Lobby P1: Young Friends of Israel," 10 January 2017. Al Jazeera: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceCOhdgRBoc and Gabriele Cosentino, Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation (Palgrave Pivot, 2020) 33-34 and 101-108.

[481] Gabriele Cosentino argues that Pizzagate and its offshoot, QAnon, served as blueprints for the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory that has "serv[ed] as an ideological framework for a growing wave of violent actions by White nationalists worldwide. She further asserts that such movements are not fueled by any perceived epistemic value, but rely almost exclusively on "affective and aspirational values" that quiet users' anxieties regarding perceived threats to their collective identity. Cosentino 60, 67.

[482] Critics argue that sites like Twitter create infinite "networks of agreement" whereby the only criterion for truth is internal coherency in relation to that particular group's opinions. "Post-Truth, Social Media, and the 'Real' as Phantasm," Michael E. Sawyer, Relativism and Post-Truth in Contemporary Society (2018): 55-56.

“The hope,” as Nancy Luxon relates in her consideration of trust and truth, “is to generate a way to talk about broader discourses that is neither outside of time (by virtue of being ahistorical, mystical, or transcendent) nor one that lapses into a yet-more-esoteric scholasticism.”[483] This ambitious hope necessitates a richer engagement with contemporary attitudes toward derangement and disorder, whose parameters have so often directly informed how we approach reason and by extension how we access or declare truth. The rise of the biomedical model of mental illness in the West[484] is in many ways a continuation of centuries spent exoticizing those labeled mad as vessels of ultimate Otherness. It is a cruel irony that an increased gatekeeping of the bounds of reason has accompanied our current panic over truth, with those labeled disabled or disordered facing horrific stigma,[485] direct violence,[486] and the stripping of their rights and dignities as a result.[487] At the same time, the "contradictions within the subject [have been] inscribed by institutions, social formations, representations, and discursive practices" within mainstream academic discourse to the point of rendering insanity at once "ubiquitous and irrelevant."[488] The works of Linda Lê, Gisèle Pineau, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, and Anna Starobinets issue a challenge to this devaluation and abstraction of madness. They also counter literature's new status as an "undisciplined discipline," one which "surrender[s] its ability to *produce* truth" in order to gain "the advantage of flexibility or critique that its antidisciplinarity affords."[489] Mad literature, like the now-problematized concept of "truth itself," has been deprived of its former status as otherworldly or transcendent.[490] Yet through the breakdown of authority triggered by madness and literature in concert, break-*throughs* might be achieved in how we think and what truths that process may generate. In attempting to map out the directionless future of truth, they draw on madness as their chief rhetorical concept, and on literature as an authority with nothing to confirm its authenticity.

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[483] Luxon 209.

[484] Rhetorician Lucille Parkinson McCarthy and psychiatrist Joan Page Gerring place the start of this rise to the release of the DSM-III (1980) and the revised DSM-IV (1994), which marked “a dramatic shift in psychiatry toward the biomedical model and away from competing models, which dominated the field before 1980.” These revisions have fostered a professional and public attitude within both America and parts of Western Europe that mental illness is driven by genetics, is objectively measurable in its forms, and is universal in its needs and treatments. Lucille Parkinson McCarthy and Joan Page Gerring, “Revising Psychiatry’s Charter Document DSM-IV,” Written Communication 11.2 (April 1994): 157.

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[485] The latest global survey by the United Nations observed a strong correlation between mental illness and the potential for home insecurity. The survey noted the significant role that stigma played into securing housing, and high rates of suicidal ideation among those who were both homeless and labeled disabled or disordered. Marybeth Schinn, "International Homeless: Policy, Socio-Cultural, and Individual Perspectives," Journal of Social Issues 63.3 (August 2007): 657-677.

[486] In a recent U.S. study, researchers comparing data from its largest cities that people with a serious mental illness had been victims of a violent crime at more than 11 times the rate of the general population. While the study was conducted solely in the US, global reports on ableism and the related stigma against mental illness suggest that the ratios in other countries are likely to be similar. Linda A. Teplin et al, "Crime Victimization in Adults with Severe Mental Illness," JAMA Psychiatry (Previously Archives of General Psychiatry) 1 August 2005: https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/article-abstract/208861

[487] Depending on their country of residence, people diagnosed with a mental disability or disorder risk losing their liberty, their right to vote or hold public office, to retain custody of their children, and to marry or divorce. Once they have a history of being institutionalized, they are likely to "receive diminished forms (if any at all) of the rights to choose where they live, with whom they associate, and with whom they speak, and/or relinquish some control over whether or not to accept medical and psychiatric treatment." Judith Lynn Failer, Who Qualifies for Rights?: Homelessness, Mental Illness, and Civil Commitment (Cornell UP, 2002) 2.

[488] Carol Neely as quoted in Prendergast 46.

[489] John Limon as quoted in David Mitchell, "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor," in Sharon L. Snyder et al, Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities (The Modern Language Association of America, 2002) 16.

[490] The attempted reduction of mental illness to the biomedical realm in the second half of Twentieth Century went almost hand-in-hand with the denigration of literature as a field. Shoshana Felman casts this as an extraordinary irony: "At the very moment some claim to be 'liberating' madness — or, at the very least, to be undoing the cultural codes responsible for its repression — they are in fact denying and *repressing* literature, the sole channel by which madness has been able throughout history to speak in its own name, or at least in relative freedom." Felman 15.

These women's works also demonstrate the ongoing and fruitful exchange between the Francophone and Russophone literary traditions. Badiou's resonance when examining Petrushevskaya's short stories; Shestov's illumination of new patterns in Pineau; Deleuze's reading of Kafka as a guide for approaching Starobinets; and Marina Tsvetaeva's influence in Lê's approach to autofiction all demonstrate how these traditions may act in concert as much as clash in conflict. They remind us that conversations regarding the relationship between madness, truth, and literature are far from over. In the autofiction of Lê, the autobiographical novels of Pineau, and the genre-bending short stories and novellas of Petrushevskaya and Starobinets, truth is not something known, discovered, and firmly grasped: it is enact, experienced, and created. Against the bleak forecast predicted by our current musings on "post-truth," they offer ways to reconceptualize authenticity and its (non)relation that do not fall back on the transcendental, nor satisfy themselves with the lure of relativism or the despair of nihilism.

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