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Stanislav Savitski

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Helenuctism, Verpa, and the Neo-Avant-Garde of the 1960s

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There was no Herodotus before Herodotus
Arnaldo Momigliano

freedom is freedom
Vsevolod Nekrasov

INTRODUCTION

François Rabelais, Multiple Modernities, and the Neo-Avant-Garde

François Rabelais and the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party

The Thaw began when Moscow celebrated the 400th anniversary of François Rabelais's death. It was April 1953, a month after Stalin's death. The country's main newspapers – *Pravda*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, and *Izvestia,* the organ of the Soviets of Deputies – reported on the gala evening held in honor of the founder of Pantagruelism at the Moscow Conservatory on 7 April 1953. The popular periodicals *Ogonek* and *Literaturnaya Gazeta* also responded. A *Pravda* correspondent wrote enthusiastically:

> […] общественность столицы отметила 400-летие со дня смерти великого французского писателя и гуманиста Франсуа Рабле. […] Большой зал Московской консерватории заполнили писатели, ученые, мастера искусств, представители общественных организаций столицы. Среди присутствующих — гостящие в СССР видный общественный деятель Канады, лауреат международной Сталинской премии «За укрепление мира между народами» Джеймс Эндикотт и член секретариата Всемирного Совета Мира известный китайский общественный деятель и поэт Эми Сяо.
> (*Pravda*. 8 April 1953, 4)

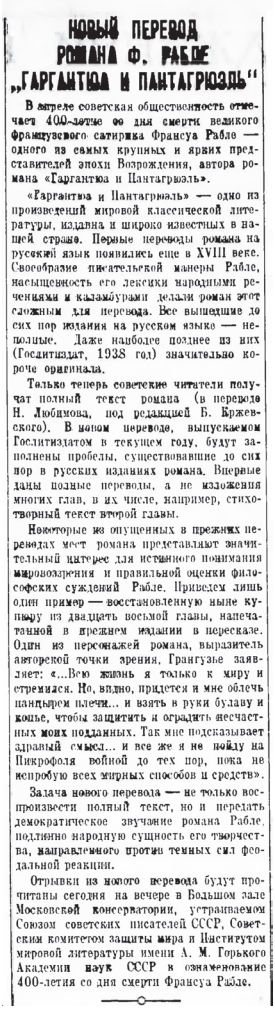
> […] the capital's public celebrated the 400th anniversary of the death of the great French writer and humanist François Rabelais. […] The Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory was filled with writers, scientists, artists, and representatives of the capital's public organizations. Among those present were James Endicott, a prominent Canadian public figure and winner of the International Stalin Prize "For Strengthening Peace Between Peoples", and Amy Xiao, a well-known Chinese public figure, poet, and a member of the Secretariat of the World Peace Council, both visiting the USSR.

Izvestia echoed *Pravda*:

> По поручению правления Союза советских писателей СССР, Советского Комитета защиты мира и Института мировой литературы имени А. М. Горького Академии наук СССР вечер открыл Председатель Советского комитета защиты мира писатель Н. Тихонов. Он сказал:

— Отмечаемое нами 400-летие замечательного французского писателя и гуманиста принадлежит к числу знаменательных юбилейных дат в истории мировой культуры. […] Мы, советские люди, высоко ценящие все создания человеческого гения, все богатства мировой культуры, воздаем должное писателю-гуманисту Ф. Рабле, творчество которого принадлежит прогрессивному человечеству […].
С докладом «Жизнь и творчество Ф. Рабле» выступил директор Института мировой литературы профессор И. Анисимов. Оценивая творчество Ф. Рабле, докладчик охарактеризовал его роман «Гаргантюа и Пантагрюэль» как сатирическое произведение глубочайшего реализма, проникнутое прекрасным знанием действительности, бичующее ненавистную Рабле реакцию, смело устремленное в будущее. По окончании вечера состоялся большой концерт, в котором были исполнены отрывки из романа Рабле «Гаргантюа и Пантагрюэль», произведения французских композиторов-классиков и советских композиторов.
(*Izvestiia*. 8 April 1953, 3)

On behalf of the Board of the Union of Soviet Writers of the USSR, the Soviet Committee for the Defense of Peace, and the Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, the evening was opened by the Chairman of the Soviet Committee for the Defense of Peace, writer N<ikolai> Tikhonov. He said: "The 400th anniversary of the remarkable French writer and humanist, which we are celebrating, is one of the significant jubilee dates in the history of world culture. […] We, the Soviet people, who deeply value all the creations of human genius and the riches of world culture, pay tribute to the writer and humanist F<rançois> Rabelais, whose work belongs to progressive humanity […]."
Professor I<van> Anisimov, Director of the Institute of World Literature, delivered a report titled "The Life and Work of F<rançois> Rabelais". Assessing Rabelais's work, the speaker characterized his novel "Gargantua and Pantagruel" as a satirical masterpiece of profound realism imbued with an excellent understanding of reality, condemning the reactionary forces despised by Rabelais, and boldly looking toward the future.



НОВЫЙ ПЕРЕВОД РОМАНА Ф. РАБЛЕ „ГАРГАНТЮА И ПАНТАГРЮЭЛЬ"

В апреле советская общественность отмечает 400-летие со дня смерти великого французского сатирика Франсуа Рабле — одного из самых крупных и ярких представителей эпохи Возрождения, автора романа «Гаргантюа и Пантагрюэль».

«Гаргантюа и Пантагрюэль» — одно из произведений мировой классической литературы, издавна и широко известных в нашей стране. Первые переводы романа на русский язык появились еще в XVIII веке. Своеобразие писательской манеры Рабле, насыщенность его лексики народными речениями и каламбурами делали роман этот сложным для перевода. Все вышедшие до сих пор издания на русском языке — неполные. Даже наиболее позднее из них (Гослитиздат, 1938 год) значительно короче оригинала.

Только теперь советские читатели получат полный текст романа (в переводе Н. Любимова, под редакцией Б. Бржевского). В новом переводе, выпускаемом Гослитиздатом в текущем году, будут заполнены пробелы, существовавшие до сих пор в русских изданиях романа. Впервые даны полные переводы, а не изложения многих глав, в их числе, например, стихотворный текст второй главы.

Некоторые из опущенных в прежних переводах мест романа представляют значительный интерес для истинного понимания мировоззрения и правильной оценки философских суждений Рабле. Приведем лишь один пример — восстановленную ныне купюру из двадцать восьмой главы, напечатанной в прежнем издании в пересказе. Один из персонажей романа, выразитель авторской точки зрения, Грангузье заявляет: «...Всю жизнь я только к миру и стремился. Но, видно, придется и мне облечь панцирем плечи... и взять в руки булаву и копье, чтобы защитить и оградить несчастных моих подданных. Так мне подсказывает здравый смысл... и все же я не пойду на Пикрохола войной до тех пор, пока не испробую всех мирных способов и средств».

Задача нового перевода — не только воспроизвести полный текст, но и передать демократическое звучание романа Рабле, подлинно народную сущность его творчества, направленного против темных сил феодальной реакции.

Отрывки из нового перевода будут прочитаны сегодня на вечере в Большом зале Московской консерватории, устраиваемом Союзом советских писателей СССР, Советским комитетом защиты мира и Институтом мировой литературы имени А. М. Горького Академии наук СССР в ознаменование 400-летия со дня смерти Франсуа Рабле.

Fig. 1

> At the end of the evening, a grand concert was held, featuring excerpts from "Gargantua and Pantagruel" as well as works by French classical composers and Soviet composers.[1]

Of course, this anniversary was incomparably more modest than the grandiose celebrations for the centenary of Pushkin's death in 1937 or the even more lavish commemoration of Lermontov's death planned for 1941, which was canceled due to the Nazi invasion of the USSR. Nevertheless, even among the grim and pompous Soviet celebrations, the commemoration of the author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in the sixth part of the world was noteworthy.

The Soviet literary scholars and critics came to interpret the work of the French literary classic as communist and pacifist.[2] Curiously enough, their texts did not even hint at what Mikhail Bakhtin wrote during those years about popular culture as the source of Rabelais's novel in his book *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura Srednevekov'ia i Renessansa* ("François Rabelais's Works and the Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance", 1965[3]). The Soviet Rabelais bore little resemblance to the hero of Bakhtin's theory – and even less to his historical prototype. This striking dissimilarity ensured his place of honor in the pantheon of Soviet culture, further reinforced by Nikolai

1 See also: *Ogonek*. 10 Apri 1953.

2 See, e.g., Roman Samarin's essay "Titan of the Renaissance: On the 400th Anniversary of François Rabelais's Death" (Samarin 1953) and Ivan Anisimov's lecture "The Life and Works of François Rabelais" (Anisimov 1953), as well as the bibliography of publications on Rabelais (Rable 1953: 12).

3 Bakhtin 1965; English translation: *Rabelais and His World* (Bakhtin 1968).



ВЕЛИКИЙ ФРАНЦУЗСКИЙ ПИСАТЕЛЬ И ГУМАНИСТ

400-летие со дня смерти Франсуа Рабле

Вчера общественность столицы отметила 400-летие со дня смерти великого французского писателя и гуманиста Франсуа Рабле. Этой знаменательной дате был посвящен вечер, организованный Союзом советских писателей СССР, Советским Комитетом защиты мира и Институтом мировой литературы имени А. М. Горького.

Большой зал Московской консерватории заполнили писатели, ученые, мастера искусств, представители общественных организаций столицы. Среди присутствующих — гостящие в СССР видный общественный деятель Канады, лауреат международной Сталинской премии «За укрепление мира между народами» Джеймс Эндикотт и член секретариата Всемирного Совета Мира, известный китайский общественный деятель и поэт Эми Сяо. Вечер открыл кратким вступительным словом председатель Советского Комитета защиты мира писатель Николай Тихонов.

— Отмечаемое нами сегодня 400-летие со дня смерти замечательного французского писателя Франсуа Рабле,— сказал он.— принадлежит к числу знаменательных юбилейных дат в истории мировой культуры. Эта дата торжественно отмечается передовыми общественными кругами различных стран.

— Эпоха, в которую жил и писал творец бессмертных образов Гаргантюа и Пантагрюэля, отошла в далекое прошлое. Но его книга пережила столетия, сохраняя свою брызжущую через край полнокровную жизненную силу, свой народный реалистический характер, свою яркую красочность, свой лукавый юмор, свою разящую сатирическую остроту. Великий французский писатель Возрождения наносил оружием слова сокрушающие удары по всему отживающему и мертвящему. Великому гуманисту Рабле были близки чаяния народных масс, и вместе с ними — пусть в наивной и утопической форме — он мечтал о справедливом и свободном обществе, где сможет гармонично развиваться человек, не зная оков рабства и пут мракобесия.

— Мы, советские люди,—сказал в заключение Н. Тихонов, — высоко ценя все создания человеческого гения, все богатства мировой культуры, воздаем должное писателю и гуманисту Франсуа Рабле. Творчество Рабле принадлежит прогрессивному человечеству, отстаивающему мир, культуру, национальную независимость, утверждающему идеи дружбы и сотрудничества между народами.

С докладом «Франсуа Рабле и его великий роман» выступил директор Института мировой литературы имени А. М. Горького профессор Н. Анисимов.

В заключение состоялся большой концерт.

Fig. 2

Zabolotsky's remarkable adaptation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* for children (1935). In the USSR, this favorite children's book, as well as Vladimir Piast's translation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1929), was repeatedly reprinted with illustrations by Gustave Doré. Doré's drawings, exemplifying the visual language of nineteenth-century social satire, fit perfectly within the context of Soviet anti-religious and anti-bourgeois caricature, making the Renaissance author more accessible to modern readers. In the Soviet Rabelais – supposedly scourging the church and ridiculing the vices of the bourgeoisie – the famous doctor from the town of Chinon was barely recognizable.

The state cultural policy of the USSR, aimed at replacing religious values with ideals embodied in the heroes of the cultural pantheon, had a great

need for world classics.[4] On the anniversary of the writer's death, the Library of Foreign Literature published a bibliography of Rabelais's works and texts about him, further strengthening his status as a leading figure in Soviet and world culture (Rable 1953). The Renaissance humanist, whose books had been translated into many languages, was an ideal ally for the builders of the Soviet cultural pantheon. In this sense, the idea to celebrate the 400th anniversary of his death seemed quite natural.

The beginning of the Thaw, as we know, was marked by Nikita Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956. Of course, political relaxation had already begun in the mid-1950s under Georgy Malenkov. Ilya Ėrenburg, who foresaw the course of future events, wrote the story *Thaw* (1954), and it so happened that this climatic metaphor – signifying the arrival of a milder, more favorable time – gave its name to the period of liberal reforms. Not only these well-known historical facts but also many other factors shaped and accompanied the development of the 1950s and the following decade, as Sergei Chuprinin insightfully, subtly, and movingly describes in his two-volume encyclopedia of the Thaw.[5]

And yet, although much has been written and said about this era, not everything about it is fully known. Moreover, reducing the Thaw to Khrushchev's political reforms, the liberalization of society, and the construction of 'socialism with a human face' would confine us to long-standing generalizations about this time. Historical reality does not fit neatly into such a framework. For instance, there is one story in the history of post-Stalinist freedom that is entirely about freedom itself – yet, surprisingly, is not directly tied to the Communist Party's liberal reforms. Some intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s saw Khrushchev's democratic reforms as a temporary concession from the authorities, a top-down decision to loosen control over society and cultural life. Although such independent thinkers were few in number and not

4 It is no coincidence that the first translation of Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* into Russian was completed at the same time as the work on the translation of Rabelais: in the late Stalinist period of the 1950s (Monten′ 1954 and 1958).

5 Chuprinin 2022a and 2022b. The first significant work on the cultural history of the Thaw was Petr Vail′ and Aleksandr Genis's book *The World of the Soviet Man* (Vail′/Genis 1988). It remains relevant today. See also: Burton 1965; Chunikhin 2025; Etkind/Nivat/Serman 1990; Gibian 1960; Hayward/Blake 1962; Hornsby 2023; Jones 2005; Johnson/Labedz 1965; Kozlov/Gilburt 2013; Sjeklocha/Mead 1967; "Soviet Underground Literature. A Discussion" (1969).

at the forefront of the era, their perspectives and experiences were just as significant as the majority's enthusiasm. The circle of poet and literary scholar Leonid Chertkov, the artists of the Order of Mendicant Painters, the "barracks school", "Akhmatova's orphans", the Verpa artistic comradeship, the Helenucts group, and their associates viewed freedom as an absolute value, independent of any state policies or official initiatives.

The ideals of the Thaw did not inspire Leonid Chertkov, Aleksandr Aref'ev, Joseph Brodsky, and their peers. To them, the Soviet Union itself – both as a political system and a socio-cultural reality – was absurd. Absurdity was embedded in the very fabric of the utopian yet repressive Soviet regime, in its communal social structures. Absurdity was embodied by the grandiose nationwide celebrations marking death anniversaries. Equally ridiculous was the glorification of "the Soviet people's writer François Rabelais". This honoring of a "genuine realist-democrat" who scourged "the dark forces of feudal reaction" to mark his death, which had occurred four centuries earlier, did not merely resemble a delusion; it was a delusion in reality. Rabelais was not a realist at all but one of the key figures in the history of utopian and fantastic literature. He knew as much about feudalism as he did about *The Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It was hard to imagine anything more absurd than these solemn glorifications! The 400th anniversary of Rabelais's death, celebrated through lavish cultural event just a month after Stalin's passing, marked the height of absurdity – a threshold from which new life, new freedom, and a new reality began, breaking away from the rigid norms and traditions of the past. Within this commemorative event – one that might have appealed to the Surrealists – there was a hint of impending change and the emergence of a new history.

At the celebration at the Moscow Conservatory, excerpts from a new translation of the novel were read, which was significant enough to be announced separately by *Literaturnaya Gazeta*: «Отрывки нового перевода <Н. Любимова под редакцией Б. Кржевского> будут прочитаны […] на вечере в Большом зале Московской консерватории […] в ознаменование 400-летия со дня смерти Франсуа Рабле» (*Literaturnaia Gazeta,* 7 April

1953, 3).[6] *Literaturnaya Gazeta* also hastily reported that a new translation was scheduled to be published by the publishing house Goslitizdat later that year.

However, as the anniversary fever subsided, the book was released much later. The translation, excerpts of which were read at an evening at the Conservatory, was published only eight years later, in 1961. Its author, Nikolai Liubimov, unlike his predecessors – Anna Ėngel′gardt (Rable 1901) and Vladimir Piast (Rable 1929), who significantly softened Rabelais's obscene humor and surrendered to the master of wordplay due to their inability to translate his fantastical linguistic games – managed to render Rabelais's text quite freely in modern colloquial language.[7] Brother Jean and other characters in Liubimov's version spoke in a manner reminiscent of the protagonists of popular works from the Thaw era, such as Erich Maria Remarque's *Tri tovarishcha (Drei Kameraden,* 1936, Russian translation 1958), Ilya Il′f and Evgeny Petrov's *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev (The Twelve Chairs,* 1928), and Grigory Belykh and L. Panteleev's *Respublika Shkid* (*The Republic of ShKID,* 1927). Thanks to this, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* not only became more accessible to Soviet readers but also attained popularity. For the post-Stalin era, the very fact that the book was written in everyday language was striking to readers. Here was a sixteenth-century French book that sounded so modern!

In one way or another, Nikolai Liubimov's translation influenced many who read one of the most rebellious books in world literature during the 1960s. The motto of the Abbey of Thélème, "Fay ce que vouldras" ("Do as you will"), became the credo of Aleksei Khvostenko, one of the central figures of the Soviet nonconformist movement. Mikhail Bakhtin's doctoral dissertation, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura Srednevekov'ia i Renessansa (*"François Rabelais's Works and the Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance"*)*, published in 1965, introduced underground artists to the power of laughter and a wide range of absurdist artistic practices. The poet Leonid Entin, a member of Verpa – a Leningrad neo-avant-garde group of the 1960s – described the absurdist work of Aleksei Khvostenko and Anri

6 "Excerpts of the new translation <by Nikolai Liubimov, edited by Boris Krzhevsky> will be read at an evening in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory […] to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of François Rabelais." Throughout the book, the comments and additions in angle brackets within quotation marks are mine. – S. S.

7 For information on Rabelais's translations into Russian and his reception in Russia, see: Savitskii 2022.

Volokhonsky in Bakhtinian terms as a process of becoming, an experience that is never fully completed but is constantly unfolding:

> Песни Хвостенко и Волохонского, […] звучавшие «у бездны на краю», смеясь и пророчествуя, […] как бы говорят нам словами Бахтина: «Ничего в мире еще не произошло, последнее слово мира и о мире еще не сказано, мир открыт и свободен, еще все впереди и всегда будет впереди». Таков очищающий смысл смеха.
> (Khvostenko/Volokhonskii 2006: 5)

> Khvostenko and Volokhonsky's songs, […] sung "at the edge of the abyss", laughing and prophesying, […] seem to echo Bakhtin's words: "Nothing in the world has happened yet, the last word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything still lies ahead and will always lie ahead". Such is the purifying significance of laughter.

This episode in the history of Rabelais' veneration in the USSR was neither a radical shift nor a harbinger of imminent transformation. It was merely a symptom of anticipated change, an upbeat of a yet-to-be-written musical composition. Change, as we now know from history, was not slow to follow, and in just a few years, the country was transformed beyond recognition. A generation emerged that, two decades later, would lead Perestroika and rid the country of communism. Those who rejected the idea of 'socialism with a human face' and instead chose to live as part of an independent, nonconformist community transformed the absurdity of the obsolete Stalinist system into a neo-avant-garde experience of the absurd – one that, as early as the 1960s, gave birth to a new freedom and a new way of life.

"The more inevitable and absurd, so much the better and more authentic",[8] is how Joseph Brodsky, one of the most successful nonconformists of the late Soviet era, once formulated his credo.

This book is about how absurdity became the foundation of a new existential-aesthetic system. About how freedom was born from the spirit of absurdity.

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8 «Чем неизбежнее и нелепей — тем лучше, тем подлинней» (Brodskii 2007: 173).

Multiple Modernities

For more than a hundred years, the history of modernism has been dominated by the conquerors of art capitals – those at the epicenter of artistic life in Paris, Berlin, or New York, or those retrospectively elevated from the margins into the canon. Marcel Proust and Paul Cézanne, James Joyce and Marcel Duchamp, Jean-Paul Sartre and Wassily Kandinsky, along with Franz Kafka, Kazimir Malevich, and Walter Benjamin – who rose to fame in the second half of the twentieth century – defined the values and boundaries of modernism. Many writers and artists who, for various reasons, were overlooked by these cultural capitals remained in obscurity.

In recent years, however, there has been growing discussion about the rich and vibrant artistic life that existed – and continues to exist – on the periphery of metropolitan modernism, or even far beyond it.[9] As a result, modernism is now understood in a new way: as a multifaceted, diverse artistic experience that unfolds across numerous local histories. The old hierarchy has been recognized as unfair, having excluded many artists and writers who, due to their provincial backgrounds, never had a chance to receive recognition. Some were disregarded simply because they did not fit within the cultural framework of the major art centers. One of the key critiques of modernism's neglect of vernacular traditions has come from postcolonial theory, which has demonstrated how colonial practices marginalized those who did not conform to the artistic and intellectual trends of imperial capitals. The concept of multiple modernities, introduced by Israeli historian Shmuel N. Eisenstadt – who developed it under the influence of Karl Jaspers' theory of the Axial Age – has played a crucial role in this intellectual debate.[10]

This idea has provided a platform for voices that had previously been ignored. That does not mean that contemporary French literature is now represented exclusively by authors from the Maghreb or that new Ethiopian prose dominates Italian literary circles. However, a shift has taken place: audiences have learned to pay more attention to foreign writers and artists from regions

9 See for example the following recent works: Harney/Phillips 2019, as well as Bäckström/Hjartarson 2015 and Iskin 2016.

10 Eisenstadt 2000. A special edition also deserves mention: *Daedalus* (Winter 2000), dedicated to "Multiple Modernities". Several other important publications on the subject include: Huyssen 2007; Walkowitz D. / Walkowitz R. 2008. One of the earliest works on this topic in art history was Mitter 2008.

previously unknown to cultural centers like Paris or Milan. It is time for a reappraisal of the vernacular traditions that metropolises once exoticized.

The diversity of multiple modernities has been showcased in major exhibitions. The Centre Pompidou presented this concept in the museum collection exhibition *Modernité(s) plurielle(s)* (2013–2015; see Grenier 2015), followed a few years later by MoMA in 2019 (see Racovich 2020). *Documenta 13* (curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 2012) and *Documenta 14* (curated by Adam Szymczyk, 2017) also contributed to this dismantling of the established metropolitan canon. The 2013 Venice Biennale, particularly its main project *The Encyclopedic Palace* (curated by Massimiliano Gioni), placed figures like Rudolf Steiner and André Breton on an equal footing with lesser-known artists and the so-called *magiciens de la terre* from "exotic" countries (Gioni 2013). The exhibition's tone was set by unrecognized geniuses and forgotten thinkers, while metropolitan celebrities played a secondary role.

Most recently, the 2024 Venice Biennale continued this theme with its main project *Foreigners Everywhere* (curated by Adriano Pedrosa), which excluded the dominant figures of modernism and postmodernism altogether. Pedrosa assembled artists from various countries who had never tasted the glory of the art capitals, creating an exhibition that echoed earlier ones but with a sharper focus on themes of foreignness and exclusion (Pedrosa 2024).

This theme was explored even more extensively in the exhibition *Die Erfindung des Fremden in der Kunst (*"Inventing the Foreign in Art") at Heidelberg's Kurpfälzisches Museum. The curators of this show traced the figure of the outsider from the early modern period to the present day, demonstrating how it has been shaped by intersecting cultural phenomena: fascination with the exotic, colonial perspectives, racism, Orientalism, the cult of the archaic, the collecting of rarities and "monsters", and critiques of Eurocentrism. The exhibition, accompanied by a scholarly publication (Carrasco/Hepp 2024), offered a concise yet comprehensive analysis of how perceptions of foreignness have evolved over time.

Today, the hero of contemporary art is an outsider – an alien to European capitals, a displaced person. It has become customary to forgo the obligatory references to Pablo Picasso, Yves Klein, and Joseph Beuys. Their unique, "original" artistic experiences no longer serve as models or unattainable benchmarks of artistic success. "The 'original of the originality' is itself an ideological, identity-forming construct", writes Lola Kantor-Kazovsky

(2022: 171) in her book on the Moscow nonconformist leader Mikhail Grobman, critiquing the monopoly of art capitals and questioning the validity of original, metropolitan modernism as a framework that relegates regional modernisms to mere derivatives of their metropolitan counterparts. The modernist classics that gained recognition during the twentieth century no longer dictate the rules or monopolize key exhibition spaces. The hierarchical grading scale that once determined their dominance is now considered obsolete.

However, it is important to recognize that these debates and exhibitions have not led to the replacement of modernist classics with artists from Haiti or Jamaica. Rather, the concept of artistic primacy itself has dissolved. There is no longer a first place – only multiplicity, variety, polyphony, and diversity. Modernism, in its contemporary sense, places a Parisian star on equal footing with an intellectual in Pyongyang, exploring the mysteries of the universe. From this newfound artistic equality arises the necessity to understand vernacular modernisms – artistic traditions shaped in contexts unfamiliar to us. Our goal is not merely to treat these works as exotic curiosities but to engage with them within their own artistic frameworks. In keeping with the contemporary understanding of modernism as a plurality of artistic experiences, we must examine how different aesthetic idioms emerged in their respective cultural and historical contexts.

This task, however, is daunting in its sheer scope – there are too many modernisms. Who can fully grasp this diversity? The *Modernité(s) plurielle(s)* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou featured works of artists across the globe, yet no single viewer could truly comprehend them all. There is no one with a universal perspective capable of encompassing such vast artistic variation. Nevertheless, it is possible to analyze vernacular modernisms in comparison to established modernist traditions – not by equating them, but by highlighting the distinctiveness and originality of both. After all, an artist living far from Paris or New York might have been inspired by a faded, black-and-white reproduction of a Picasso or Warhol piece, yet gone on to create something entirely unique, with little resemblance to the original. This is the nature of non-metropolitan art: it absorbs echoes of metropolitan life but speaks in its own voice.

While utopian in scope, the concept of multiple modernities grants us the valuable opportunity to closely examine individual instances of modernist artistic expression that emerged outside the world's cultural capitals. This

book presents one such case: the artistic life of Leningrad in the 1960s. The Leningrad of that decade was fascinated by Happenings, Allan Kaprow's *Art of Life*, Edward Estlin Cummings' poetic experiments, the Viennese school of concrete poetry, and Dada montage techniques. But it also had its own Oscar Wildes and its own Joan of Arc – it had a creative life distinctly its own.

Leningrad in the 1960s was not London of the Swinging Sixties, nor Paris of 1968, where Daniel Cohn-Bendit's generation was coming of age. It was not Prague, where the hopes for 'socialism with a human face' were crushed that same year. Leningrad was not the epicenter of world-changing events, despite St. Petersburg's status as a globally recognized city – founded by Peter the Great as Russia's window to the West, mythologized in Russian literature, and immortalized in Soviet cinema. It was, as the St. Petersburg artist Oleg Kotel′nikov once quipped in the spirit of François Rabelais, the absurd city of «Петра, Ильича и Чайковского»[11] (Andreeva 2003).

In the Leningrad of the 1960s, there was no vibrant capital city life. Many people still lived with memories of pre-Soviet times, when the city was the center of a vast empire, calling it Petersburg in defiance of modern toponymy. For many, retrospection was a form of modernity. Life felt stifled. "St. Petersburg is a city where dinner has gone cold",[12] wrote one of the heroes of this book A. Nik. The most internationally recognized intellectual to emerge from Leningrad in the 1950s and 60s – Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky – was largely retrospective and conservative in his aesthetic preferences. Time and again, Brodsky will help us to illuminate the artistic life of this city for those whose interests lie far from Soviet cultural history, in particular the history of the Thaw.

During these years, Leningrad was an ideal setting for the emergence of one of the multiple modernities. It was far removed from contemporary international art life, as the USSR had remained isolated from the so-called Western world since the 1930s. During World War II, the city endured a 900-day siege, after which its demographic composition changed drastically, with many writers and artists among those who perished. In Stalin's final years, repression intensified, and several political trials were staged against Leningrad

11 "<The city> of "Peter <the Great>, <Vladimir> Il′ich <Lenin>, and <Peter Il′ich> Tchaikovsky".

12 «Петербург — это город, где ужин остыл» (cit. after: Ėrl′ 1993: [41]).



Fig. 3

intellectuals. Amid the purges of the late 1940s and early 1950s, engaging with Acmeism or Expressionism was unthinkable. Only after Georgy Malenkov came to power – and especially after Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Congress of the CPSU – did Leningrad intellectuals begin to reconnect with the pre-revolutionary, modernist tradition and the avant-garde.

At the same time, neither Leningrad nor Moscow – where, under Malenkov, in 1953–1955, more and more foreigners began to visit – could be considered artistic backwaters in relation to the world's artistic capitals. Reading the diaries of Mikhail Grobman, the aforementioned Moscow neo-avant-garde artist, collector and inventor of the notion of the "Second Avant-Garde", one does not get the sense that Moscow's art scene was provincial. The intensity of artistic life in this chronicle of the underground's formation during the Thaw years is comparable to that of art capitals like London or New York. Unlike in the West, where the competition drove the art market, the creative tension in the USSR arose from the struggle for self-realization. Artists sought freedom from official institutions, selling their works privately, often to foreigners. By the 1960s, they had gained admirers in Western Europe, demonstrating the international demand for Soviet nonconformist art.[13] Grobman's works were exhibited in Czechoslovakia, including a solo show (1965), and discussions

13 See Grobman's diary (2002) and Sjeklocha/Mead (1967: 127, 133, 139), as well as the memoirs of Valentin Vorob'ev (2005 and 2012) and Anatoly Brusilovsky (Brusilovskii 2001).

were held about an exhibition in Poland. Meanwhile, in 1965, exhibitions of Anatoly Zverev's work were held in Paris and Geneva, and other nonconformist exhibitions were organized abroad.

The internal dynamics of Moscow's artistic life was analyzed by the Czechoslovak critic and art historian Jindřich Chalupecký, a close friend of Grobman (Khalupetskii 1985; Grobman 2002: 139–149). With deep knowledge of the artistic landscape on both sides of the Iron Curtain, Chalupecký rejected the notion that Moscow nonconformism was merely a provincial offshoot or an appendage to Western art. Instead, he viewed it through a dual lens, recognizing its unique place within the broader currents of modernism.

When talking about Soviet nonconformism in the Thaw era, it is important to consider another aspect. In Leningrad and in the USSR as a whole, modernism was not officially recognized,[14] nor was it seen as a continuation of artistic traditions, as it was in France, Britain, or the USA. During the Second World War, the modernist sculptor Henry Moore was Britain's national artist. During these years, hundreds of European modernists who had fled Nazism gathered in New York. Even in occupied Paris, Albert Camus, Jean Dubuffet, and Jean Fautrier continued the artistic experiments of the early twentieth century by publishing their works or exhibiting them. In contrast, the development of modernism in the USSR was hindered by the Soviet system. Anna Akhmatova, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Tatlin, or Vladimir Favorsky had to adapt to the institutions governing culture. In this sense, their experience mirrors that of German and Italian modernists who were persecuted or forced to emigrate by authorities in the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s. Soviet modernists underwent repression, and the return to modernist art, officially permitted with the beginning of the Thaw, carried a political and sociocultural charge that resonated with the youth of the 1950s and 60s.

Due to these circumstances, modernism in the USSR was not a liberal-bourgeois artwork embedded in the cultural industry and art market. The generation of Joseph Brodsky and Ilya Kabakov – the most successful and famous

14 The idea of the modernist essence of Socialist Realism – originating from Benjamin Buchloh's interpretation of German totalitarian art and shared by the authors of the collections *Laboratory of Dreams* (Bowlt/Matich 1996) and *Creating Life* (Paperno/Grossman 1994) – was an important generalization for its time. However, as is now becoming evident, it fails to account for numerous facts and particularities that contradict it. For a critique of these ideas, see: Savitskii 2013.

representatives of Soviet nonconformism in the West – faced a similarly daunting task as that confronting Arnold Bode, who revived modernist art and the city of Kassel from the ruins after World War II. Kassel was devastated by bombing, but by the 1960s it was already one of the world's centers of contemporary art, thanks to the Documenta festival founded by Bode. The generation of Brodsky and Kabakov also revived much of what had been suppressed by the Soviet system. Their experience was marked by high existential tensions and risks. Some members of this generation ignored the boundaries and conventions established by Soviet cultural institutions and found themselves outside the system. Some openly defied Soviet laws, choosing the fate of the marginalized, which, with the onset of Perestroika, became the shortest route to the establishment.

Neo-Avant-Garde

This book deals with one of the most radical trends of late Soviet modernism, the neo-avant-garde. By neo-avant-garde, we refer to the work of the continuators of the so-called *historical avant-garde*, which includes Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and other varieties of experimental art and literature from the 1900s to the 1920s.[15] The neo-avant-garde was formed and

15 For an analysis of the concept of the neo-avant-garde, see Pavlovets 2025. Pavlovets defines the neo-avant-garde and neo-avant-gardists as follows: «[…] авторов, основной установкой которых было обновление языка современной им поэзии с опорой на тщательно собираемый, исследуемый и осваиваемый ими опыт „исторического авангарда", мы называем неоавангардистами» ("We call the authors whose main aim was to renew the language of poetry contemporary to them while relying on the experience of the 'historical avant-garde', which they carefully collected, researched, and mastered, neo-avant-gardists"; Pavlovets 2025: 12). This understanding is relevant to this book. The literary scholar and philosopher Igor′ P. Smirnov in his article "Avant-Garde-3" describes the artistic experience of the 1950s and 1960s as primarily retrospective: «Разительная особенность авангарда, израсходовавшего свои ресурсы, — его отказ от перспектированной модели мира в пользу ретроспекции» (Smirnov 2018: 72; "A striking feature of the avant-garde, which has exhausted its resources, is its rejection of a prospective model of the world in favor of retrospection"). This characteristic of the neo-avant-garde is mediated by a high degree of existential tension, reinforced by the nonconformist rejection of Soviet officialdom and the consistent marginalization of underground artists. The vitality of the neo-avant-garde helps resolve some of the contradictions underlying the well-known debate between Hal Foster and Peter Bürger. Despite their disagreements, the scholars spoke about two interconnected sides to neo-avant-gardism. Foster saw the institutionalization and museification of

gained prominence in the 1960s. Below, we will discuss how the neo-avant-gardists interacted with the avant-garde tradition, how they understood its continuation, and what results they ultimately achieved. The neo-avant-garde flourished in the second half of the twentieth century, but even today, neo-avant-garde tendencies can be found in the work of contemporary artists and writers.

One compelling reason to closely examine the neo-avant-garde today is its overshadowing by the Moscow Conceptualism of the 1970s and 80s. In the 1990s and the 2000s, Moscow Conceptualism, while undoubtedly an important and original movement, was often perceived, both in the West and Russia, as the zenith of the entire underground culture. However, a closer look at the experiments of the 1950s and 60s reveals the origins of many Conceptualist breakthroughs during this period. Notable innovators include Vsevolod Nekrasov, who deeply influenced Conceptualist classic Ėrik Bulatov and participated in the Happenings of Collective Actions while critiquing other Conceptualist leaders in the 1990s. Another significant example is Aleksei Khvostenko's oeuvre, which synthesized the neo-avant-gardist experiments of Leningrad and Moscow nonconformists.

Neo-avant-garde is a syncretic experience that blurs the boundaries between the arts, especially between literature and the visual arts. Mikhail Grobman began his career as a poet but gained fame as one of the leading artists of the underground and the third wave of emigration. Aleksei Khvostenko is a poet, artist, theatre director, and songwriter. Ilya Kabakov and Viktor Pivovarov are artists as well as remarkable essayists. The writer Oleg Grigor′ev studied at the school of the Academy of Arts. The poet Vladimir Ufliand was a member of Mikhail Shemiakin's circle in the 1960s and participated in the famous nonconformist exhibition at the Hermitage in 1964. Vsevolod Nekrasov believed that he developed as a poet-concretist under the influence of the paintings of Oskar Rabin and Olga Potapova, who "gave him an eye" (Nekra-

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the avant-garde in the mid-twentieth century as a justification for a renewed radicalization of transgressive artistic experiments (Foster 1984). Bürger, on the other hand, emphasized the Happenings, performances, and actionism of the 1960s as evidence of the remaining avant-gardist focus on praxis over the traditional notion of the artwork (Bürger 1984 and 2010). However, both the rejection of institutionalized forms and the emphasis on praxis became defining features of the neo-avant-garde – not only in the West but also in Soviet underground culture – largely due to the existential foundations of Soviet nonconformism.

sov 2019: 87). He organized the first exhibition of Oskar Rabin and four exhibitions of Oleg Vasil′ev (Rabin 2024).

Syncretism is a manifestation of freedom: freedom of creativity and freedom of life, which were core values of nonconformism. Lola Kantor-Kazovsky, in her abovementioned book on Mikhail Grobman, describes the influence of the 1959 American exhibition on the Moscow underground. She discusses this influence as primarily that of Abstract Expressionism, which was perceived in Moscow as existential freedom, despite its initial liberal political and propaganda message (Kantor-Kazovsky 2022: 25–28). The belief in art as an experience of existential freedom – a fusion of freedom and creativity – was not only an idea that obsessed Grobman and many Moscow artists and writers, but also one shared by their friends and colleagues in Leningrad, such as Joseph Brodsky, Konstantin Kuz′minsky, Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko, and some others. Artistic voluntarism with elements of anarchism, which formed the foundation of Khvostenko's worldview, complemented neo-avant-garde syncretism with the ideals proclaimed by François Rabelais's heroes, frère Jean and the monks of Thélème Abbey.

Neo-avant-garde also inherited avant-garde syncretism: the idols of many characters in this book, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov, were artists by training. Their drawings are valuable not only as autobiographical or illustrative materials, but also as original graphics. Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky are difficult to fully understand in their artistic projects if we overlook the numerous texts they wrote. The neo-avant-garde, which continued the traditions of the avant-garde, is considered in this book precisely as a syncretic experience. One of the book's key figures, Aleksei Khvostenko, was involved, as mentioned above, in poetry, painting, sculpture, drama, theater, performance, and songwriting, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes alternately.

This book offers a portrait of one neo-avant-garde artistic circle, the Helenucts group, which emerged in Leningrad at the height of the Thaw era, in 1966, and disbanded with the end of the liberalization period, in 1970-1971. The Helenucts were among the most radical representatives of the era's Soviet neo-avant-garde. However, neither in the 1960s nor later did this group claim key positions in the art scene. This makes it particularly interesting as an experience of non-metropolitan, non-mainstream creativity, which is now receiving special attention from researchers, critics, and curators. The Helenucts

are marginalized in the plurality of modernities, yet they are equated with internationally renowned writers and artists. The name Helenuct itself was a neologism coined by Vladimir Ėrl′. It refers to the concept of absurdity, a key theme in the nonconformist culture of the 1960s. There will be further discussion of the name in the chapter dedicated to the history of the group.

Like many avant-garde and neo-avant-garde artists, the Helenucts began their artistic careers at a young age – most barely twenty years old. Vladimir Ėrl′ (the pseudonym of Vladimir Gorbunov), a writer and later philologist who prepared the first collections of works by Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedensky in the 1970s and 80s, was the movement's ideologist. The poet Aleksandr Mironov subsequently became an important figure in nonconformist literature. Dm. M. (the pseudonym of Dmitry Makrinov) was the author of many key Helenuctic texts and later became a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. VNE (the pseudonym of Viktor Nemtinov) – a poet and photographer who created a gallery of portraits of underground figures – became a publisher in the post-Soviet era and published the works of many nonconformists, including *Kniga Khelenuktizm* (*The Book Helenuctism;* Ėrl′ 1993). N. F. (the pseudonym of Natalia Fediuchek) was a co-author of Helenucts' texts and, at the time, the wife of Vladimir Ėrl′. Another member of the group, Aleksei Khvostenko, was older than the rest. He joined the group as a writer, artist, and songwriter already known in the nonconformist community and had created the Verpa project together with several like-minded people. The nonconformist neo-avant-garde of the 1960s can hardly be understood without Khvostenko. Khvostenko played a special role as a senior figure, an "honorary member" of the group, as Ėrl′ sometimes referred to him.[16] His experience provided both the foundation and the starting point for Helenuctic experiments.

One must begin with the premise that the group was not an artistic phenomenon with clearly defined boundaries, objectives, or shared aesthetic values, neither during the Thaw nor in the avant-garde era. For more than a decade, historians have discussed Expressionism (Beil/Dillmann 2010; Möller

16 See, for example, Vladimir Ėrl's introductory note to the publication of Aleksei Khvostenko in the typewritten journal *Chasy* (The Clock, 1977, no. 8, https://samizdat.wiki/images/1/15/ЧАСЫ8-11-Хвостенко.pdf). The original typewritten copy is preserved in the Archiv der Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen (Archive of the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen; hereafter, FSO): FSO 01-037/W-030.

2005), Futurism (Hultén 1986), and Surrealism (Bajac/Chéroux 2009; Bürger 1996; Paligot 1995) as artistic movements characterized neither by monolithic unity and consistency nor by the systematic development of aesthetic ideas. The ideas declared by artists, creative approaches, and group affiliations changed frequently, if not constantly, and sometimes significantly. The same can rightly be said of Neo-Dadaism, Fluxus, Pop Art, New Realism, Arte Povera, and subsequent artistic movements. The Soviet nonconformist neo-avant-garde of the 1960s, which lacked the opportunity to officially institutionalize artistic initiatives, was even less inclined to establish boundaries between groups and micro-communities. The underground constituted a sphere that was not divided into isolated zones, even though it was, at the same time, separated from the official art establishment. This fluid environment should therefore be described and understood precisely in terms of its openness and dynamism. A preliminary analysis of Khvostenko's artistic and literary experiments and discoveries will help establish the role of the Helenucts within the nonconformist community and shed light on the potential inherent in neo-avant-garde absurdism – the Helenucts' credo. This will allow us to examine their work and lives at close range. In this case, the group's history cannot be written "from the inside," with a narrow focus on its activities; its history is also the history of the context that made its existence possible.

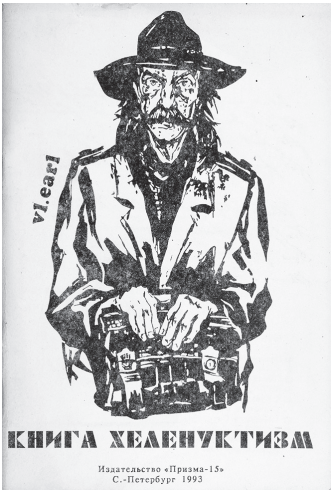


Fig. 4

To carry out this plan, we must first attempt to answer several questions. How can we talk about these Leningrad neo-avant-gardists without confining ourselves to a local context that is little known and poorly understood outside of Leningrad/Petersburg? How can we discuss them without exaggerating their role in the Soviet and international art scene or downplaying the significance of their aesthetic experiments? How can we make the experience of freedom felt by the writers and artists of the Thaw more accessible to us?

Historical Knowledge of the Recent Past

This book explores how a rare period of freedom and peace sparked the neo-avant-garde movement and, in particular, the emergence of the Helenucts. It may seem that we know a lot about this time, which saw the liberalization of the country freed from the Stalinist system, the exploration of space, the development of the virgin lands (*tselina*), new utopian cultural and scientific projects, and a wave of experimentation in art and literature. On the other hand, this period was also marked by the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising, the 1961 economic reform that devalued the population's savings, the trials of dissidents, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which ended the era of 'socialism with a human face'. The 1960s as a master narrative have existed in our consciousness for quite some time. However, the master narrative of the 1960s constructs a very general idea of this era, leveling out many details and significant circumstances. The portrait of one neo-avant-garde group of the 1960s is not created based on conventional ideas about this time and about the nonconformist community to which this group belonged. In some cases, on the contrary, it builds on their critique and provides us with a different, refined understanding of this time. Not much is known about the neo-avant-gardists and the Helenucts in particular, who were not, as stated at the very beginning of this book, typical representatives of the Thaw. Meanwhile, their role in the history of art and literature of the 1960s is extremely significant.

Here it is vital to consider in advance what kind of knowledge about the cultural history of the 1960s is possible today. We are not talking about historical knowledge that can be definitively verified by a fixed corpus of sources, because the Thaw is too recent. Some participants in or witnesses to Khrushchev's liberalization are still alive today. For many, it is part of their family history. The voices of some participants in or eyewitnesses to the events of those

years have not yet been heard. To begin approaching a rigorously verifiable historical knowledge of the 1960s, it is necessary to first establish where we are today in terms of distance from the late Soviet era.

More than twenty years ago I wrote about the underground, with a focus on the 1960s, trying to answer a similar question within the context of that time (Savitskii 2002). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was possible to capture knowledge about the underground in the early post-Soviet period, namely, to identify how its protagonists perceived that era in correlation with different facts and historical materials, in order to avoid mythologizing the late Soviet era and to create a preliminary, plausible, retrospective historical picture. In the early 2000s, the late Soviet times seemed much closer than they do today, but the difference between early capitalist reality and Soviet life, coupled with the certainty that the USSR was forever in the past, made it possible to see some components of the Soviet past more clearly.

Today, the Soviet era is viewed differently. Many memoirs have been published that twenty years ago were not even considered by their authors in their preliminary plans. Numerous egodocuments from that era have been published: diaries, notebooks, letters.[17] Some of these texts were previously unknown not only to modern readers, but also to readers of the samizdat era. Interview books with underground figures or collections of conversations with them record oral testimonies about the 1960s.[18] Dozens of various studies devoted to the culture of the underground have appeared.[19] Meanwhile,

17 The following sources are worth noting: Batshev 2007 and 2017; Bukovskaia 2025; Chertkov 2000; Daniel′ 2012; Filanovskii 2021; Golomshtok 2015; Grobman 2002; Kholin 2020; Khromov 2025; Ė. Kondratov 2005; Krasil′nikov 2024; Likhachev 2006; Losev 2010; Liagachev-Khelgi 2018; Mikhnov-Voitenko 2008; Nazanskii 2011; Nekrasov 2019; Nikolaev 2024; Plavinskii 2006; Pligin 2013; Purishinskaia 2019; Rapoport 2003; Roginskii 2009; Shemiakin 2020; A. Smirnov 2011; L. Sooster 2000; Iu. Sooster 2007; Vierny 2009; Vin′kovetskaia 2008; Vorob′ev 2005; Vorob′ev 2012.

18 See for example: Alekseev 2022; Kizeval′ter 2018; Prigov 2014; Rabin 2024.

19 First and foremost, *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture* (Lipovetsky et al.: 2024) serves as both a monument and homage to Soviet nonconformism. Among its many merits, it provides an extensive bibliography on the history of the underground. The project *Production, Documentation, Intervention: On Unofficial Art in Late Soviet Russophone Culture from the 1960s to the 1980s* (Kukuj/Obermayr 2026) complements the Oxford edition by addressing several key issues in the study of nonconformism. See also: Agamov-Tupitsyn 2009; Andreeva 2012; Bobrinskaia 2012; Degot′ 2002; A. Erofeev 1995; Gerchuk 2008; Golburt/Morse 2025; Günther/Schwartz 2024; Pavlovets 2017; Komaromi 2015; Komaromi/

writers and poets continuing the nonconformist literary tradition – Pavel Arsen′ev, Aleksei Konakov, Aleksandr Zhitenev, Ivan Sokolov – have also appeared on the scene.

Since 2022, the Soviet past has once again become our contemporary reality. The coordinates that define our present align with those of the Soviet era: the geopolitical confrontation between the West and the East has returned to the agenda, Stalinist-era policies are making a comeback, and the media distorts reality with propaganda. The connection to the Soviet period is stronger than ever. The 1960s, along with the broader Soviet era, are not merely historical relics – whether some resent or welcome this fact. Twenty years ago, things were different: the early capitalist time stood in direct opposition to Soviet times. Though it was chronologically close to the Soviet era, it existed outside of it, as if resetting the historical clock. Today, discussing Soviet nonconformism is shaped by a reality that, in many ways, has reverted to a Soviet-like state – at least to the extent that such a return is possible in the contemporary world. A few years ago, it was hard to imagine this could happen. In this sense, speaking about the Soviet experience now means speaking about our time – an idea that may sound both absurd and desperate. To discuss freedom in a heavily regulated and closed Soviet society is, in many respects, to discuss freedom today. A new understanding of the Thaw is necessary – not just to express outrage or despair in the face of the events unfolding before us, but also to articulate hope and dignity.

The current "fusion" of contemporary reality with the Soviet past reminds us that the history of the 1960s remains 'living history', rather than settled verified historical knowledge of the politics, social life, culture, or literature of that era. From a historiographical perspective, rooted in the work of Leopold von Ranke (Ranke 1834–1836; Ranke 1839–1847) and historical studies based on archival sources, the 1960s will remain "living" history for as long as there are generations who are able speak of it – not only from personal experience but from the accounts of older contemporaries. It is also important to recognize that many memoirs, diaries, and letters from that time remain unpublished, and some have yet to be written. It is unclear when this body of egodocuments from the 1960s will finally come to light.

Kuzovkin 2018; Kukui 2022; Kukulin/Smola 2024; Lipovetsky/Smola 2018; M. Tupitsyn 2019; Zolotonosov 2018a.

Even today, a retrospective historical analysis of the 1960s remains valuable. The seminal work of Petr Vail′ and Aleksandr Genis (1988) offered one such perspective. Their study focused on the intelligentsia, particularly those close to the "Soviet common man", a concept further explored in the Levada Center's well-known study *Sovetskii prostoi chelovek: opyt sotsial'nogo portreta na rubezhe 1990-kh* ("The Soviet Common Man: A Social Portrait at the Turn of the 1990s"*;* Levada 1993). However, this book takes a different approach. It explores another kind of protagonist of the Thaw – a neo-avant-garde nonconformist who, in many ways, distanced himself from the generation of the 1960s.

A few words about the genre of this book. The figures at the center of this book are known only to a small circle of specialists and introducing them requires additional explanations and contextualization. This is necessary to immerse the reader in the historical and cultural landscape of the Soviet underground of the 1960s. As a result, most chapters include explanatory digressions, each offering an analysis of a specific subject or issue. To avoid confusion and ambiguity, some repetition is unavoidable. Later in this introductory chapter, we will outline the book's key themes and structure. To ensure that these clarifications do not dilute or oversimplify the material, we take as a model the historical and cultural commentary – an open-ended form akin to a research essay. This approach provides the text with structure and coherence while maintaining analytical depth. The commentary format allows us to introduce readers to the Soviet neo-avant-garde without resorting to simplifications, situating the works of Leningrad and Moscow authors in dialogue with European and American writers and artists.

Moreover, this form has a distinct advantage for studying nonconformism in the Thaw era: it enables a broader understanding than a strictly monographic study, which is often constrained by methodological frameworks. A commentary refines commonly accepted perceptions and brings to light previously overlooked details. For a historical and retrospective study of the recent past, this approach is at least as valuable as applying various discursive strategies to the historical materials of the 1960s. In fact, in this case, commentary proves to be an intellectually productive method – it liberates knowledge by primarily interpreting the uncovered facts. At its highest ideal, commentary is as intellectually rigorous as the finest essays. Commentary functions as a kind of *perpetuum mobile* – a continuous intellectual process that no interpretive challenge can bring to a halt. Consider Pascal's *Pensées*: its fragmented

nature has defied definitive sequencing for centuries, yet this very uncertainty continues to inspire generations of scholars who propose new ways of ordering its parts. The works of scholars such as Daniel Arasse (1997, 2000, 2006), Mikhail Bezrodnyi (2023), and Aby Warburg (1932) offer models for similar interpretive endeavors.

From the very first pages of this book, the protagonists do not appear in the conventional Thaw-era setting shaped by widely shared representations of this period. Instead, they are presented within the reconstructed historical circumstances of their time. A major advantage of our present moment is the ability to examine the 1960s retrospectively, benefiting from an extensive and diverse body of material that has been published over the past two decades. This includes a vast corpus of texts, audio and video recordings, as well as *autocommentaries* – the retrospective reflections of those who participated in these events. These first-hand testimonies, gathered from various sources, are used here as extensively as possible. Bringing together these materials is essential because both the neo-avant-garde and the postmodernism that followed were profoundly intellectual artistic movements. The artists and writers of the 1950s through the 1980s could often analyze and interpret their own work and historical moment as deeply as critics, curators, or historians – and in some cases, even more so. The neo-avant-gardists and postmodernists were capable of articulating their own perspectives on what was unfolding around them. Thus, understanding the neo-avant-garde requires engaging with their *autoconceptualizations* – their own interpretations of their creative practices and historical moment.

Interestingly, even fiction – especially improbable fantasies – sometimes emphasizes the significance of a story when presented in an artistically transformed form. Historical fact is equally likely to appear in both documentary and fictional materials. The classics of modernism confirm this: Viktor Shklovsky, who interweaves fiction and real events in his montage prose, his student Lydia Ginzburg, who employs this technique in her *Notebooks*, or Orson Welles in his documentary about the famous art forger Elmyr de Hori, *F For Fake*. Anna Akhmatova's poetic statistic, which claims that "20% of memoirs are falsified in one way or another"[20], proves untenable in the face of the historical testimony presented in her *Poem without a Hero*.

20 «20% мемуаров так или иначе фальшивки» (Akhmatova 1996: 555).

In addition to these autocommentaries, *egodocuments* – diaries, memoirs, notebooks, letters, and interviews – serve as valuable material for analyzing the socio-cultural practices that sustained the nonconformist community. These documents shed light on the formation of nonconformist identity, the artistic ideology of the absurd, and the distinct aesthetic experiments of the movement, which were deeply rooted in existential experience. This book establishes, with a high degree of reliability, historical facts that were previously uncertain due to a lack of documentation. It also clarifies crucial details that had previously been overlooked.

Ultimately, this work presents a contemporary perspective on the 1960s, offering a preliminary but essential understanding of the Thaw and its nonconformist culture. Even in the mid-2020s, the history of the 1960s remains the history of the *recent* past. This book does not merely introduce readers to the protagonists and eyewitnesses of that era. For some, these pages will reveal familiar figures; for others, they may even reflect their own past. And for some, this history may serve as an inspiration – one that they wish to honor and continue.

Key Subjects

In this study of the neo-avant-garde, we will address several understudied subjects, namely:

- the shift in the development of the nonconformist community in the mid-1960s;
- the interaction between the Moscow and Leningrad art scenes, the resulting formation of a nonconformist identity, and the associated changes in underground life between 1964 and 1965;[21]

21 From the perspective of multiple modernities, Moscow and Leningrad are not capitals of contemporary culture but rather areas distant from cultural centers. For his project *Magiciens de la Terre*, which presented artists largely unknown in London, New York, and Paris, Jean-Hubert Martin chose the Moscow-based Ilya Kabakov rather than a marginal painter from a small Soviet provincial town. Of course, the internal Soviet hierarchy implied a centralized system in which Moscow and Leningrad played leading roles. Nevertheless, this hierarchy was not relevant in the international context.

- the extent and nature of Western (neo)avant-garde influences on the underground;
- the self-representation of nonconformism as a means of overcoming the rupture with pre-revolutionary (pre-Soviet) culture;
- neo-avant-garde absurdism and its existential background.

Below, we will briefly outline these main topics before transitioning into the core study.

The evolution of the underground has yet to be examined sufficiently in terms of its dynamics.[22] Traditionally, it has been described as a system of continuity and succession: the founders of the underground were the Lianozovo school and the Aref'ev circle, who began in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They were succeeded by Leonid Chertkov's circle, the Philological school, and others. This was followed by the emergence of a much larger milieu of nonconformists in the 1960s, and subsequently by the period of Stagnation. While this widely accepted account of the evolution of the nonconformist milieu does not fundamentally contradict historical reality, it can be further refined.

The very fact that the Helenucts represented at least the third generation of young artists and writers who rejected formal career paths in official institutions – such as the Writers' Union or the Artists' Union – is noteworthy. The Helenucts not only continued what their predecessors had initiated but also built upon foundations laid even earlier, at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. With each new generation, nonconformist life became more intense and even competitive. Although the nonconformist community was incomparably smaller than the official system of creative institutions, it existed in a state of increasing creative and existential tension. This intense development of

22 The generally accepted ideas about the formation of nonconformism fail to account for the specific historical events, to the extent that we know little about even such a crucial aspect of the community's history as the struggles and rivalries among its members. For example, how much do we really know about the conflict between Mikhail Shemiakin and Lev Nusberg, who vied for leadership within the nonconformist community (see Vorob'ev 2012: 164–169, 358–360)? Do we have a clear understanding of the disagreement between Joseph Brodsky and Dmitry Bobyshev on one side and Kostantin Kuz'minsky on the other – a dispute triggered by Kuz'minsky's harsh attitude toward Anna Akhmatova, which ultimately led to Brodsky's refusal to publish in Kuz'minsky's and Kovalev's *Anthology of the Modern Russian Poetry at the Blue Lagoon (1980–1986)*? Similarly, the relationship between Brodsky and Leonid Chertkov during the Thaw was notably tense (Chertkov 2000: 7).

the underground led to significant transformations in 1964–65, an important milestone that has remained largely unexplored until now. This book examines these changes in detail.

Recently published diaries, notebooks, letters, and memoirs provide new insights into the interaction between the Moscow and Leningrad art scenes. This relationship is often depicted as one of rivalry or even hostility. While some contacts between Muscovites and Leningraders are relatively well-documented (such as the Helenucts' interactions with the SMOGists, Brodsky's connections with Moscow artists, and the relocation of Evgeny Rein, Anatoly Naiman, Mikhail Eremin, and Andrei Bitov to Moscow, as well as Leonid Chertkov's move to Leningrad), further analysis is necessary to fully understand these exchanges. These facts remain scattered and are rarely considered as factors that affected the underground as a whole. Meanwhile, new artistic ideas and practices emerged as a result of the interaction between the two cities. For Helenucts, the synthesis of Moscow and Leningrad neo-avant-garde is one of the key themes. One of its members, Aleksei Khvostenko, an artist and intellectual who originally belonged to the Leningrad artistic elite, spent a significant amount of time in Moscow, and eventually moved to the capital in 1968. For Muscovites, Khvostenko was very much a Leningrad artist; for Leningraders, he became a capital city intellectual. Khvostenko, who grew up in Leningrad and adopted many motifs and techniques from the poets of the "Lianozovo school" and Moscow Concretists, merged two artistic scenes in his work. He was not the only one to recognize the interaction between them, but he was among the few who actively engaged with it. By synthesizing his Leningrad background with Moscow's neo-avant-garde experiments, he even surpassed Brodsky, Rein, Naiman, and Chertkov, who also attempted to navigate both the Moscow and Leningrad artistic contexts simultaneously. Notably, Khvostenko managed to transfer much of what he had learned in Moscow to the Helenucts. Neo-avant-garde absurdism emerged as a result of this creative interaction.

We still know little about how bright, uncompromising, and experimental the beginning of Khvostenko's poetic and artistic career was, despite the fact that his importance for late Soviet and post-Soviet culture is widely recognized. Until recently, it was not well known that many of his contemporaries, including his older peers, were struck by the artistic discoveries Khvostenko made in the mid-1960s (Brui 2005; Sapgir 1999). For example, he was one



Fig. 5

of the first to depict the marginal, ultra-aesthetic type of personality – fascinated by artistic and existential experiments – who is still recognized today as the quintessential nonconformist. Khvostenko's work entitled *The Suspector* (1965) was an (auto)portrait of the late Soviet nonconformist that anticipated a type that emerged somewhat later. *The Suspector* foreshadowed the hero of the 1970s and 1980s – the so-called "generation of janitors and watchmen". The Helenucts group formed shortly after the creation of *The Suspector*.

The Helenucts were legitimized by *The Suspector* as the new marginalized artists who consciously chose marginalization – new indestructible outsiders, seemingly absurd in all their aspirations from the perspective of Soviet common sense. Absurdism became one of the central values underpinning independent creativity and free life in the USSR. Several chapters of the book are devoted to this theme, describing neo-avant-garde irrationalism as an aesthetic ideology. This concept was effectively employed in Renato Poggioli's now somewhat forgotten book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968), which remains extremely useful for the study of the Soviet neo-avant-garde. The notion of "aesthetic ideology" describes a creative and existential system founded on aesthetic values that are alternative to the generally accepted ones. For this reason alone, such an ideology demands the artist's deep engagement

and involvement.[23] Here, artistic ideas are inextricably linked to biography, which is crucial for understanding the nonconformism of the 1960s. The book by Renato Poggioli will be invaluable to this study. The volume significantly enhances studies on modernist creative life (Paperno/Grossman 1994; Lotman 1975; Schahadat 2004) and helps to distinguish it from neo-avant-garde absurdism, which is based on the conjunction of artistic and existential experience.

The exposure of artists in the 1960s to Western influences, long considered by many to be paramount to the development of the underground, is no longer viewed as such from today's perspective. In her book on Mikhail Grobman, Lola Kantor-Kazovsky convincingly argues that Moscow neo-avant-gardists were inextricably linked to the domestic tradition and were mostly looking for internal self-determination rather than a place on the Paris or New York art scene (Kantor-Kazovsky 2002: 17–25). Abstract Expressionism was not an alien phenomenon in Moscow but was perceived within the Russian artistic context. The Russian avant-garde – both within the Russian/Soviet tradition and in the international context, where it was consistently promoted by Alfred Barr, the first director of the MoMA – helped ensure the self-sufficiency of artistic life in Moscow and Leningrad (ibid.: 172). It is indicative that even third-wave emigrants (Konstantin Kuz′minsky, Aleksandr Putov, Vitaly Statsinsky, Valentin Maria Til′ Samarin), instead of integrating into the American or French system, continued what they had started in the USSR and created artistic communities abroad similar to the Soviet underground. Nonconformists' reception of Dadaism, Surrealism, Edward Estlin Cummings's poems, or the Viennese school of concrete poetry was mediated by their search for internal self-definition. This will also be discussed in the book.

Since the 1960s, representatives of the late Soviet nonconformist community have persistently spoken, and continue to speak today, about the gap between pre-Soviet culture and the neo-avant-garde/neomodernism of the Thaw era. Nonconformists have variously described their experience as starting from scratch, and themselves at the beginning of their creative journey as tabula rasa. Joseph Brodsky (Brodskii 2007: 119): «Мы все пришли

23 In particular, Renato Poggioli wrote: "[…] by ideology I mean the rationalization of these forms, currents, or residues into formulas of logic: their translation into theory, their reduction to programs and manifestos, their hardening into positions or even 'poses'. In fact, an ideology is […] the crystallization of a still fluid and suspended sentimental condition into a behavioral code even before it has crystallized into work or action" (Poggioli 1968: 4).

в литературу Бог знает откуда»[24]. Ilya Kabakov (2008: 169): «Наше […] поколение начинало […] с абсолютного нуля — такое было у всех ощущение. Каждый стартовал со своей кочки в поле, но такой маленькой, что она была почти не видна. […] старт начинался с ровного, чистого листа»[25]. Viktor Krivulin (1998: 42): «[…] если совсем откровенно — так не было учителей / племя преподавателей с палками и камнями»[26].

There are many other similar testimonies.[27]

Certainly, the pre-revolutionary avant-garde and modernist traditions were marginalized by Soviet official culture and existed primarily as nonprofessional or private creativity, but does this imply their disappearance? The statements of the nonconformists undoubtedly convey their sense of self adequately. However, it is difficult to deny the fact that the rhetoric of rupture with tradition developed simultaneously with intensive interaction with representatives of that very tradition, a phenomenon not common in all historical epochs. In late Soviet times, older contemporaries – poets, artists, and intellectuals who belonged to the non-Soviet avant-garde/modernist tradition – were particularly valued. Joseph Brodsky and the poets of his circle had the

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24 "We all came to literature from God knows where."

25 "Our […] generation started […] from absolute zero – that was how everyone felt. Everyone started out from his own little hummock in the field, but such a tiny hummock that it was almost invisible. […] the race began from an even blank sheet."

26 "To be perfectly honest, there were no guides – only a tribe of teachers armed with sticks and stones." Cf. Betaki 2010.

27 Boris Ivanov, a leader of the Leningrad underground and one of the founders of the samizdat magazine *Chasy* (The Clock), described this experience in an article about one of the first samizdat publishers, Boris Taigin, as follows: «[…] то, что Грачев назовет „значащим отсутствием", в которое войдут и безотцовщина, и многое, многое другое: не было ни „интеллигенции", ни дееспособного „общества", ни „настоящей литературы", без которой обществу невозможно осознать самого себя. Позднее Виктор Кривулин обнаружит тот же трагический разрыв […]» (Ivanov 2008; "[…] what <Rid> Grachev would call the 'meaningful absence', which would include fatherlessness and much, much more: there was no 'intelligentsia', no functioning 'society', and no 'real literature', without which it is impossible for society to realize itself. Viktor Krivulin would later discover the same tragic rupture […]"). Brodsky, Kabakov, Krivulin, and Ivanov are echoed by the physicist Boris Filanovsky, a friend of Khvostenko's: «[…] мы жили в середине (а скорее и ближе к концу) большого ледникового периода. Когда начали размораживаться лексические открытия поэтов 1920-х и 1930-х годов» (Filanovskii 2021; "[…] we lived in the middle (or rather near the end) of the Great Ice Age. When the lexical discoveries of the poets of the 1920s and 1930s began to unfreeze"). See also Valentin Vorob′ev's autobiography (2005).

opportunity to communicate regularly with Anna Akhmatova, and all of them deeply valued their friendship with her.[28] By the way, Brodsky's family history also calls into question his claim that he "came to literature from nowhere": his grandfather owned a printing house in St. Petersburg, his mother was a military translator, and his father was a photo reporter and journalist. Another underground leader, Aleksei Khvostenko, was the son of Lev Khvostenko, a renowned translator and one of the founders of Leningrad's first English school no. 213, which was opened after the war to educate the Soviet elite. (In addition to future KGB officers and diplomats, it produced writers Konstantin Kuz′minsky, Yury Mikhailov, and Andrei Bitov.)[29] Of course, not all

28 Evgeny Rein, in his memoir *Mne skuchno bez Dovlatova* ("I Am Bored without Dovlatov"; Rein 1997), also speaks about his acquaintance with Boris Pasternak and his interactions with the poets of the older generation: Vladimir Lugovskoi, Ilya Sel′vinsky, and Nikolai Tikhonov.

29 Marius Pluzhnikov, a graduate of School 213 and later a famous physician, recalled Lev Khvostenko as an outstanding personality: «Он был […] огромного, почти гигантского роста, с черными-черными прямыми и длинными волосами, довольно бледной кожей и в коричневом костюме (тогда все ходили в костюмах цвета пыльной панели). Он, любезно улыбаясь, заговорил с Анной Федоровной <Исаковой, учительницей> на неизвестном языке <английский был родным языком Л. Хвостенко, поэтому ленинградскому школьнику было непонятно его произношение>, а потом обратился к нам, медленно и четко произнося каждое слово […]. Увидев испуганное молчание, он что-то сказал Анне Федоровне, и та по-русски пояснила, что Лев Васильевич споет для нас английскую детскую песенку. Мы не успели удивиться, как этот огромный мужчина необычного вида довольно тонким голосом вдруг запел: 'Jack and Gill went up the hill […]'. Страх наш сразу куда-то пропал, все заерзали на партах и одобрительно зашумели, и кто-то из наших, по предложению Анны Федоровны, прочитал стихотворение 'The coach is at the door at last', которое мы […] учили чуть ли не четыре месяца. Лев Васильевич нас похвалил […] Тогда впервые у меня возникло особое состояние души, которое бывает, когда сталкиваешься с большим талантом, и это соприкосновение тебя самого почему-то делает богаче, умнее и, казалось бы, талантливее […]» (Glushkov 2006: 305–306; "He was […] of huge height, almost gigantic, with black-black straight and long hair, rather pale skin, and wearing a brown suit (at that time, everyone wore suits the color of dusty paneling). He, smiling kindly, spoke to Anna Fedorovna <Isakova, the teacher> in an unknown language <English was Lev Khvostenko's native language, and hence the Leningrad schoolboy could not understand his pronunciation>, and then addressed us, pronouncing each word slowly and clearly […]. Seeing the frightened silence, he said something to Anna Fedorovna, and she explained in Russian that Lev Vasil′evich would sing an English children's song for us. We had no time to be surprised when this huge man of unusual appearance suddenly sang in a rather thin voice: 'Jack and Jill went up the hill […]'. Our fear disappeared at once; everyone fidgeted at their desks and murmured approvingly. One of us, at Anna Fedorovna's suggestion, recited the poem 'The coach is at the door at last…', which we […] had been studying for almost four months. Lev

nonconformists came from intellectual families. Ilya Kabakov or Boris Ivanov, who were particularly concerned about the gap between pre-revolutionary and neo-avant-garde culture, came from humble backgrounds. But cultural continuity was not solely ensured by family ties.

During the 1960s, many artistic circles formed around the older-generation modernists and avant-gardists, such as Nikolai Aseev, Lydia Ginzburg, David Dar, Kirill Kostsinsky, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Ivan Likhachev, Vladimir Favorsky, Robert Fal′k, and Nikolai Khardzhiev, among others. Kabakov himself emphasized that he and his colleague Ülo Sooster, with whom he once shared a studio, were inspired in the 1960s by exhibitions at the Mayakovsky Museum, such as Malevich's exhibition (Kabakov 2008: 27). Viktor Krivulin studied at the Leningrad University (Faculty of Philology) and was taught by scholars such as the literary critic Dmitry Maksimov, who had first-hand knowledge of Aleksandr Blok, the Futurists, Daniil Kharms, or the Formalists. Connections to tradition were abundant. The artist Vladimir Yankilevsky recalled that in the house of George Kostakis, a collector of twentieth century Russian art, one could see works by Russian avant-gardists: «[…] это был настоящий музей для нас. На самом деле первый авангард я увидел в первый раз у него по-настоящему, ни в одном музее России он не был так представлен. Многие имена я там впервые открыл, Никритина, например» (Alekseev 2022: 438).[30]

The thirst to continue the avant-garde tradition was as strong as ever. Talk of rupture primarily reflected a strong desire to engage with and continue the avant-garde line in artistic practice. By the mid-1960s, young people in the nonconformist circle could already learn not only from avant-garde figures, but also from their older contemporaries – Genrikh Sapgir, Igor′ Kholin, Yan Satunovsky, and others. In this respect, the neo-avant-gardists differed from

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Vasil′evich praised us […]. Then, for the first time, I had a special state of mind, the kind that happens when you encounter great talent, and this contact somehow makes you richer, smarter, and, it would seem, more talented […]"). This collection details the unique curriculum developed specifically for this school and its remarkable teachers. The famous actor Nikolai Cherkasov took an active part in the founding of the school. There was a similar elite English school in Moscow, where poet Stanislav Krasovitsky studied.

30 "[…] it was a real museum for us. In fact, I first saw avant-garde art in its true form at his place; no other museum in Russia presented it in such a way. I discovered many names there for the first time, <Solomon> Nikritin, for example".

the Futurists, who rejected their predecessors and denied them a place on the "steamship of modernity". For the Futurists, modernity was symbolized by a steamboat – a technological marvel of the early twentieth century – from which it was high time to throw those who had arrived late to the feast of modernity. By contrast, the 1950s and 60s were better represented by the image of an ark of salvation or a workshop where new creations emerge from the surviving wreckage. Unlike the modernist movements of Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Imaginism, the neo-avant-garde did not deny the experience of its predecessors, nor did it challenge older contemporaries or assert itself solely by opposing the establishment or established artists and writers. Instead, it lived through risky innovations.

Several key factors contributed to both the rhetoric of rupture and the intentional link to tradition. First, they pointed to the lack of institutionalization of art circles, which, with few exceptions, existed privately or as an amateur artistic community. Second, the nonconformists' lack of engagement in Soviet society radicalized their artistic projects, at least socially. Their work was carried out outside the official system of creative unions (artists, writers, etc.) and in defiance of the authorities. Third, the restoration and archiving of pre-Soviet literature and art as an independent aesthetic experiment – without institutionalization – became a neo-modernist innovation or a neo-avant-garde experience that carried existential risks. Nonconformism was constructed as an alternative to officialdom, following the lines of modernist movements, which sought either to contradict the establishment or to maintain an angle of nonconformity with conventional notions of the writer's or artist's vocation (Andreeva 2012).

The Helenucts were consistent neo-avant-gardists in this respect. They were fascinated by the works of Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, and OBERIU. The fact that the generations before them – such as Genrikh Sapgir and Valentin Khromov, followed by Vladimir Piatnitsky and Aleksei Khvostenko – had been similarly drawn to these authors, allowed the Helenucts to build upon their predecessors' experiences and make their taste for the absurd one of the foundations of neo-avant-garde absurdism. This nonconformist aesthetics of absurdity – an existentially mediated art of the absurd and incongruous – will be explored in this book.

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Before I begin my research on the emergence of absurdism in the nonconformist neo-avant-garde, I would like to warmly thank my colleagues and friends who helped me with this book.

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Note on Transliteration

The body of this volume employs a modified version of the Library of Congress (LoC) transliteration system. For the sake of readability, certain adjustments have been made: personal names ending in *-ii* are rendered as *-y* (e.g., *Evgeny Kropivnitsky* instead of *Evgenii Kropivnitskii*). Similarly, endings in *-iia* have been simplified to *-ia* (e.g., *Natalia, Izvestia*), and *-aia* has been regularized as *-aya* (e.g., *Vin'kovetskaya, Pushkinskaya ulitsa*). Such names as *Il'ia, Lidiia,* and *Tat'iana* have been unified as *Ilya, Lydia,* and *Tatiana*. Names and titles beginning with *Ia-* or *Iu-* (such as *Iurii* and *Iunost'*) are represented as *Yury* and *Yunost'*. Where an established English equivalent exists, standard forms are used (e.g., *Joseph Brodsky*). Bibliographic references adhere strictly to the standard LoC transliteration system, without the use of diacritics.

CHAPTER 1

"Let Those Things Begin Which Have Not Yet Begun"

The Contemporary as Renewal

The 1960s began with great hopes. Stalin's era was a thing of the past, and freedom had arrived. To many, it seemed like the beginning of a new path – an era of creative innovation and the discovery of new poetry. Vsevolod Nekrasov, one of the most striking poets of the Thaw and the founder of Russian Concretism, recalled this time in the 1990s as follows:

> […] в каждом авторе подозревались черты какой-то новой абсолютно поэзии. Дело не только в фигуре, в поэте, а дело в другой поэзии, черты которой вытаскивались, выуживались, выцарапывались из рутины. Это было общее дело, поэтому оно было такое бескорыстное и безотносительное к личности людей, к которым могли быть претензии. […] Переход от смерти к жизни! […] Все, что касалось искусства, было очень актуально и очень интересовало. Интересовала смена форм и то, что называлось «модернизм»: искусство должно было быть современным. «Современное» — вообще было волшебное слово, шантажное, опасное. […] было необходимо, чтобы искусство было другое: не такое, как ты знал, не такое, как ты видел.
> (Nekrasov 2019: 80, 82)

> […] every author might be hiding features of some entirely new kind of poetry. It wasn't just about the individual figure, a poet – it was about this different kind of poetry, whose features were being dragged, fished out, scratched out of everyday routine existence. This was a collective undertaking, which is why it was so selfless and impersonal, regardless of who might have been subject to criticism. […] It was a transition from death to life! […] Everything related to art felt urgent and deeply engaging. What mattered was the shifting of forms and what was called "modernism": art had to be contemporary. "Contemporary" was really a magical word – both compelling and dangerous. […] Art had to be different: not what you already knew, not what you had seen before.

Vsevolod Nekrasov's sentiments are echoed by the artist Vladimir Nemukhin, another iconic figure of the underground: «Такое было обновленческое состояние, все новое мы встречали с радостью. Нового ждали в период оттепели, где-то в пятидесятых, раньше этого ни у кого из нашего

поколения не было» (ibid.: 275).[31] There is a distinction between the kind of artistic relevance that Nekrasov speaks of – one that offers an alternative artistic experience – and the positive political and cultural changes that Nemukhin describes. The Thaw reveals that newness comes in different forms, teaching us how to distinguish between them. It is precisely this distinction – exemplified by the Helenucts group – that is the subject of this book. One of its goals is to study the specific neo-avant-garde experiments of the Helenucts group and to describe how they related to other innovations or discoveries in the cultural history of the Thaw.

The neo-avant-garde may not be comparable in scale to the major events of this epoch – the liberalization of the country and the discovery of space – but by nature, it is innovative and stands alongside many other known (and unknown) inventions and discoveries. The neo-avant-garde was not a return to, repetition of, reconstruction of, or archiving of the avant-garde, as it is sometimes portrayed. In the 1950s and 1960s, the avant-garde was reworked and transformed into a new, contemporary artistic experience. It served as the foundation for the radical changes that began to take place in 1964–65 in the artistic life of Moscow and Leningrad.

The historian Arnaldo Momigliano, in *The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography*, reflected on the invention of historical knowledge captured in writing (Momigliano 1966: 127–142). Herodotus was unique, even though other thinkers and speculative experiences may have influenced the emergence of his invention. Moreover, as Momigliano points out, Herodotus was recognized as the "father of history" not by his contemporaries – who were often critical of his writings – but by later generations of readers and admirers in the modern era. Even in retrospect, an innovation remains nevertheless a unique experience and a unique event. In any case, "there was no Herodotus before Herodotus" – a phrase that serves as one of the epigraphs to this book.

The neo-avant-gardists were also unique, even if few among them became world-famous figures like Herodotus. They were not inventors in the sense of creating discoveries that changed the world, but they were still innovators. For many of them, recognition did not come immediately.

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31 "There was a sense of renewal – we welcomed everything new with joy. During the Thaw, somewhere in the fifties, new things were anticipated in a way that no one of our generation had experienced before."

What exactly were the innovations that these representatives of the underground were so passionate about?

Neo-Avant-Garde Eclecticism

At the beginning of the Thaw, which contemporaries experienced as a turning point, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Vladimir Nemukhin, and many other nonconformists saw as new what had recently been semi-banned: Symbolism, Acmeism, the avant-garde, and contemporary Western art movements. Daniil Kharms and Aleksei Kruchenykh, Paul Cézanne and Kazimir Malevich, the Viennese Concretists and Jackson Pollock became their core influences. The experience of pre-Soviet and early Soviet modernism and the international avant-garde was intensively reworked by the first generations of the underground.

The innovation-oriented 1960s were initially characterized by a kind of neo-avant-garde/neo-modernist eclecticism, typical of the work of the artist Yury Vasil′ev-Mon, for example. From the late 1950s, he was one of the key figures of the Moscow art scene, although later, unfortunately, he remained in the shadow of his friends, the stars of the Thaw: the poets Bella Akhmadullina and Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, and the bard Bulat Okudzhava. Vasil′ev-Mon did much for the formation of modern art of the 1950s and 60s in the USSR. He was also in demand as a restorer and theater artist.[32] Ernst Neizvestny writes of him thus: «Он, именно он и никто другой первый, еще в страшные сталинские времена, начал изучать русский и западный авангард. Это он своей веселой свободой лечил многих от летаргии соцреализма. Щедрый коллекционер с широким русским размахом и кистью в руках».[33]

32 In particular, he participated in the restoration of Aleksandr Pushkin's tombstone and grave cross at the Svyatogorsky Monastery and designed the theater performances of Yury Liubimov and Anatoly Efros. It was Yury Vasil′ev-Mon who removed the posthumous mask of Vladimir Vysotsky. *Don Quixote* by Vasil′ev-Mon is held in the collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery.

33 "He – it was he and no one else first – even in the terrible Stalinist times, began to study the Russian and Western avant-garde. It was he who, with his cheerful freedom, cured many from the lethargy of Socialist Realism. A generous art collector with a broad Russian scope and a brush in his hands." (http://www.artlib.ru/index.php?id=15&idp=60&fp=2&uid=7216&iid=86454&idg=0&user_serie=0, 22.04.2025).

The famous sculptor explains why the artist is here described as an art collector, using it as the highest praise: «Он <Васильев-Мон> любил шутить: „Я сумасшедший коллекционер, а поскольку у меня нет денег, если мне захочется Пикассо — я нарисую Пикассо, захочется Магритт<а> — нарисую Магритт<а>. У меня никогда не будет недостатка в Малевиче или Кандинском“» (ibid.).[34]

The reproduction of artistic experiments of the early twentieth century and their assimilation created the basis for the further development of the neo-avant-garde. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, a close friend of Vasil′ev-Mon, accurately formulated the significance of his work:

> […] каждый новый открытый им иностранный художник словно бы преломлялся в его творчестве. Он «перебаливал» всеми болезнями и переваривал […] все влияния, которые были в мире на тот момент. Его картины — это антология всех новых западных веяний. Но это не подражание, не копировка, он пропускает глубокие мысли и новые идеи сквозь свою, русскую душу. Сюрреализм, кубизм, супрематизм, абстракция, невероятный по мощи реализм. Владел всеми техниками, вплоть до ташизма.
> (Ibid.)

> […] each new foreign artist discovered by him seemed to be refracted in his work. He "suffered" through every disease and took in […] all the influences that were in the world at that moment. His paintings are an anthology of all the new Western trends. But this is not imitation, not copying – he lets deep thoughts and new ideas pass through his own Russian soul. Surrealism, Cubism, Suprematism, Abstract Art – an incredible realism in power. He mastered all techniques, up to Tachism.

The Vasil′ev-Mon generation continued the artistic experiments that had been interrupted by Socialist Realism, reliving in just a few years the artistic experience of the avant-garde, which had been under a tacit ban since the late 1920s.

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34 "He <Vasil′ev-Mon> liked to joke: 'I am a crazy art collector, and since I have no money, if I want a Picasso – I will paint a Picasso, if I want a Magritte – I will paint a Magritte. I will never have a shortage of Malevich or Kandinsky."

By returning to a tradition that was marginal at the time, this generation made the development of the neo-avant-garde possible. One of the major cultural highlights of the Thaw, Bulat Okudzhava's song "Painters, dip your brushes" (1959), reflects the expectation of a new art born from the synthesis of early twentieth-century art. The song is dedicated to Yury Vasilyev-Mon:

Живописцы, окуните ваши кисти
в суету дворов арбатских и в зарю,
чтобы были ваши кисти словно листья.
Словно листья, словно листья к ноябрю.

[…] Мостовая пусть качнется, как очнется!
Пусть начнется, что еще не началось!
Вы рисуйте, вы рисуйте, вам зачтется…
Что гадать нам: удалось — не удалось?

Вы, как судьи, нарисуйте наши судьбы,
наше лето, нашу зиму и весну…
Ничего, что мы — чужие. Вы рисуйте!
Я потом, что непонятно, объясню.
(Okudzhava 2001: 178)

Painters, painters, oh come and dip your brushes
in the bustle of the Arbat courtyards and in the dawn,
make it so your brushes are like tree-leaves.
Like tree-leaves, like leaves when it's November.

[…] Let the pavement rock beneath us as it wakes up!
Let those things begin which have not yet begun!
Go on painting, go on painting, you'll get credit.
Why should we guess what worked out in the end.

You, like judges: paint our fates for us, our futures,
paint our summers, paint our winters, and our springs…
It's all right that we are strangers. Go on painting!
And later on I will explain you what isn't clear.

This cityscape, reviving postcard views of the old Arbat, portrays the freedom-loving generation of the Thaw as its defiant and willful inhabitants. The heroes are depicted against the richly hued backdrop of the Arbat (the brushes are "like leaves when it's November"). The image leans toward a primitivist style, distorting the laws of perspective and mimetic representation ("Let the pavement rock beneath us as it wakes up"). This painting does not follow academic rules; its visual language is accessible to those familiar with modernist art. At the same time, it remains realistic as a depiction of beloved places in Moscow and their distinctive inhabitants ("paint our fates for us, paint our summers, paint our winters, and our springs"). This poetic ekphrasis captures the hopes that the neo-avant-gardists embraced, along with their creative potential.

Vasil′ev-Mon, Okudzhava, and their admirers longed for artistic innovation. From this remarkable text we can infer – at least approximately – the intended pictorial style. Apparently, it was something akin to lyrical Neo-Expressionism, synthesizing Fauvism, Expressionism, Futurism, and modernist primitivism. Such eclecticism was indeed characteristic of Vasil′ev-Mon's painting. Clearly, Abstract Expressionism was not the intended reference here. Okudzhava's taste aligned more closely with the early avant-garde, in contrast to Khvostenko's artistic preferences. Okudzhava and Khvostenko knew each other, and both songwriters may have participated in a concert in Tarusa during the summer of 1961, which coincided with the famous nonconformist exhibition (Vorob′ev 2005: 192).

Neo-avant-garde eclecticism was one of the defining artistic experiences of the early Thaw – a period of intense and heterogeneous aesthetic development.[35] The reworking of the avant-garde legacy laid the groundwork for the emergence of the neo-avant-garde in the mid- and late 1960s. The cultural

35 Ilya Kabakov discusses the neo-avant-garde eclecticism of the 1960s in his "Apologiia personalizma" ("Apology of Personalism"): «У нас же все смешано в каких-то диких неритмических циклах, все забыто, порвано и связано заново; еще Пушкин говорил: „и устарела новизна, и новым бредит старина". Вот это взаимопроникновение всего во все, этот пыльный смог из всего — и есть главное ощущение» (Kabakov 2008: 316; "We have everything mixed up in some wild non-rhythmic cycles, everything is forgotten, torn up, and connected anew. As Pushkin once said, 'And the newness is obsolete, and the old is raving about the new'. This interpenetration of everything into everything, this dusty smog of everything, is the main feeling"). The quotation from *Eugene Onegin* emphasizes the tension created by an intense engagement with tradition, which distinguished neo-avant-garde

chronicle of the Khrushchev period, compiled by Georgy Kizeval′ter (2018), along with personal testimonies from Thaw-era intellectuals provides valuable insights into this transformative period. Using these sources, let us outline the most significant events of the time.

The Genesis of the Neo-Avant-Garde

The Thaw, on one hand, granted freedoms that had been unimaginable during Stalin's era. However, these same years saw the suppression of the Hungarian uprising, political trials of artists, and persecution of dissidents. As Georgy Kizeval′ter rightly points out, there were two opposing vectors of development at that time: liberal modernization and increased control. This duality created a period of contradictions and intermixing. A contemporary art exhibition in Moscow was followed by the trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel′, who had published their works abroad without the approval of Soviet authorities, as required by law. The authorities authorized the publication of Anna Akhmatova's works and even permitted her to go on trips to Italy and England, while simultaneously initiating the trial of Joseph Brodsky (Akhmatova 1996: 588, 636–637). Sergei Chuprinin, in his monumental study of Thaw-era literature, describes this oscillation between liberalization and repression.[36]

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vital eclecticism from postmodernism, which prioritizes reflexivity, skepticism, and playful interaction with tradition.

36 Chuprinin 2022a; Chuprinin 2022b. The playwright and writer Aleksandr Gladkov, the author of the interesting book on Boris Pasternak and a friend of Nadezhda Mandelstam's, describes this time in a similar way in his diary: «Непонятное, темно-серое время. Все в противоречиях. Ничего нельзя и все можно» ("An incomprehensible, dark gray time. Everything is full of contradictions. Nothing is impossible, and everything is possible"; Gladkov 1966 (9 March). On 15 September 1965, Gladkov learns that Andrei Sinyavsky has been arrested and writes: «[…] еще молодой, но очень солидно выдвигающийся критик, автор предисловия к новому однотомнику Пастернака, эрудированный, тонкий, добросовестный и принципиальный человек. […] Я с ним не был знаком. […]. В начале месяца будто бы было пересмотрено дело Бродского и он освобожден, но не реабелитирован <sic!>, а весь отбытый срок ему зачтен за весь срок наказания. Вот два резко противоположных факта» (ibid.; "[…] still a young but already well-established critic, author of the preface to a new one-volume edition of Pasternak's works, an erudite, subtle, conscientious, and principled man. […] I was not personally acquainted with him. […] At the beginning of the month, it seems that Brodsky's case was reviewed: he was released but not rehabilitated, and the time he had served was credited toward his full sentence. These are two sharply contrasting events"; Gladkov 2014/3).

In such an unstable environment, where political dynamics resembled the swing of a pendulum, even members of the establishment struggled to find their bearings. Confusion during this period was not limited to the general public but also affected representatives of the Soviet elite. The writer Kornei Chukovsky caustically recounts a comical episode involving the publication of the scandalous novel *Tlia* ("Aphid") by the Stalinist writer Ivan Shevtsov (Shevtsov 1964). Misjudging the ever-changing political climate, Shevtsov launched an untimely and harsh critique of the avant-garde artists. However, after the dismissal of Khrushchev in 1964, the Soviet authorities maintained their liberal position, and critics quickly turned against the novel, condemning it. This incident would have remained an ordinary episode in Soviet literary history had it not been for the controversy surrounding the novel's preface. The book was published with a glowing introductory article by the influential Soviet painter Aleksandr Laktionov, a member of the USSR Academy of Arts. However, after *Tlia* faced harsh criticism, Aleksandr Laktionov, eager to avoid trouble, attempted to align himself with the prevailing view by publishing a penitential letter in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*:

> Я не читал роман, когда подписывал предисловие к нему, заранее заготовленное автором романа, проявив тем самым, мягко говоря, неосторожность. Разрешите через вашу газету выразить мое искреннее сожаление о случившемся. Сейчас, прочитав роман, я вижу, как жестоко искажен в нем высокий смысл жизни искусства и служения ему. Я считаю своим долгом сообщить читателям, что полностью согласен с критической оценкой, выраженной этому «произведению» в печати.
> (*Literaturnaia Gazeta*. 17 December 1964, 149, 3)

> I did not read the novel before I was signing the preface, which had been prepared in advance by the author. In doing so, I demonstrated, to put it mildly, poor judgment. I would like to use your newspaper to express my sincere regret for this mistake. Now, having read the novel, I see how deeply it distorts the true meaning of the artistic life and dedication to the arts. I feel it is my duty to inform readers that I fully support the critical assessment of this "work" expressed in the press.

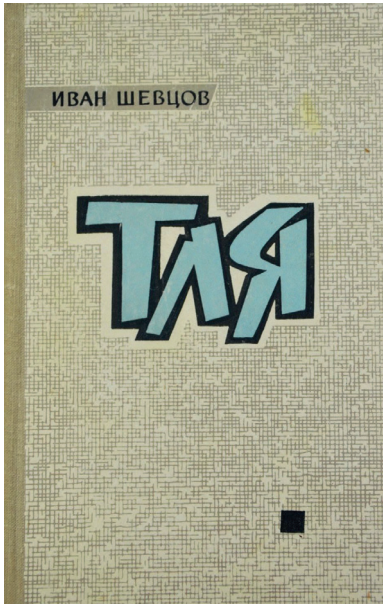
Kornei Chukovsky wryly comments on this episode of public repentance, reminiscent of forced public confessions of the 1930s, as an example of the era's disregard for basic principles of decency:

> Все хохочут над дураком — Лактионовым, который написал предисловие к роману «Тля». […] Лактионов, желая оправдаться, публично заявил (письмом в редакцию «Лит. Газеты»), что
> 1. романа он не читал,
> 2. не читал и своего предисловия, так как это предисловие в порядке саморекламы сочинил сам автор «Тли».
> То есть сам о себе заявил, что он шулер, причем думает, что здесь — оправдание.
> (Chukovskii 2007: 400)

> Everyone is laughing at the fool – Laktionov, who wrote the preface to the novel *Tlia* (*Aphid*). […] Laktionov, wishing to justify himself, publicly stated (in a letter to the editorial board of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*) that
> 1. he has not read the novel,
> 2. he had not read his preface either, as this preface was written by the author of *Тля* ("Aphid") himself as a form of self-promotion.
> In other words, he declared himself to be a fraud, yet he believes this to be a valid excuse.

The Stalinist-era establishment felt deeply insecure during the Thaw. In contrast, nonconformists, who were indifferent to political trends, were consistent in their views. Their beliefs left little room for ambiguity. For a time, Boris Ivanov or Yury Vasil′ev-Mon harbored hopes that Socialist Realism would soon be set aside, allowing them to officially pursue neo-modernist or neo-avant-garde work. These hopes developed gradually. After Stalin's death, during Malenkov's tenure, such aspirations were unthinkable. Avant-garde and modernist exhibitions remained rare. In October 1954, Moscow hosted a retrospective of the sculptor Sergei Konenkov, who had returned home after the years of emigration – thanks in part to his wife Margarita Vorontsova (Konenkova), who worked for Soviet intelligence (Sudoplatov 1996: 291–294). That summer of 1954, an exhibition of the avant-garde sculptor Stepan Erzya was also held in Moscow (Kizeval′ter 2018: 294). Meanwhile, in Leningrad, the sec-

ond floor of the Hermitage displayed about thirty works by Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. According to Helen Gordon-Lazareff, founder of *ELLE* magazine and a first-wave émigré who visited the USSR in 1954, these works offered rare glimpses into modern Western art (Lazareff/Gordon-Lazareff 1955: 111).



Fig, 6

Just a couple of years later, at the onset of the Thaw, the situation changed drastically. By 1956, Moscow was abuzz with discussion about the Pablo Picasso exhibition – an event that would leave a lasting imprint. The artist Vladimir Slepian, who later emigrated from the USSR (1959) – first to Poland, then to France – spoke of the profound influence Picasso had on his work (Kizeval′ter 2018: 131–133). The sculptor Vadim Sidur also admitted that he was deeply moved by the French artist's works (Volovnikov 2007: 18). Mikhail German, an art historian specializing in French art, remained an ardent admirer of Picasso throughout his life, though the Parisian avant-garde scene fascinated him as a whole. The poet Savely Grinberg, inspired by the 1956 exhibition, played on words in his poem "Rifmoulovitel′ na vystavke Pablo Pikasso 1956 goda" ("The Rhyme Receiver at the 1956 Pablo Picasso Exhibition"): "Both life is Picassa / And living is Picasso" (ibid.: 67).[37] The Leningrad Picasso exhibition, which followed the Moscow show, provoked spontaneous discussions in front of the Russian Museum in Arts Square. Despite lasting just over two weeks, it left an indelible mark on the city's cultural landscape (ibid.: 77–84).

Another event that seemed unbelievable at the time, but was nevertheless held, was the American Exhibition of 1959 (Kizeval′ter 2018: 143; Chernyshov

37 «И жизнь Пикасса / И жить Пикассо» — the paraphrase of Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem *Khorosho!* (*All Right!*, 1927): «и жизнь хороша, / и жить хорошо!».

1988; Chunikhin 2025: 135–167). Mikhail Chernyshov's artistic style was profoundly influenced by the works shown there, although, in his memoirs *Moskva. 1961–1967* ("Moscow. 1961–1967"), he later placed French abstraction above American abstraction.[38] The works of Jean Fautrier, Pierre Tal Coat and Charles Lapicque, exhibited two years later, in 1961, at the French National Exhibition in Moscow, resonated with him more than the canvases of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. The nonconformists would spend entire days at the French exhibition, not only viewing the artwork but also listening to the music of Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen (ibid.: 23–25). Other significant exhibition projects of the Thaw included *French Painting from the Collection of the Louvre and Other Museums of France* at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in 1956 (Kizeval'ter 2018: 299), an exhibition of artists from the People's Democracies in 1958 (ibid.: 406), and a display of works by Nicholas Roerich (ibid.: 145–146). Interest in non-Soviet art and culture was so high that the Czech glass exhibition, featuring numerous examples of modernist art and craft, attracted 1.5 million visitors (ibid.: 295). To put this into perspective: usual attendance for a blockbuster temporary exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris today typically reaches 300,000–400,000 visitors (Pompidou 2026).

In addition to exhibitions and festivals, artists and intellectuals could access information on the avant-garde and contemporary art at the Library of Foreign Literature ("Inostranka") – at the time, the best collection of books and periodicals on Western culture in the country. For the artistic milieu, it held greater significance than the Lenin Library, whose smoking room served as the most fashionable intellectual club in Moscow. Mikhail Chernyshov, who had been reading literature on modernist art at the Library of Foreign Literature since high school, impressed even foreign experts well versed in this subject with the depth of his knowledge (Chernyshov 1988; Sjeklocha/Mead 1967: 113-117). The desire to engage with what had long been semi-prohibited – and became accessible with the beginning of the Thaw – was stronger than ever. This led to the emergence of figures like Mikhail Chernyshov and Leonid Chertkov, who possessed a deep knowledge of literary history, particularly of the early twentieth century, extending even to the forgotten figures of the third and fourth ranks. Many intellectuals of the Thaw embodied the role of

38 https://alexvadim.livejournal.com/84211.html (15.06.2026).

collectors of the avant-garde and archivists of modernism. Notable examples include Boris Taigin, one of the founders of samizdat; Konstantin Kuz′minsky and Grigory Kovalev, who compiled the anthology of *The Blue Lagoon*, featuring contemporary Russian poetry and art; and art collectors George Kostakis and Leonid Talochkin, who built collections of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde works. Vladimir Ėrl′, the ideologue of Helenuctism, stands alongside these remarkable intellectuals. The role of the archivist will be explored in more detail in Chapter 9.

The neo-avant-gardists' return to tradition was neither a curated project nor a process unfolding according to a predetermined framework. The freedom of the Thaw followed no strict sequence or system. Spontaneous anarchism, which developed outside any structured ideological framework, was the result of a period of radical change – one that did not fit into any established concept of democracy.

The Formation of the Underground in 1964–65

A certain order in this situation was established through the interaction of nonconformists with repressive official institutions – or through their ability to avoid contact with them altogether. Many of the protagonists of this book insisted on their independence from state-sanctioned socio-cultural systems, yet their opposition remained inextricably linked to officialdom. The underground was in a risky symbiotic relationship with the system of control and regulations imposed by the authorities.

As events unfolded, the cultural policy and political climate of the USSR offered diminishing hope for continued liberalization. The authorities, having initiated reforms in 1956, soon resumed the persecution of freethinkers. The adoption of the 1961 law on social parasitism (*tuneiadstvo*), which threatened creative people who did not hold formal employment, was followed by a series of repressive measures: Khrushchev's notorious outburst at the Manege exhibition on 1 December 1962; the trials of Andrei Amal′rik, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Sinyavsky, and Yuly Daniel′; and the expulsion of Yuly Oksman from the Writers' Union for publishing an article abroad. In 1965, the KGB seized Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's personal archive. One of the leaders of the Thaw, Solzhenitsyn fell into disfavor, his works were no longer published, and he

began distributing his books through samizdat. These and other events cast a shadow on the lives of freedom-loving bohemians.

In 1965, after returning from military service, Sergei Dovlatov started working on his story "Zona" ("The Zone"), which depicted his time as a prison camp guard (Dovlatov 1999: II, 17–18). "Our existence today is medieval", the abstractionist artist Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko wrote in his notebook in 1965 (Mikhnov-Voitenko 2008: 335). The atmosphere had changed drastically compared to the early years of the Thaw.

Many artists and intellectuals withdrew into tight circles of like-minded acquaintances, finding themselves excluded from the official cultural sphere and instead embedded in the nonconformist underground. Samizdat was continuously updated with new texts that could not be published through official channels.[39] The poet Gleb Gorbovsky, best known for his song "Fonariki" ("Lanterns") – which was embraced as a folk tune and inspired his friend Aleksei Khvostenko to compose his own songs – recalled how, during these years, he was granted a clandestine opportunity to read Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* and *Poem without a Hero*. He described the experience, which took place while he was vacationing at a writers' sanatorium near Leningrad:

> […] назавтра Анна Андреевна прислала ко мне порученца за пишущей машинкой и копировальной бумагой. Ахматовой понадобилось что-то срочно перепечатать. […] «Технику» возвратили мне через день-другой вместе с копировальной бумагой, той, что была использована, однако использована удивительно неаккуратно, во всяком случае с копирки, повернутой «лицом» к свету, запросто считывался текст, отбитый кем-то из ахматовского окружения на весьма шумной, […] тарахтевшей «Москве». Листы копирки использовались почему-то единожды, под каждую последующую страницу текста подкладывался новый лист

39 In these years, the playwright and writer Aleksandr Gladkov not only mentions in his diary numerous texts circulating in samizdat but also analyzes some of them in detail. He published his book on Pasternak in samizdat in the mid-1960s (Gladkov 2014). Interestingly, in 1965, he used the word "samizdat" (7 July 1965), while later, in 1966–69, he consistently used the word "samoizdat" (sic), suggesting that the term had not yet been fully standardized at that point (4 December 1966, 25 March and 24 July 1967, and 19 Aptil 1968). On 12 April 1968, the word "samoizdat" appears without quotation marks. On 9 February 1969, it is spelled with a capital letter (Gladkov 1966–1968).

«переводки». Тогда же подумалось: ничего себе живут! […] вот она, голубая кровь с ее замашками, госпожа, поэтическая дама, — вот и чудит, вот и размахнулась.

[…] <На копирке можно было прочесть> повествовательные строчки, предварявшие «Реквием», в которых говорилось о стоянии в очередях возле тюремного подъезда […]: а ведь тебя, дурака, похоже, приглашают к прочтению опальной поэмы, потаенного слова […], к прочтению «наоборот» […], в зеркальном […] варианте, сквозь черную, ночную бумагу, наложенную на дневной животворящий свет, что вызревал помаленьку за окном […].

[…] «трюк» с копиркой наверняка принадлежал (по замыслу) не ей, а тому, кто перепечатывал тогда поэму. Кто знал меня основательнее, нежели хозяйка поэмы. […]

И тут через какое-то время меня вновь приглашают в «нумер» <комнату в Доме творчества в Комарово> к Ахматовой и вручают сроком на одну ночь экземпляр «Поэмы без героя», отпечатанный также на моей машинке. И ставят, причем вполне серьезно, непременное условие: изложить о поэме «собственное мнение», предъявить его от лица нового поколения поэтов — автору.

(Gorbovskii 1991: 329)

[…] the next day, Anna Andreevna sent an envoy to borrow my typewriter and some carbon paper. She needed something retyped urgently. […] The typewriter was returned to me a day or two later, along with the used carbon paper. Surprisingly, the carbon paper had been handled rather carelessly; when held up to the light, the imprints of the text were still clearly visible – someone from Akhmatova's circle had typed it on a very noisy, […] clattering "*Moskva*" typewriter. For some reason, each sheet of carbon paper had only been used once, with a fresh one placed under each successive page of the text. At the time, I thought: what a life! […] Here she is, a blue-blood and a lady of poetry, with all her grandeur and eccentricity […]

[…] <from the carbon imprints, one could discern> the narrative lines that preceded *Requiem*, describing the queues outside the prison gates. And yet there I was – a fool – granted the rare privilege of reading this banned poem,

> these hidden words […] in reverse, in mirrored script, through the black nocturnal paper that lay against the daylight slowly maturing outside the window. […]
> The "trick" with the carbon paper had likely been devised not by Akhmatova herself but by whoever had been typing the poem at the time. Someone who knew me well – perhaps better than the poem's author did […]
> Later, I was summoned again to her "room" <at the writers' sanatorium in Komarovo>, where Akhmatova handed me, for one night, a typewritten copy of *Poem Without a Hero*. She gave me a serious task: to provide my "own opinion" of the poem and to present my judgment to its author on behalf of the new generation of poets.

The writer and Akhmatova's secretary, Anatoly Naiman, in *Rasskazy ob Anne Akhmatovoi* (*Remembering Anna Akhmatova*), dates the beginning of the circulation of *Requiem* in samizdat to 1964 (Naiman 1989: 142). By all appearances, the episode from Gorbovsky's memoirs refers to this period. What is significant here is not the question of whether the events truly happened but rather the need for this story within the memoirs. Even if fictional, it reflects the atmosphere of the mid-1960s as authentically as a documentary source. If this clever and refined conspiratorial "trick" did indeed occur, its author could well have been Naiman himself, acting as Akhmatova's secretary.

Around the same time, a transcript of Joseph Brodsky's trial by Frida Vigdorova appeared in samizdat, which, by the mid-1960s, had developed into a fully-fledged, parallel sphere of information dissemination (ibid.). This text was read – albeit with caution.

Akhmatova's generation and those who had lived through Stalin's era never fully shed their fears and suspicions. In the mid-1960s, for many who remembered the old, pre-Thaw Soviet order, even seemingly harmless events could resemble the persecutions and trials of the 1930s and 40s. Anatoly Naiman recalled how terrified Akhmatova was when he – already on bad terms with the police and the KGB – was summoned for questioning in connection with Vladimir Ionisyan, nicknamed "Mosgaz", one of the first serial killers in the USSR to be widely reported in the media (1963–64).[40] The maniac was arrested in the same Moscow neighborhood where Naiman rented a room, leading to

40 Cf. Gladkov 2014/1 (diary from 12 and 14 January 1964).

his interrogation. Fortunately, the matter was resolved without consequence (ibid.: 165–167). Even almost thirty years later, during Perestroika, Naiman's account conveys the anxiety and suspicion that persisted in the country in the late Thaw.

Independent intellectuals noted that the initial liberalization was gradually giving way to increasing pressure. As authorities sought to push independent artists and writers into the margins, nonconformists strengthened their ties within the unofficial community. The underground became increasingly institutionalized. At the beginning of the decade, Lev Nusberg founded Kinetism, a movement that straddled the boundary between the underground and the officially sanctioned sphere of decorative and applied arts, incorporating avant-garde motifs and techniques (Vorob′ev 2012: 149–150). Around the same time (1963), Aleksei Khvostenko established the Verpa art community, which also included Anri Volokhonsky, Yury Galetsky, Leonid Entin, Ivan Steblin-Kamensky and some others. In 1964–65, Boris Vakhtin, Vladimir Gubin, Igor′ Efimov, and Vladimir Maramzin formed the group Gorozhane ("City Dwellers"), and even submitted a collective manuscript to the Soviet Writer publishing house. Such an act, in those years, was an audacious challenge to the authorities – one that carried the risk of persecution and even punishment (Efimov 1984: 115). Yet, for those who sought creative independence, defying officialdom was essential. It is worth noting that Mikhail Grobman's diary – a detailed chronicle of the artistic life of the 1960s and one of the era's most valuable documents – was started in 1963.

Beyond organized groups, numerous home literary and artistic salons (such as those of Kirill Kostsinsky or Ėly Beliutin) and LITOs (literary associations based at the Mining Institute, the House of Culture of Industrial Cooperation, the House of Culture of Labor Reserves, etc.) played a crucial role in fostering intellectual life. Joseph Brodsky, in one of his interviews, described the literary scene of those years as follows:

> Среда возникала… ну не то чтобы автоматически, но невольно… […] И среда была столь же разнообразна и разношерстна, как и сами авторы. Все началось при домах культуры, при газетах. Наиболее активными […] литературными объединениями были литобъединения при Доме культуры трудовых резервов и при ДК промкооперации. […] Активность этих литературных объединений в сильной степени была предо-

пределена их руководителями, двумя довольно замечательными людьми. Одного из них звали Давид Яковлевич Дар. Это был довольно хороший прозаик, муж Веры Пановой […]. Этот человек действительно воспитал, буквально воспитал Горбовского, Кушнера и Соснору, трех столь разных поэтов […].

Члены объединения сидят и просто обсуждают. Это закаляет и воспитывает совершенно замечательным образом. Я помню, однажды я приехал из Москвы, и мой приятель на объединении спросил меня: "Иосиф, ты приехал из Москвы? Ты привез новые стихи?" Я говорю: "Да". Он говорит: "Почитай". Я начал читать. Он говорит: "Нет, нет, не свои", — имелся в виду другой поэт, который живет в Москве. […]

Как правило, мы […] собирались на частных квартирах, куда приглашали знакомые или полузнакомые. Набиралось довольно много народу, и поэт время от времени читал свои стихи. Это, в общем, носило не столько подпольный, сколько неофициальный характер. Это было естественной формой существования.

(Brodsky 2007: 140–141)

The environment emerged… well, not automatically, but involuntarily… […] And it was as diverse and eclectic as the authors themselves. It all started in the houses of culture, in newspapers. The most active […] literary associations were the associations at the House of Culture of Labor Reserves and the House of Culture of Industrial Cooperation. […] The character of these literary associations was largely shaped by their leaders, two rather remarkable people. One of them was David Yakovlevich Dar, a talented prose writer, and the husband of writer Vera Panova […]. He quite literally mentored Gleb Gorbovsky, Aleksandr Kushner, and Viktor Sosnora – three very different poets […].

The members of the association would sit and simply discuss. It was an incredibly effective way to strengthen and educate each other. I remember once, when I had just returned from Moscow, a friend from the association asked me: "Joseph, you've come from Moscow? Did you bring new poems?" I said, "Yes". He says, "Read them". I started reading and he stopped me: "No, no – not your own". He meant the work of another poet from Moscow.[41] […]

41 Aleksei Khvostenko, in an article about Igor' Kholin's exhibition in Paris, recalls that he first heard poems by Kholin and Sapgir from a Leningrad friend who had come from Moscow,

> As a rule, we […] would gather in private apartments, invited by friends and acquaintances – sometimes even by people we barely knew. Quite a large group would assemble, and, occasionally, a poet would read his works. This, in general, was not so much an underground movement as an informal one. It was a natural way of existence.

Another nonconformist approach to institutionalization was the publication of typewritten almanacs and anthologies. In 1965, an attempt was made to compile an anthology of poets from Malaya Sadovaya, *Fioretti* (Kukuj 2021). Around the same time, Konstantin Kuz′minsky and Boris Taigin, who had already published several collections of nonconformist poetry through the early samizdat press Be-Ta, compiled *Antologiia sovetskoj patologii* ("The Anthology of Soviet Pathology"; Severiukhin 2003: 17). In 1965, the SMOGists published the almanac *Sfinksy* ("Sphinxes"), preceded by *Chu!* ("Hark!"), *Avangard* ("Avant-Garde"), and *Zdravstvujte, my genii* ("Hello, we are geniuses", 1963), which had been compiled two years earlier. In the summer of 1965, Oleg Liagachev, Valery Petrochenkov, and several other poets and artists published the almanac *Parus* ("Sail"; Liagachev-Khelgi 2018: 276–277). Periodical typewritten publications began appearing regularly in Leningrad from the mid-1970s.

Alongside the growth of literary circles, salons, and the publication of anthologies and almanacs, the nonconformist exhibition culture also expanded. On 30–31 March 1964, the Hermitage hosted an exhibition of riggers arranged by Mikhail Shemiakin. The event featured works by Shemiakin, Vladimir Ovchinnikov, Oleg Liagachev, and the actor Valery Kravchenko, all of whom were employed in auxiliary roles at the museum. The exhibition also brought together Mikhail Ivanov, Viktor Goliavkin, Vladimir Ufliand, and Konstantin Kuz′minsky, who worked as riggers at the Hermitage. However, it was abruptly shut down the day after its opening, generating widespread controversy. The event later became a landmark in the history of the late Soviet underground (Zolotonosov 2018b).[42] The very fact that it took place in the

perhaps via Brodsky (Khvostenko 1989: 14).

42 See for example the chapter "V khoziaistvennoi chasti Ėrmitazha" ("In the custodial section of the Hermitage"; Shemiakin 2020), or the memoirs by Oleg Liagachev (Luzhin 2013: 116–119; Liagachev-Khelgi 2018: 276). Nikolai Tret′iakov, who was the Komsomol secretary

country's most prestigious art museum, only to be swiftly censored, created a major precedent in the artistic communities of both Leningrad and Moscow.

That same year, the first apartment exhibitions organized by artists took place in Leningrad. In July and August, Kirill Lil′bok hosted exhibitions of Aleksandr Aref′ev, Tatiana Kerner, and Anatoly Basin. In December, an exhibition of Yury Galetsky, Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko, and Aleksei Khvostenko was held in the apartment of artist Yury Sorokin. The event was attended by their teacher Nikolai Akimov, as well as avant-garde artists Vladimir Sterligov and Tatiana Glebova (Severiukhin 2003: 332, 484).

Mikhail Grobman's 1965 diary confirms that nonconformist exhibitions in Moscow had become significantly more frequent compared to 1963–64 (Grobman 2002: 45–118). Grobman's account is supported by Georgy Kizeval′ter's chronicle of artistic life in the 1950s and 60s (Kizeval′ter 2018: 420–425). It was during this peak in unofficial art activity that the first significant Western study of the Soviet underground was written – *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union* by Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead. The book was published in 1967 by the University of California Press (Sjeklocha/Mead 1967).

Soviet authorities attempted to control the activities of unofficial artists, but they had little success. The painter Boris Zhutovsky recalled an incident in which USSR Deputy Minister of Culture Vladimir Popov summoned Lev Nusberg, Oskar Rabin, Ülo Sooster, and several others – apparently in Viktor Pivovarov's studio – for an official meeting. However, the attempt to curb the activities of neo-avant-gardists had no real effect. Ironically, Nusberg may have used this opportunity to his advantage, securing a commission to design decorations for Leningrad's 50th anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution:

> […] 1965 год.
> Мы получаем открытки с таким текстом:
> «Уважаемый товарищ Жутовский!
> Просим Вас принять участие в совещании, которое будет проводиться замминистра культуры СССР Кузнецовым 25 ноября 1965 г. в 11 часов под адресу: ул. Куйбышева, 10».

during those years and later served as the director of the Pavlovsk Palace in the post-Soviet period, was involved in organizing the exhibition (Tret′iakov 2003).

Эти бумажки получили все: Нусберг, Рабин и все прочие, свыше 20 человек. Назревало грандиозное событие, и мы решили собраться и подготовиться […] Мы все притащили вырезки из газет, перевели их (как правило, мы имели дело с зарубежными компартиями (Италии, Франции, Чехословакии, Польши и т. п.) […] Совещание вел […] Попов — плохой человек, выгнанный из ЦК антроповской командой (Бовин и ко), […] и тогда […] замминистра культуры. Он начал нас ругать и поносить. […] на каждое его обвинение кто-нибудь вставал и зачитывал ему выдержки из газет. Попов обращался к своим референтам, стоявшим тут же, но они ничего не подготовили и не знали. Ловкий Нусберг сидел рядом с ним в президиуме и что-то ему нашептывал. И, когда Попов понял, что нас не за что схватить, он сказал: «Хорошо, ребята, скоро мы будем праздновать 50-летие Октябрьской революции. Как вы готовитесь к юбилею?» […] Тогда все время молчавший Юло Соостер встал и произнес королевскую фразу: «Ну что тут можно сказать? Когда нас не зовут в *будничи*, какой тут может быть общий праздник?»
(Kizeval′ter 2018: 80–81)

[…] 1965.
We receive postcards with the following text:

> "Dear Comrade Zhutovsky!
>
> We invite you to attend the meeting with the USSR Deputy Minister of Culture Kuznetsov on 25 November 1965, at 11:00 AM, at the following address: 10 Kuibysheva Street".

Everyone received these notices – Nusberg, Rabin, and more than 20 others. A major event was looming, so we decided to gather in advance and prepare. […] We collected newspaper clippings and translated them, focusing mostly on foreign Communist parties in Italy, France, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other countries. […]
The meeting was led by Popov – a thoroughly unpleasant man, expelled from the Central Committee by Andropov's team (Bovin and company) […] and later appointed Deputy Minister of Culture. He launched into a tirade, scolding and berating us. […] For every accusation he made, one of us would stand up and read aloud a relevant excerpt from the newspapers. Popov turned to his aides, who stood nearby, but they had come unprepared and knew nothing. Meanwhile, the quick-witted Nusberg sat beside him on the presidium, whis-

> pering into his ear. Realizing that he had no grounds on which to condemn us, Popov suddenly shifted gears. "Alright, comrades", he said. "We'll soon be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution. How are you preparing for the occasion?" […] At that moment, Ülo Sooster, who had remained silent the entire time, stood up and delivered a regal response: "Well, what can one say? If we are not invited to the workdays, what kind of common holiday can there be?"

By 1964–65, the nonconformist milieu had become such a prominent phenomenon in Moscow and Leningrad that, working on one of the major epic films of the Thaw – *Andrei Rublev* – Andrei Tarkovsky enlisted some of its brightest representatives for "cameo" roles. *Andrei Rublev* opens with the balloon flight of the poet Nikolai Glazkov, who coined the neologism "samsebyaizdat" (self-publishing), from which the word "samizdat" – which entered common usage in the mid-1960s – was derived. The inventor of the balloon, played by Glazkov himself – the Icarus of the "Russian Renaissance"[43] – symbolically revives traditions interrupted by the Mongol-Tatar yoke, just as the creator of independent typewritten literature sought to restore the Russian avant-garde to modernity. Tarkovsky may have known Glazkov personally or heard about him from childhood, as his father, Arseny Tarkovsky, belonged to the same liberal wing of the Writers' Union as Glazkov, a follower of Khlebnikov.

One of the film's casting consultants was the Moscow poet and dandy Sergei Chudakov, who invited the poet Valentin Khromov to play the role of a skomoroch (a medieval Russian minstrel). At the time, Khromov was deeply engaged with the works of Kirsha Danilov, one of the earliest Russian folk poets published and admired in Russia since Pushkin's era. Initially, Tarkovsky planned to cast Khromov, but at the last moment, the role went to Rolan Bykov.[44] Chudakov himself nearly played Boriska (Orlov 2014).

43 …and teacher of Vsevolod Nekrasov.

44 See: Khromov 2025: 190–192. It was Khromov who apparently provided Bykov with the words from Kirsha Danilov and the movements for the skomorokh dance.



Fig. 7

The film also featured Sergei Esaulenko, a Leningrad artist and a close friend of Mikhail Shemiakin, as a background actor (see Shemiakin 2020: 42). Aleksei Khvostenko, who was well-acquainted with the Moscow nonconformist circle,[45] may have also been present on set – perhaps to add to his collection of eccentric professions or to earn money. His friend Aleksei Sorokin, a poetry connoisseur and admirer of Konstantin Vaginov, was working as an extra. By the mid-1960s, the nonconformist "persona" had been translated into the heroes of the new national cinematic epic.

The above facts illustrate that by 1964–65, the nonconformist community in Moscow and Leningrad was not only expanding but also experiencing an increasingly intense artistic life. Thanks to Andrei Tarkovsky and Sergei Chudakov, it became the subtext of *Andrei Rublev*, the Thaw-era epic that depicted

45 Khvostenko may have known Chudakov through Brodsky, among others. Brodsky and Chudakov were friends. See, for example, Vladimir Orlov's commentary on Brodsky's poem "Na smert' druga" ("On the Death of a Friend"; Orlov 2021).

a mythology of national revival. The mid-1960s marked a crucial shift: a new cultural movement was emerging from the neo-avant-garde eclecticism that had synthesized the historical avant-garde experience. As Okudzhava sang in his song dedicated to the artist Vasil′ev-Mon, something was beginning that had not yet begun.

By the mid-1960s, the generation of neo-avant-gardists following Vasil′ev-Mon and his peers was already experimenting with new artistic ideas. In 1965, Khvostenko wrote *The Suspector*, an (auto)portrait of an underground figure who would become a key archetype of late Soviet culture up to the Perestroika era. *The Suspector* introduced, for the first time, a new kind of escapist – an individual, with whom late Brezhnev-era nonconformists eagerly identified: someone who deliberately took a job as janitor, watchman, and maintenance worker to avoid engagement with Soviet officialdom.

By the 1980s, Moscow Conceptualists would refer to this self-imposed marginalization as "kolobkovost'", a reference to the Russian folk tale about a bun (Kolobok, Roly Poly) that rolls away from everyone to escape capture. The escapist self-identification, already recognized for its absurdity in the mid-1960s, found further confirmation in 1966 with the formation of the Helenucts group, which elevated absurdity to an aesthetic principle.

Before delving into Khvostenko's *Suspector* – which foreshadowed future developments – it is essential to clarify a crucial aspect of the underground's formation: the interaction between Moscow and Leningrad intellectuals. The widespread notion of rivalry between these cities and competition between their artistic circles does not fully capture the reality of the 1960s nonconformist movement. While differences existed between the Moscow and Leningrad bohemians, few have explored how their interactions, rather than their differences, played a crucial role in shaping the underground. The underground thrived precisely because of what unified the nonconformists of Moscow and Leningrad. Of course, independent intellectuals and freethinkers existed in other Soviet cities as well, as evidenced by several volumes of the anthology *The Blue Lagoon*. However, the history of the 1960s neo-avant-garde is most clearly understood through the lens of the Moscow–Leningrad connection, which played a defining role in shaping the artistic experience of the era.

CHAPTER 2

To Moscow, to Moscow…

Two Separate Worlds?

Historians of the underground tend to treat Moscow and Leningrad as separate entities, even though, from the 1950s and 60s onwards, nonconformist artists and writers from both cities were in constant contact, some even forming close friendships. Studies by Ekaterina Bobrinskaya, Boris Groys, and Ekaterina Degot′ on Soviet Conceptualism and unofficial art primarily focus on Moscow. Works, ranging from Boris Groys's article on Romantic conceptualism to books on the history of twentieth-century Russian art (Grois 1978; Degot′ 2002; Bobrinskaia 2012), contribute to the perception that the Moscow context existed in isolation from the Leningrad context. Even Elena Penskaya's recent article in *Slavic Literatures* (2024, No. 149), which examines the Conceptualist reception of Koz′ma Prutkov, discusses only Vsevolod Nekrasov and Andrei Monastyrsky, despite Prutkov's equally enthusiastic reception in Leningrad. Meanwhile, scholars such as Ekaterina Andreeva, Liubov′ Gurevich, and Andrei Khlobystin, who focus extensively on Leningrad nonconformism, emphasize the St. Petersburg tradition instead (Andreeva 1990 and 2007; Gurevich 2007; Khlobystin 2017).

Thematic collections of articles dedicated to specific artistic communities or figures – such as the Lianozovo School, Verpa, Vsevolod Nekrasov, or Konstantin Kuz′minsky – have reinforced the separation of Moscow and Leningrad nonconformists.[46] In contrast, the encyclopedic edition *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture* (2024) offers a broad portrayal of unofficial culture, presenting it as both a cohesive phenomenon and as a collection of diverse expressions. This monumental work addresses various aspects of nonconformism, including micro-communities, key artistic movements, and the most significant cultural and artistic practices that shaped the underground, such as *samizdat*. However, it offers little direct discussion of the interaction between the two underground centers.

Recently, however, several studies have attempted to bridge the artistic scenes of Moscow and Leningrad. Ekaterina Andreeva took up this task in her book *Ugol nesootvetstviia: Shkoly nonkonformizma. Moskva–Leningrad. 1946–1991* ("Angle of Nonconformity: Schools of Nonconformism in Moscow and Leningrad, 1946–1991"; Andreeva 2012). Ilja Kukuj, in his paper on the conceptualist nature of the Helenucts' work, also established links between

46 Cf. Zykova/Kulakov/Pavlovets 2021; Nekrasov 2019; Kukui 2022 and 2024a.

Moscow and Leningrad literary experiments (Kukuj 2023). Similarly, Ainsley Morse's extensive research on Vsevolod Nekrasov's Leningrad poems contributes to this effort (Morse 2017; Mors 2021). Further exploration of these connections is essential to understanding how the two primary centers of nonconformism influenced each other.

The long-standing tendency to study them separately is largely due to the challenge of covering such a vast body of material. To put it simply: in Moscow (and beyond), Moscow nonconformism is better known; in St. Petersburg/Leningrad (almost exclusively), Leningrad nonconformism is better known. However, this does not mean that tracing Moscow–Leningrad interactions is an impossible task.

These artistic worlds were deeply intertwined and had a significant influence on one another. The emergence of the underground in the mid-1960s provides a strong starting point for this discussion, as nonconformism and the neo-avant-garde arose precisely through interactions between the two cities. These exchanges were intense, and mutual interest was undeniably high.

Leningrad artists such as Evgeny Rukhin or Aleksei Khvostenko visited Moscow, formed friendships, and collaborated with figures like Valentin Vorob′ev and Igor′ Kholin.[47] Conversely, Muscovites often romanticized Leningrad, as seen in the perspectives of Mikhail Grobman, Vsevolod Nekrasov, and Valentin Khromov. Grobman visited Leningrad twice in 1967 and deeply appreciated the book illustrations of Yury Vasnetsov (Grobman 2002: 239). He also respected Mikhail Shemiakin (ibid.) and Joseph Brodsky (ibid.: 238). Grobman was in Leningrad precisely when Lev Nusberg and the Kinetists were decorating the "cradle of the Revolution" for the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution.

The movement between cities was fluid. Moscow artist Mikhail Kulakov relocated to Leningrad, while Leningrad writer Andrei Bitov divided his time between both cities. Aleksei Khvostenko, a Leningrader, was a friend of

47 In Moscow, largely thanks to the collector of Russian avant-garde and nonconformist art George Costakis, the "dipart" movement took shape, as vividly recounted in Valentin Vorob′ev's memoirs. The capital had far more buyers of unofficial art, both among foreigners and collectors. Leningrad-based artists Evgeny Rukhin and Mikhail Kulakov (who studied under Nikolai Akimov in Leningrad but was born and grew up in Moscow) were oriented toward Moscow's "dipart", as noted by Vorob′ev and several of the figures interviewed in Vadim Alekseev's book *Ideal'no drugie* (Vorob′ev 2012: 181–182, 261; Alekseev 2022: 35, 310).



Fig. 8

Muscovites such as Valentin Vorob′ev, Aleksandr Piatnitsky, Genrikh Sapgir, and Igor′ Kholin. In 1968, he too moved to the capital. Notably, the collection of nonconformist art assembled by Muscovite Leonid Talochkin begins with a painting by Leningrad artist Evgeny Rukhin (Andreeva 2012: 369).

It is time to explicitly explore how interactions between Muscovites and Leningraders shaped the development of nonconformism. This discussion should start by questioning the widely accepted but often oversimplified distinctions between the two artistic scenes. Figures such as Oskar Rabin, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Genrikh Sapgir, and Igor′ Kholin portrayed the grittier aspects of Soviet daily life far more consistently than their Leningrad counterparts, such as Roal′d Mandel′shtam and the Aref′ev circle, despite the latter's works sometimes being considered boldly naturalistic by Leningrad standards. Still, environments like Lianozovo and other barracks-style settlements on the outskirts of Moscow – built before the war as labor camp settlements – were markedly different from Leningrad's standard residential districts, such as Rzhevka-Porokhovye, let alone the historic Kolomna district of St. Petersburg, which retained echoes of Aleksandr Blok, the *Miriskusniki (World of Arts movement)*, and the Pushkin era.



Fig 9

The artistic language developed by Moscow nonconformists was also more experimental and radical than that of their Leningrad counterparts, who were more influenced by post-Cézannism and post-Acmeism. Writer and critic Mikhail Sheinker captured this distinction well when discussing the differences between the underground scenes in Moscow and Leningrad in an interview published in a collection of memoirs about Vsevolod Nekrasov:

> […] поэтика Некрасова, Рубинштейна и других казалась питерцам слишком радикальной, если не сказать разрушительной. Сергей Стратановский однажды сказал, что картотеки Рубинштейна — это продукт работы взбесившейся счетной машины. Радикальная московская поэтика в Петербурге была не очень понятна, они застряли в чем-то другом […]
> (Nekrasov 2019: 338)

> The poetics of Nekrasov, Rubinstein, and others seemed too radical – if not outright destructive – to the Petersburgers. Sergei Stratanovsky once remarked that Rubinstein's card catalogs were the product of a frenzied counting machine. The radical Moscow poetics were difficult to grasp in Petersburg; they were engaged in something entirely different […].[48]

The divergent evolution of these two underground movements ultimately led to their most internationally renowned representatives being radically different from each other. Ilya Kabakov, a Conceptualist from Moscow, became a defining figure in contemporary global art. Meanwhile, Joseph Brodsky, a devotee of Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Slutsky, and W. H. Auden, went down in history as a modernist who remained skeptical of Minimalism, Conceptualism, and other postmodernist currents. In this sense, it is difficult to disagree with Sheinker's assessment.

A Leningrader in Moscow

This difference undoubtedly influenced the formation of the neo-avant-garde, in which Aleksei Khvostenko's experience played a particularly valuable role. Although Khvostenko grew up in Leningrad, he had frequent and meaningful interactions with Moscow artists and poets throughout the 1960s. He became involved in Moscow's artistic scene quite early: as early as 1961, he traveled to Tarusa – a Moscow-area retreat often compared to Barbizon – where many nonconformist artists lived and gathered. There, he participated in one of the first underground exhibitions, featuring works by Boris Sveshnikov, Ivan Miturich, Ėduard Shteinberg, Valentin Vorob′ev, Mikhail Grobman, and oth-

48 Such a generalization certainly implies that in both Moscow and Leningrad, there were intellectuals who did not fit into the general milieu. For example, the Moscow artist Mikhail Shvartsman, with his spiritual quest, his desire to synthesize icon painting and abstraction, and his refusal to socialize his creative project, could just as easily be imagined living in Leningrad. At the same time, Leningrad resident Sandy Conrad ([Sendi Konrad], the pseudonym of Aleksandr Kondratov), who once served in the militsia, embodied the cynicism and duplicity of Soviet life in his novel *Zdravstvui, ad* ("Hello Hell"; Kondratov 1996), translated Henry Miller, and was fond of combinatorics in literature, appears to be a figure much closer to the Moscow underground.

ers. This exhibition was a significant event for its time and later became a milestone in the history of independent art.

However, in an interview with Vadim Alekseev – who compiled testimonies from many prominent Moscow intellectuals of the 1960s – Khvostenko downplayed his own role, saying that he ended up in Tarusa almost by accident. According to him, he simply spent the night in a haystack with a traveling companion (Alekseev 2022: 473).

The artist Valentin Vorob′ev, who met Khvostenko in Tarusa in 1961, recalls the episode in a similar way:

> Из Ленинграда пешком и автостопом пришли два художника и две художницы под водительством Алексея Хвостенко. Они клятвенно обещали сделать большую мозаику из тарусского мрамора, но лето проспали на сеновале, изредка вылезая за жратвой. Началось самое нудное и опасное время ожидания <открытия выставки> с примерным поведением в общественных местах. Это тяжелое испытание художники с честью вынесли, если не считать мелкой стычки, когда нашего друга Хвостенко столкнули с парома в речку.
> (Vorob′ev 2005: 189)

> Two male artists and two female artists from Leningrad arrived on foot and by hitchhiking, led by Aleksei Khvostenko. They solemnly promised to create a large mosaic from Tarusa marble, but instead spent the summer sleeping in a hayloft, occasionally emerging for food. And so began the most tedious and dangerous time of waiting for the <opening of the exhibition> with exemplary behavior in public places. The artists endured this difficult trial with honor, except for a minor incident in which our friend Khvostenko was pushed off the ferry into the river.

He continues:

> Наш вернисаж продолжился пиром на крутом берегу Оки. Мы допоздна пили перцовку в бараке под названием «Голубой Дунай» и горланили частушки под гитары Хвостенко и Окуджавы.
> (Ibid.: 192)

> Our vernissage concluded with a feast on the steep bank of the Oka. We drank pepper vodka late into the night in a barrack called "Blue Danube" and sang ditties to the guitars of Khvostenko and Okudzhava.[49]

The juxtaposition of Khvostenko – then a newcomer to the artistic scene – with Okudzhava, who was already well known but not directly involved in the nonconformist movement, is striking. Despite not being a nonconformist himself, Okudzhava supported underground figures persecuted by the authorities, including Brodsky.

After meeting Vorob′ev and other Tarusa exhibition participants, Khvostenko expanded his Moscow connections significantly. He befriended

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49 In the third book of memoirs by Valentin Vorob′ev, *Levaki*, which includes a separate chapter on Khvostenko, the author specifies that Khvost arrived with the poet and artist Leonid Entin, a member of the Verpa group (Vorob′ev 2012: 133–134). Echoes of Okudzhava's songs can be heard in the songs of Khvostenko and Volokhonsky. The ironic phrase «самый страшный суд» (the very last judgment) from one of Okudzhava's earliest songs, "Neistov i upriam" (1946, Okudzhava 2001: 191), appears in their song "Strashnyj sud" ("Last Judgment", 1963; Khvostenko/Volokhonskii 2016: 20–23):

> На суд, на суд
> Нас ангелы зовут
> […]
> На самый страшный суд […]
> А нас а нас
> Не тронут в этот час
> А нас а нас
> Сперва посадят в таз
> Потом слегка водою обольют —
> Вот весь наш Страшный суд
>
> To judgment, to judgment
> Angels are calling us […]
> To the very last judgment […]
> But we but we
> Will not be touched in this hour
> But we but we
> Will first be put in a tub
> Then they'll pour a little water on us
> So this is our big Last Judgment.

Uncompromisingness, multiplied by irony and self-irony, unites such different authors as Okudzhava and the Volokhonsky–Khvostenko duo. The latter are anarchist, yet not unlike the Moscow bard.

artist Vladimir Piatnitsky and his circle (Kabakov 2008: 219–221), as well as poet Igor′ Kholin, the Sapgir family, and artists Aleksandr Kharitonov and Mikhail Roginsky. Gradually, he became an integral part of the Moscow nonconformist community. In October 1965, he even held a one-day exhibition at Kira Sapgir's apartment (Kizeval′ter 2018: 424). In an interview, Khvostenko noted that the exhibition featured works ranging from Abstract Expressionism to pop art (Alekseev 2022: 465).

Although he grew up in Leningrad, Khvostenko ultimately became one of the defining figures of the Moscow underground. Looking back from the 2020s, it is difficult to imagine the nonconformist movement of the 1960s and 70s in Moscow without him. This is evident in Vadim Alekseev's collection of interviews with leading figures of the Moscow underground, where Khvostenko appears alongside Andrei Volkonsky, Aleksandr Gleser, Lidia Masterkova, Vladimir Nemukhin, Oskar Rabin, and others.



Fig. 10

One particularly interesting artifact of his Moscow experience is the book *10 stikhotvorenii Verpy posviaschennykh Igoriu Kholinu* ("10 Poems by Verpa Dedicated to Igor′ Kholin", 1965), which contains poems Khvostenko wrote in Kholin's studio. During the autumn of 1965, he lived there for some time at Kholin's invitation. In the book's preface, Khvostenko mentions that Kholin supported him financially, paying him one ruble a day for writing poetry. Valentin Vorob′ev, possibly embellishing the story based on Khvostenko's own words, described it this way:

> Опеку над питерским битником взял на себя барачный поэт Игорь Сергеевич Холин. Он уступил ему место в своем логове и выдавал по рублю за каждое стихотворение. У него Хвост создал ряд поэтических шедевров. Там же, на Абельмановской, высший ареопаг подпольной литературы — Холин, Лев Кропивницкий, Генрих Сапгир — провозгласил Хвоста поэтом, достойным уважения.
> (Vorob′ev 2012: 135)

> The Petersburg beatnik was taken under the wing of the barracks poet Igor′ Sergeyevich Kholin. Kholin gave him shelter in his den and paid him a ruble for each poem. It was in this setting that Khvostenko created several poetic masterpieces. There, at Abel′manovskaya Street, the highest tribunal of underground literature – Kholin, Lev Kropivnitsky, and Genrikh Sapgir – declared Khvostenko a poet worthy of respect.

The reality may not have been quite so dramatic, but Khvostenko certainly earned the admiration of the Lianozovo School's elder statesman, Evgeny Kropivnitsky. In a letter to Vsevolod Nekrasov, Kropivnitsky placed Khvostenko alongside Sapgir, Satunovsky, and Kholin: «Лично я считаю вашу поэзию высшим достижением среди поэтов наших дней. Даже такие корифеи как Холин, Хвостенко, Сапгир и Сатуновский немного меркнут и звучат уже не так свежо» (Zykova/Kulakov/Pavlovets 2021: 777).[50] More than two decades later, in the years of emigration, Khvostenko fondly recalled his first

50 "Personally, I consider your poetry the highest achievement among poets of our time. Even such luminaries as Kholin, Khvostenko, Sapgir, and Satunovsky have lost some of their freshness."

encounters with Kholin and his discovery of the "barracks school" poets in an article about his elder friend's performance in Paris:

> 50-е годы, начало 60-х. Слава «левого искусства», как тогда говорили, растет по Москве. Стихи и картины, минуя издательства и выставочные залы, приобретают все более широкую популярность.
> Холинское
>
> На днях у Сокола
> Дочь
> Мать укокала
>
> И сапгировское
>
> Вот там убили человека.
> Вот там убили человека.
> Вот там убили человека.
> Внизу — убили человека.
>
> Пойдем посмотрим на него…
>
> — повторяют наперебой обе столицы. Меня с этими стихами впервые познакомил Иосиф Бродский, привезший несколько листочков с текстами обоих поэтов из Москвы. Эти строчки становятся своеобразными «позывными» нового отношения к поэзии.
> (Khvostenko 1989)

> The 1950s, early 1960s. The glory of what was then called "left art" is growing in Moscow. Poems and paintings, bypassing official publishers and exhibition halls, are gaining wider popularity.
> Kholin's poem:
>
> At Sokol's on Monday
> The daughter
> Killed the mother

And Sapgir's:

> Over there a man was killed
> Over there a man was killed
> Over there a man was killed
> A man was killed down over there
>
> Let's all go and look at him

– the two capitals echo each other. I was first introduced to these poems by Joseph Brodsky, who brought me a few pages of both poets' texts from Moscow. These lines became a kind of "*call sign*" for a new approach to poetry.

The claim that Brodsky introduced Khvostenko to "barracks poetry" sounds quite plausible. In the 1960s, the two poets were friends. As mentioned earlier, Brodsky recounted how Leningrad poets, upon returning from trips to Moscow, would read poems by the capital's nonconformists in a literary association (LITO; Brodsky 2007: 141).

Among other things, Kholin and Khvostenko were connected by their shared bohemian lifestyle. Kholin's diaries contain a record of their debauched existence:

> […] проснулся […] у себя в комнате, зажег свет. Картина предстала передо мной такая: возле кровати лужа блевотины. В ней мой костюм и настольная лампа. Простыня и пододеяльник — тоже в блевотине. У стены раскладушка, на которой спит Хвостенко. […] Я встал, убрал блевотину. Но и после этого в комнате стояла страшная вонь […]. Проснулся и Хвостенко. […] Мы сообразили на четвертинку водки и на шесть бутылок пива. […] Приехал Сапгир и Ян Сатуновский. Мы выпили все, что купили.
> (Kholin 2020: 102–103)

> […] I woke up […] in my room, turned on the light. The scene before me looked like this: a puddle of vomit beside the bed. My suit and a table lamp were covered in it, as were the sheets and duvet cover. Against the wall was a cot where Khvostenko was sleeping. […] I got up and cleaned the vomit, but

> even after that, the stench in the room was unbearable. […] Khvostenko woke up too. […] We pitched in for a quarter of vodka and six bottles of beer. […] Sapgir and Yan Satunovsky had arrived. We drank everything we had bought.

In "Apologiia personalisma" ("Apology of Personalism"), Kabakov attempts to categorize the nonconformists of the 1960s, classifying Khvostenko as part of the "black bohemia" – a group of self-proclaimed Neo-Expressionists. He compares Khvostenko and figures like Voroshilov, Piatnitsky, Kurochkin, Stesin, Grobman, and to some extent, Zverev and Yakovlev, to "ball lightning" (Kabakov 2008: 218–221). However, this classification seems somewhat inaccurate. Khvostenko could hardly be described as a Neo-Expressionist; his interest lay more in Abstract Expressionism. Likewise, while certainly wild, his bohemianism was not as extreme as the reckless abandon of Voroshilov, Piatnitsky, or Zverev.

Khvostenko was a peaceful figure and did not fit the image of "ball lightning". While he was indeed close to many of the artists Kabakov listed – both in the 1960s and later – his social circle was much broader. Interestingly, Kabakov refrained from placing Kholin and Sapgir within the "black bohemia", despite the fact that they, too, were no strangers to unrestrained revelry. Kabakov's classification, in this case, appears to be shaped by his desire to maintain good relations with the leaders of the Moscow nonconformist community.

Khvostenko may have written prolifically under Kholin's patronage, but the samizdat book itself was assembled in the minimalist Moscow style, containing only ten texts. More than twenty years later, in 1988, it was published in Paris (Khvostenko 1988).[51]

Which poems, then, were the ones Kholin paid for at the rate of one ruble per day, as Khvostenko claimed?

> Внутри собаки
> Жуть и мрак
> Внутри енота
> Жуть и мрак

51 The book was first published in the mid-1960s by the self-publishing house of Vladimir Ėrl′, Pol′za.

Внутри рыбешки
Пустота
Внутри бутылки
Пустота
Внутри затылка
Пустота

Внутри коровы
Жуть и мрак
(Khvostenko 1988: 27)

Inside a dog
Dread and gloom
Inside a racoon
Dread and gloom
Inside a fishy
Just a void
Inside a bottle
Just a void
Inside my noggins
Just a void

Inside a cow
Dread and gloom

This text is called "Trium" ("The Bilge") and serves as the final piece in the book dedicated to Kholin. Of the ten texts included, five are monologues spoken by characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Khvostenko plays with themes and motifs from Shakespeare's tragedy, using a series of absurd and parodic statements. Some of these statements feature broken syntax, others rely on repetitive syntactic constructions, and some are entirely devoid of meaning. Nonsense is juxtaposed with words that are phonetically consonant, echoing the structure of the neighboring lines.

The remaining four texts – "Liubovnoe" ("Amorous"), "Gidra" ("Hydra"), "Poeticheskaia nachinka" ("Poetic Filling") and "Isolation Ward" ("Isolator") – continue this subversive and comedic approach, making provocative use

of colloquial and obscene language. The final poem, "Trium" ("The Bilge"), builds upon the syntactic repetition developed in the preceding texts. However, unlike the others, it is mimetic, depicting darkness and absence in a Concretist manner. The syntax is stripped to its most basic form, devoid of metaphors, metonymy, and imagery. A single phrase is repeated with slight variations, followed by another, equally repetitive, construction. Tautology and reiteration become vehicles for representing nothingness. As a painter, Khvostenko takes the motif of Arkhip Kuindzhi's *Night Over the Dnieper* and pushes it to the stark minimalism of Pierre Soulages' monochromes, but with an absurdist mockery.

The fragmented, unrhymed phrases, syntactic tautology, distorted language, obscenities, and depictions of wild day-to-day life appear in the texts of the "barracks school" poets just as prominently as they do in Khvostenko's book. It seems likely that Kholin would have been pleased with how his daily payments to Khvostenko were put to use. The texts Khvostenko wrote at Kholin's "commission", as well as his other poems from the same period, suggest that he was far more aligned with the Lianozovo poets than with Leningrad's nonconformists.

In mid-1960s Leningrad, his work would have been considered too radical for "Akhmatova's orphans", the group Gorozhane, and the poets of Malaya Sadovaya.[52] His preference for Moscow poetry becomes evident if we compare two texts written on the same occasion: Brodsky's "Ostanovka v pustyne" ("A Stop in the Desert", 1966) and Khvostenko's "Napasti Peskov" ("The Calamities of Peski", 1965, the same year as *Ten Poems by Verpa Dedicated to Kholin*). Next to Brodsky, Khvostenko does not resemble a Leningrad/St. Petersburg poet at all.

52 It is worth noting that sometimes Muscovites were quite critical of Khvostenko's work, which easily integrated into the life of the Moscow underground, finding it "lightweight Leningrad-style". Here is a somewhat later review by Kholin: («[…] ходил в гости к Алеше Хвостенко. Читал он свои стихи. Хорошие стихи. Алиса мила (жена Хвоста). Стихи, однако, ленинградские, немного пустоватые» ("[…] I went to visit Aliosha Khvostenko. He read his poems. Good poems. Alice is lovely Khvost's wife. The poems, however, are Leningrad-style, a bit shallow"; Kholin 2020: 220). Both Grobman and Kabakov are critical of Khvostenko (Grobman 2002: 205; Kabakov 2008: 218–221). At the same time, Kholin mentions him among his like-minded friends and acquaintances in his poem "Umer Zemnoi Shar" ("The Globe is Dead", 1971).

Demolition of the Greek Church: Two Versions

Both poems are dedicated to the demolition of the Church of St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki, built in St. Petersburg in the 1860s in a neighborhood called Peski (the Sands), where a Greek community had lived since the eighteenth century. Under Soviet rule, from the late 1930s, the building was repurposed as a military training center. During the Siege of Leningrad, a shell hit the church, piercing the roof but failing to explode. By the early 1960s, the structure was in ruins, and it was ultimately demolished in 1965 to make way for the Oktyabrsky Grand Concert Hall, completed in 1967.



Fig. 11

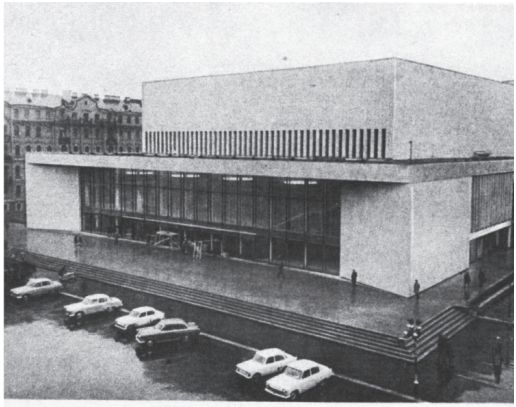


Fig. 12

Brodsky saw the destruction of the church as an ominous portent of worsening times ahead:

> Теперь так мало греков в Ленинграде,
> что мы сломали Греческую церковь,
> дабы построить на свободном месте
> концертный зал. В такой архитектуре
> есть что-то безнадежное.
> […]
> Сегодня ночью я смотрю в окно
> и думаю о том, куда зашли мы?
> И от чего мы больше далеки:
> от православья или эллинизма?
> К чему близки мы? Что там, впереди?
> Не ждет ли нас теперь другая эра?
> И если так, то в чем наш общий долг?
> И что должны мы принести ей в жертву?
> (Brodskii 1970: 166, 168)

> Not many Greeks are left in Leningrad,
> so we destroyed the only Greek Cathedral,
> relieving space where we can later build
> a concert hall. This type of architecture
> has something hopeless in its core.
> […]
> Tonight I'm staring through the open window
> and contemplating – where are we today?
> And also, what are we more distant from:
> From Orthodoxy or from Hellenism?
> What are we closer to? What lies ahead?
> Is there another epoch that awaits?
> If so, what will be our common duty?
> And what must be our sacrifice to greet it?
> (Transl. by Kirill Tolmachev)[53]

53 https://allpoetry.com/poem/16598411-A-Stop-in-the-Desert-Joseph-Brodsky-1966-by-Kirill-Tolmachev (29.08.2026).

Brodsky's poem, which lent its title to his second poetry collection (1970), serves as a critique of the Soviet system, which severed ties with pre-revolutionary cultural traditions. Brodsky did not belong to any Christian denomination, including the Greek Orthodox Church, and his poem contains no religious overtones. According to Brodsky, the destruction of the Greek Church symbolizes the loss of historical memory, indifference to the city's history, and the dismantling of the country and its culture.[54] He does not take the new, "hopeless" concert hall seriously.

Despite Brodsky's harsh assessment, the Oktyabrsky Grand Concert Hall is regarded by experts in modern architecture as a significant example of Soviet modernism. It was designed by a group of architects under the direction of Aleksandr Zhuk, a revered figure in Leningrad–St. Petersburg's architectural sphere. Zhuk was a key figure in Soviet architecture, aligning with modernist principles and in a strange way drawing inspiration from German architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, which he encountered during World War II. He valued the city's traditions while advocating for its innovative development. Notably, at the end of Gorokhovaya Street – one of the three main axes of Peter the Great's original Versailles-inspired plan, along with Nevsky and Voznesensky Prospects – he constructed the majestic Teatr Iunogo Zritelia (TIuZ, Youth Theater), a design reminiscent of Albert Speer's architectural style. Having criticized the architect Zhuk (about whom Brodsky was not interested in making enquiries), the poet took a protective, conservative position. In his views on urbanism and modern architecture, he is a conservative and an opponent of the new, which to him means the Soviet. Zhuk was and remains to this day a modernist favoring renewal.

Khvostenko, in "Napasti Peskov" ("The Calamities of Peski"), presents the same plot in a completely different way – as an episode from the everyday life of the city. There is no room for publicity or public indignation in his text. Nor is there any discussion of architecture or historical memory. Instead, it is ordinary people who talk about the destruction of the church that was located in the Peski neighborhood. City life is used as a theme, drawing an analogy to the famous collection of everyday-life essays *Fiziologiia Peterburga* (*Physiology of Petersburg*, 1844–45). Its compiler, poet and journalist Nikolai Nekrasov, is one of the addressees of "The Calamities of Peski". This work is also preceded

54 This Orthodox Church had nothing to do with the "Hellenism" mentioned by Brodsky.

by an epigraph written in the spirit of Nekrasov, presented as a conversation between two townspeople, as the author notes in the explanation of the text:

> такого-то года
> (это случилось совсем недавно)
> на Песках
> снесли Греческую церковь
> — как это сделали?
> — а очень просто
> привязали к канату огромный
> каменный шар
> и качая его
> лупили по стенам
> она и рассыпалась
> — как? сразу рассыпалась?
> нет, ломали дня два
> или три
> — изрядно!
>
> (нечто похожее на это
> написал бы Некрасов)
>
> (Khvostenko 2005b: 188)

> in such-and-such a year
> (this happened quite recently)
> in the Peski
> they tore down the Greek church
> "how did they do it?"
> "very simply
> they tied a huge round
> stone to a rope
> swung it around
> and clobbered the walls
> and it fell to bits"
> "what? it fell apart right away?"
> "no, they clobbered it for two days.
> or three"

"impressive!"

(Nekrasov would have written
something similar to this)

For a neo-avant-gardist, the reference to Nikolai Nekrasov is somewhat unexpected. However, Khvostenko and the Russian literary classic are clearly united by their shared interest in incorporating colloquial speech into poetry. Moreover, a monument to the author of *Komu na Rusi zhit' khorosho?* (*Who Can Be Happy and Free in Russia?, 1863–77)* was planned for the garden near the house where Khvostenko lived and where the Greek church once stood. Today, that monument stands there. Khvostenko lived just across the street from the church, at 15 Grechesky Prospekt, having inherited a room in a communal apartment from his father. Residents of the neighborhood were well aware of the plans to erect the new monument.

"The Calamities of Peski" continues with vivid scenes of city life, reminiscent of Kholin's and Sapgir's sketches of barrack life (e.g., Sapgir's poem "Over there a man was killed"). These scenes bring to life characters who seem to have stepped straight out of the pages of Nekrasov's journal *Sovremennik*, along with its readership. The everyday realism of Nekrasov – who made the disenfranchised commoner the hero of literature and stylized his speech – returns a century later in the grotesque barracks poetry of the neo-avant-garde:

Современник
хе-хе
подбежал
подскочил
похехекал
и снялся
на Никольское кладбище

хе-хе-хе
он сидел
он лежал в своей комнате
пледом завесив окно
хе

а назавтра
старушки хехекали —
повалился забор,
укрывающий рухнувший храм,
придавил человека
ребенка
и управдома
хе-хе
дескать Бог наказал
хе-хе
Мациневич
лети Мацулович
на своем злополучном хе-хе
Мецупович
на своем хе-хе-хе-дирижабле
(Ibid.: 188–189)

a contemporary
heh-heh
ran up
jumped up
snickered
and took off
to the Nikolskoe cemetery

heh-heh-heh
he sat
he lay in his room
blanket blocking the window
heh

and the next day
old ladies were snickering –
the fence had collapsed
that closed off the ruined church,
it crushed a man

a child
and the super

heh-heh
they said, God's just punishment
heh-heh
Matsinevich
fly away Matsulovich
on his ill-fated heh-heh
Metsupovich
on his heh-heh-heh airship

Urban gossip is infused with an incredible story about the reanimated pilot Matsinevich, the central figure in a poetry cycle that includes "The Calamities of Peski".[55] Matsinevich, the protagonist of Khvostenko's texts, was based on a real person. Lev Matsievich (sic!) was an early-twentieth-century aviator and one of the first victims of an air disaster in Russia on 24 September (7 October new style) 1910. Aleksandr Blok, Dmitry Bogemsky, Leonid Andreev, Mikhail Savoiarov, Igor Severianin, and several other writers and artists dedicated works to him. His grave is located in Nikolskoe Cemetery, also in the Peski neighborhood. During the Soviet era, Nikolskoe Cemetery became part of the Aleksandr Nevsky Lavra Museum, which included, among other things, the Committee for the Protection of Monuments. At one point, Khvostenko worked there as a conservator. It is possible that the lyrical hero of "The Calamities of Peski" – "a contemporary" who "lay in his room" in Nikolskoe Cemetery – carries some autobiographical features.

Unlike Brodsky, who viewed the destruction of a mid-nineteenth-century church as a blatant disregard for history and a symbol of the degeneration of Soviet culture, Khvostenko does not engage in direct denunciation. Instead, he fills the poem with the city's chatter, conveyed through the voices of "snickering old ladies" who gossip about how, the day after the demolition, a fence

55 The folio "Redaktsionnaia rabota. 1982" ("Editorial Work. 1982") from the Vladimir Ėrl' collection at the FSO contains the dating of the cycle *Pamiatnik letchiku Matsinevichu* ("A Monument to Pilot Matsinevich") from the summer and autumn of 1965 (FSO 01-037/W-057).

collapsed, crushing "a man, a child and a the super".[56] This style mimics the speech patterns of Moscow's neo-avant-gardists, adopting bourgeois expressions while embodying the role of the crude Soviet commoner. The image of a lyrical hero living in a cemetery aligns with the spirit of the Lianozovo school. In addition, here, one can speak of a poetics of poverty, a theme that traces back to Evgeny Kropivnitsky and Yan Satunovsky, as analyzed by Georg Witte in his article on the Lianozovo school (Witte 2024). Evgeny Lobkov, writing about Kholin, describes the "barracks" poems of the master as "[…] entirely 'made from the waste' of poetic production, using 'antipoetic materials'. The pictorial means are marked by extreme asceticism. 'The ability to choose and discard' is taken to its logical extreme. Clichés, poor rhymes, capitalized truisms […], tautologies abound. There is a total absence of metaphors, epithets, hyperboles […]. Some poems do not contain a single adjective. For Kholin's barrack constructions, they are architectural excesses".[57]

Indeed, Khvostenko's characters differ little from those in Kholin's and Sapgir's texts. Yan Satunovsky's *"poor vocabulary"* is also characteristic of "The Calamities of Peski":

> Мне говорят:
> какая бедность словаря!
> Да, бедность, бедность;
> низость, гнилость бараков;
> серость,
> сырость смертная;

56 Vladimir Ėrl', in his introductory article to the publication of Khvostenko's texts from the 1960s, published in the samizdat magazine *Chasy* ("The Clock", 1977, № 8), mentions three significant graphic cycles created by Khvostenko in the 1960s: "Kak rushili Grecheskuiu tserkov'" ("How the Greek Church Was Destroyed", 1966), "Vivos voco" (1965) и "Insulinovyi shok" ("Insulin Shock", 1965–1966). Unfortunately, nothing is known about how the story of the church's demolition was presented graphically.

57 «[…] целиком „изготовлены из отходов" поэтического производства, из „антипоэтических материалов". Изобразительные средства характеризуются крайним аскетизмом. „Умение выбирать и отбрасывать" доведено до логического предела. Изобилуют — штампы, бедные рифмы, прописные истины […], тавтологии. Полнейшее отсутствие метафор, эпитетов, гипербол […]. Некоторые стихотворения без единого прилагательного. Для холинских барачных конструкций — это архитектурные излишества» (Lobkov 2004).

и вечный страх: а ну как…
да, бедность, так.
(Satunovskii 2012: 72)

They say to me:
what a poverty of vocabulary!
Yes, poverty, poverty;
the filth, the rot of the barracks;
the drab,
the deathly damp;
and the ever-present fear: what if…
Yes, poverty, that's right.

In Leningrad's Peski district, the inhabitants of communal neighborhoods speak the same language as those in the barracks – the language of destitution, hopelessness, fear, and desperate calculation. Literature absorbs the speech of the streets, the jargon of weary, disillusioned philistines, and the voices of the desperate – the Soviet people, after all. In communal apartments and barracks, there was no other. Following in the footsteps of Kholin, Sapgir, and Satunovsky, Khvostenko embarks on a similar literary *démarche*. This kind of poetry naturally defies the boundaries set by official literature, which idealizes the Soviet people. Khvostenko, Kholin, Sapgir, and Satunovsky create literature outside the conventional definitions of the time – beyond the limits of what is generally accepted as poetry. Reading "The Calamities of Peski", one is reminded of Satunovsky's words: «Главное иметь нахальство знать, что это стихи».[58] These words would later become the credo of Vsevolod Nekrasov (Nekrasov 2019: 37).

In the epigraph Khvostenko refers to Nikolai Nekrasov, the editor of *Fiziologiia Peterburga* and the author of *Peterburgskie ugly* (*Petersburg Corners*). Meanwhile, the poem is dedicated to Nekrasov as "a contemporary of Peski". The meaning of this phrase remains ambiguous until we encounter references to Khvostenko's contemporary, Vsevolod Nekrasov, in the poem's colloquial speech. Vsevolod Nekrasov appears to be a potential interlocutor for the author of "The Calamities of Peski".

58 "The main thing is to have the nerve to know that these are poems." See Kukui 2025.



Fig. 13

Vsevolod Nekrasov had firsthand knowledge of communal life, though he was likely unfamiliar with Leningrad's Peski district, where hundreds of communal houses stood. As the artist Ėrik Bulatov noted, Nekrasov transformed the mundane into art (Nekrasov 2019: 355–356). Similarly, "The Calamities of Peski" presents vignettes of everyday urban life. Khvostenko may have had both Nekrasovs in mind, preventing the reader from focusing solely on the literary classic. Ultimately, as street language and poetic language converge, so too does the creativity of both Nekrasovs – especially since Vsevolod Nekrasov valued the work of his namesake, employing everyday speech in his poetry (Konakov 2015). Why shouldn't another pair of doubles – Matsulovich, Metsupovich, etc. – join the multiplying doubles of the protagonist in the *Pamiatnik letchiku Matsinevichu* ("A Monument of Pilot Matsinevich") cycle? The neo-avant-garde text, by its very nature, is polysemous and open to multiple interpretations.

The brevity of Khvostenko's text, with its reduction of descriptions to fragmented phrases of ordinary speech, resembles the minimalist style of Vsevolod Nekrasov. Twisting the surname of the pilot Matsinevich in an imitation of common speech is also a technique reminiscent of Vsevolod Nekrasov's combinatorial wordplay, as seen in "Antistikh" ("Anti-poem"; Nekrasov 2013:

66). Similar naming constructions appear in "The Calamities of Peski", just as Nekrasov employs them in his "Chislovye stikhi" ("Numerical poems", ibid.: 78). The use of everyday language and absurdist storytelling in "Shli dozhdi" ("The Rains Were Coming"; ibid.: 139) aligns with the grotesque elements in "The Calamities of Peski". Likewise, the grotesquery of "Armiia" ("The Army") from Nekrasov's 1961 collection (ibid.: 43) finds echoes in Khvostenko's poem.

Beginning in 1965–66, Vsevolod Nekrasov turned his attention to Leningrad, though he never wrote about Peski specifically.[59] In an article on Yan Satunovsky, Nekrasov articulated his poetic credo, emphasizing the concreteness of poetry: poetry as private speech, with the private becoming universal (Nekrasov 2013: 39). For Nekrasov, poetry is a memorable utterance – speech that meets established criteria while also reshaping them (i.e., it must always be innovative, ibid.). It is always intoned speech (ibid.: 39), a "happy speech event" (ibid.: 40)[60], "an event of our speech now and here" (ibid.: 42)[61]. In the 1960s, Khvostenko was at least aware of Nekrasov's ideas, and some of them likely resonated with him, though Nekrasov's formulaic approach remained foreign to Khvostenko's own style (ibid.: 40).

Moscow Concretism and the Concretions of Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko

By transposing Nikolai Nekrasov's depictions of everyday life into a contemporary setting, Khvostenko undertakes a literary experiment similar to the works of Vsevolod Nekrasov, Genrikh Sapgir, and Igor′ Kholin. However, one should not assume that texts like "The Calamities of Peski" merely signal that the Leningrad beatnik had severed ties with his past and fully embraced Moscow Concretism. The situation is far more complex.

Concretism was not an exclusively Moscow phenomenon, as shown by the notebooks of Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko, a Leningrad painter and a friend of Khvostenko's. Khvostenko studied alongside him at the Theater Institute under the theater director and artist Nikolai Akimov, and in December 1965,

59 See the articles by Ainsley Morse: Morse 2017; Mors 2021. Aleksei Konakov, in his essay "To Leningrad and Back: On Vsevolod Nekrasov's Poems from St. Petersburg" (Konakov 2015), writes that Nekrasov's Petersburg comes from Antsiferov, i.e., the city of the four classic writers: Pushkin, Nekrasov, Dostoevsky, and Blok.

60 «[…] счастливый речевой случай».

61 «[…] событие нашей речи сейчас и здесь».

they exhibited their abstract works together at a private apartment exhibition hosted by the artist Yury Sorokin (Severiukhin 2003: 484). Mikhnov-Voitenko, being primarily a Leningrad artist, was far less engaged with the Moscow underground than Khvostenko. In the early 1960s, Mikhnov-Voitenko wrote about "concretions" (*конкреции*). There is insufficient evidence to determine whether he was familiar with Concretism. Nevertheless, the following excerpts from his notebooks suggest that he conceived of "concretions" independently, without direct reference to Moscow Concretism:

> Конкреция находится на непредвзятой и органичной грани абстрактности мышления<,> образа […] и объекта-материала как такового во всей его реальности в пространстве и времени. Человеческий дух возвращается конкретностью в мир настоящих вещей, который является единственным и действительным во Вселенной для человека. Это путь из […] абстрактного мышления к мышлению истинно человеческому […]. (Mikhnov-Voitenko 1969)

> Concretions exist at the unbiased and organic intersection of abstract thought<,> image, […] and the object-material as such, in all its spatial and temporal reality. The human spirit returns to the world of real things through concreteness – a world that is singular and meaningful to human being in the Universe. This is the path […] from abstract thinking to truly human thought […].

According to Mikhnov-Voitenko, concretion, which embodies and humanizes the spiritualist experience, finds its fullest realization in Action Painting:

> Эстетическое устремление во всем его конкретном смысле и по работе, и по результату […] есть искусство создавать свою собственную действительность […] населять пустыню реализацией своих сокровенностей […]. Единственная реальность — конкреция. […] это выходит за рамки не только живописи, но и вообще искусства. Конкреция — мирочувствование познавшей себя системы. […] Последние конкреции говорят о том, что атака плоскости приведена мной к одному-двум […] движению-выстрелу. Моя давняя, неземная мечта о том, что нечто должно происходить сразу, сейчас, вмиг, однажды и никогда более. […]

> Живопись общих категорий. Философская живопись, но еще вернее — поступок. […] Моя живопись не изображает событие, она являет собой событие. Поэтому совершенно неверно считать ее абстрактной, а событийной или конкретной […].
>
> Aesthetic aspiration, in all its concrete sense – both in its process and in its result […] – is the art of creating its own reality […] inhabiting the desert with through realization of one's innermost essence […]. The only reality is concretion. […] this extends beyond painting and even beyond art itself. Concretion is the worldview of a system that knows itself […]. Recent concretions suggest that I have reduced the attack of the plane to a one-two […] movement-shot. My long-held, unearthly dream: that something should happen instantly, in a flash, once and never again […]. A painting of general categories. A philosophical painting, or even more accurately, an act. […] My painting does not depict an event; it is an event. Thus, it would be entirely mistaken to classify it as abstract; rather, it is event-based or concrete […].[62]

A series of Mikhnov-Voitenko's paintings from the Thaw era is known as *Tiubiki* ("Tubes"). These works were created without a brush by squeezing paint directly from the tube onto the canvas. In the 1970s, he began using a palette knife and allowing paint to drip onto paper attached to a board mounted on a ball joint. This mechanism caused the surface to tilt unpredictably, producing aleatoric patterns.

Often, these works are associated with Jackson Pollock and action painting, which had been displayed at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. However, some Soviet nonconformist artists (Michail Chernyshov, Mikhail Kulakov, Vladimir Slepian) may already have been aware of dripping techniques and Abstract Expressionism before that exhibition (Chunikhin 2025: 122–123). Mikhnov-Voitenko may not have even attended the event; secondhand accounts, illustrations in books, and articles

62 The echoes of the experiments by Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko and the Moscow poets-concretists could still be heard a decade later. In the mid-1970s, while compiling the third volume of his collected works, the writer Aleksandr Kondratov – a friend of Aleksei Khvostenko – titled it *Concretions* (Pavlovets 2014).

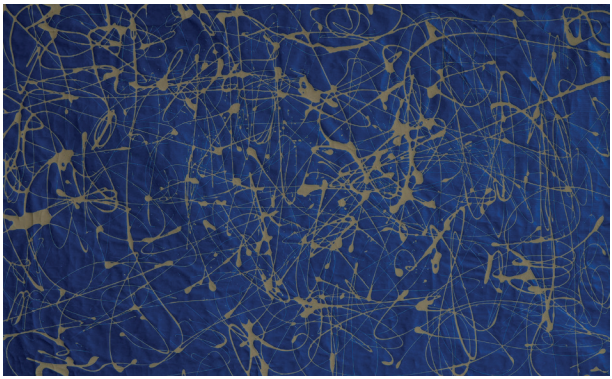


Fig. 14

in contemporary art periodicals could have sufficed to introduce him to these techniques.

Ekaterina Andreeva, an art historian from St. Petersburg, commenting on Mikhnov-Voitenko's discourse on "concretions", observes that abstraction, in this case, is paired with materiality (Andreeva 2012: 273–274). For him, the essence of an artistic statement does not lie in a specific idea, theme, or narrative but in what he calls "the structure of the presentation of the theme" – a "free presentation of the theme as such", "a concrete-abstract picture"[63], as Yan Satunovsky would say (Satunovskii 2012: 149). In "Tubes" and in his well-known palette knife paintings created on a tilting board, spontaneity takes on an Abstract Expressionist form and is materially embodied.

Mikhnov-Voitenko's concept of "concretions" resonates with the Concretism of Vsevolod Nekrasov, who pursued a radically innovative approach to poetic form. However, unlike Kholin, Sapgir, and Satunovsky, Nekrasov engaged with everyday language and the social realities of communal life to a lesser extent. That said, it is evident that the "barracks" aesthetics of the Lianozovo school and Mikhnov-Voitenko's Abstract Expressionist concretions represent two distinct artistic approaches to the same fundamental problem: the relationship between representation and existential experience. The Leningrad artist was more concerned with abstraction, speculation, and

63 «[…] структура подачи темы»; «[…] свободная подача темы как таковая».

spirituality, whereas the Moscow poets prioritized the everyday, the profane, and the naturalistic.

Aleksei Khvostenko, a friend of the Leningrad abstractionist who also drew inspiration from Moscow's poets and artists, may have been closer to Mikhnov-Voitenko in his nonfigurative painting. His exhibitions in the early and mid-1960s predominantly featured abstract works. Nevertheless, "The Calamities of Peski" demonstrates that in poetry, Khvostenko ultimately aligned himself with Moscow Concretism.

This choice becomes apparent not only in comparisons between Khvostenko and Mikhnov-Voitenko or Khvostenko and Vsevolod Nekrasov but also in the divergence of Khvostenko's and Brodsky's artistic trajectories. While it is unsurprising that they explored similar themes – at one time, they were, if not close friends, then certainly good acquaintances – the juxtaposition of "The Calamities of Peski" and "A Stop in the Desert" reveals that by the mid-1960s, Khvostenko and Brodsky were interested in the same subject matter but approached it in fundamentally different ways.

Brodsky and Khvostenko

Not much is known about their relationship, although it is an important subject in the history of 1960s nonconformism. It not only clarifies much about how the underground community was formed but also illuminates the specifics of the Moscow and Leningrad neo-avant-garde and the role of absurdism in the work of writers and artists who belonged to the Thaw generation.

Apparently, Brodsky and Khvostenko had known each other since the early 1960s. Novelist and memoirist Liudmila Shtern, who knew the future Nobel laureate well in his youth, recalls that at Brodsky's birthday parties, there was always "the strikingly imposing <Khvost> of those days, his guitar invariably tucked 'under his coat'" (Shtern 2001: 89).[64] In their youth, Khvostenko and Brodsky shared a common social circle. For example, at that time, Khvostenko's friend, the poet Leonid Entin, who later emigrated to Paris, helped Brodsky to enter the circle of nonconformist writers. According to Khvostenko's recollections, it was Brodsky who introduced him to the work of Moscow poets

64 «[…] необычайно в те годы импозантный, с неизменной гитарой „под полою" <Хвост>».



Fig. 15

of the "barracks school", Genrikh Sapgir and Igor′ Kholin (Khvostenko 1989). Khvostenko also designed the cover for Brodsky's 1963 samizdat collection of poems.

One of the poets' common interests was English and American literature. Aleksei Khvostenko inherited a substantial library with many books in English from his father,[65] Lev Khvostenko, a translator and head of the translation seminar at the Union of Writers, which Brodsky attended (Staviskaia 2008).

65 Regarding Lev Khvostenko's home library and the room in the communal apartment where he lived with his son, D. Pliukhin, a graduate of English School No. 213, recalls: («<Лев> Васильевич с женой и сыном жил в большой коммунальной квартире. В вытянутой двенадцати-тринадцатиметровой комнате стояла его кровать […]. Кровать стояла у самой двери, дальше был самодельный топчан, еще дальше, у окна, покрытый клеенкой стол. У стола и под ним стояло три табуретки. Почти всю противоположную стену занимал старинный шкаф без дверок. Часть его, ближе к столу, была занавешена, и там, очевидно хранилась посуда. Все остальные полки занимали книги, много книг» (Glushkov 2006: 100 ;"<Lev> Vasil′evich, with his wife and son, lived in a large communal apartment. In an elongated, twelve- to thirteen-meter room stood his bed […]. The bed stood right by the door. Farther into the room stood a wooden sleeping platform, while a table covered with a vinyl tablecloth stood near the window. There were three stools around the table and under it. Almost the entire opposite wall was occupied by an old cupboard without doors. Part of it, closer to the table, was curtained, and it was likely that dishes were kept there. The remaining shelves were filled with books – lots of books").

Aleksei Khvostenko knew English from childhood, while Brodsky only started learning it around the time of his friendship with Khvostenko and often borrowed books from his library. They were close friends. In the summer of 1962, in a letter to his friend, the graphic artist Valentin Gerasimenko, who was on holiday with his wife in the Caucasus, Khvostenko sent him a friendly greeting from Brodsky:

> В начале июля — […] отпуск. Могет <sic> быть, и на юг махну, но более хочется в Прибалтику. Загораешь, да? И супруга твоя с тобой. Поклон ей от меня и поцелуй также, но это уж твое дело. Небось лапаешь рыбацких див? Опиши<,> каковы они. Как водичка в море Черном? Привет тебе от Бродского, встреченного мною на Невском за день до сего. Супругу гуляй поболе, пусть добреет.
> (Khvostenko 1962)

> At the beginning of July – […] vacation. I may be going to the south, but I would rather go to the Baltics. Sunbathing, eh? And your wife is with you. A bow to her from me and a kiss too, but that's your business. You've been pawing those astonishing fisherwomen, haven't you? Describe what they're like. How is the water in the Black Sea? Greetings from Brodsky, whom I met on Nevsky the day before. Take your wife out for more walks, it'll make her nicer.

In addition to their love of English and American literature, Brodsky and Khvostenko had many other things in common. Both were educated in an encyclopedic yet unsystematic manner, having never pursued higher education. Brodsky only finished secondary school, which did not prevent him from becoming one of the brightest intellectuals of the twentieth century. Khvostenko studied at the Leningrad's first English school, which, as mentioned earlier, his father had helped to establish, but he was expelled after the seventh grade – apparently for his free-spirited nature. Both grew up in families of creative intellectuals, and for both, the relationship with their father was important[66]. Lev Khvostenko and Aleksandr Brodsky were outstanding personalities, and their sons owed much to them.

66 Especially in the post-war period it was important. Many men had died in World War II. It is interesting that in the films of Brodsky and Khvostenko's contemporary, director Ilya

Neither was interested in career advancement or success in Soviet society. Both worked various jobs: factory mechanic, morgue clerk, auxiliary worker on a geological expedition, conservator at the Committee for the Protection of Monuments, bathhouse watchman, laundry worker, and assistant to a prominent scholar. Both experienced persecution in the 1960s and were forced to emigrate in the 1970s – Brodsky in 1972 and Khvostenko five years later. Success came to both abroad.

Brodsky stood up for Khvostenko when the latter was accused of social parasitism (Nikol′skaia 2018). Brodsky's trial and exile to the Arkhangelsk region were events that also directly affected Khvostenko, especially since the two poets were linked by their stays at the psychiatric clinic. According to Khvostenko, they occupied the same bed at different times (Khvostenko 2005a, chapter 2):

> Когда я первый раз попал в одну из них (называлась она «Пряжкой» по названию речки, на берегу которой стояла), то мой «лечащий» врач сказал мне: «А вот и еще один поэт». Я спросил: «А кто был до меня?» «Бродский», — ответил он. […] тогда я оказался на той же койке, где лежал и он.
>
> When I first went to one of them (it was called "Pryazhka" after the river on whose bank it stood), my "attending" doctor said to me: "Here comes another poet". I asked, "And who was before me?" "Brodsky", he replied. […] Then I found myself in the same bed where he had been lying.

Philosopher and literary scholar Igor′ P. Smirnov has suggested that this story could serve as the subtext for Brodsky's poem "Gorbunov and Gorchakov". Another intriguing coincidence: Gorbunov is the surname of the poet known under the pseudonym Vladimir Ėrl′, a close friend of Khvostenko's and a founder of the Helenucts group.

Averbakh – the novella "Papanya" ("The Father") from *Chastnaia zhizn′ Kuziaeva Valentina* ("The Private Life of Kuziaev Valentin", 1967), *Monolog* ("Monologue", 1972) and *Chuzhie pis′ma* ("Other People's Letters", 1975) – the father is an absent figure. In these three cases, the protagonists' fathers did not die in the war but were instead absent from the family. Ilya Averbakh was shaped within the circle of "Akhmatova's orphans", and was a close friend of Evgeny Rein's, and a friend of Brodsky's.

Both Brodsky and Khvostenko began to be translated at an early stage in their careers. Both contributed to the anthology *Poesia Sovietica degli Anni 60*, compiled by the Italian literary scholar and translator Cesare de Michelis and published by Arnoldo Mondadori (De Michelis 1971). It was at least the third anthology of Soviet poets published in Italy after World War II, supplementing the previous two with young authors of the Thaw generation. The new Italian collection also included works by popular poets of the Thaw, such as Bella Akhmadullina, Evgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, Bulat Okudzhava, Robert Rozhdestvensky, and Aleksandr Kushner.

Already in the years of emigration, Khvostenko was invited to perform alongside Brodsky and Aleksandr Galich at the renowned "nonconformist" Venice Biennale of 1977. A year later, in Paris, Khvostenko and writer Vladimir Maramzin began publishing the magazine *Ėkho* ("Echo"). The first issue, dedicated to "independent Russian literature" and "free Russian art" (Khvostenko/Maramzin 1978: 5–6), opened with a selection of Brodsky's early poems, most of them written during their years of friendship.[67] Diana Vin′kovetskaya, the wife of artist Yakov Vin′kovetsky and a longtime friend of Brodsky, writes in her memoir "Edinitsy vremeni" ("Units of Time") that Brodsky came up with the magazine's name (Vin′kovetskaia 2008). The poets maintained their friendship: in 1981, while working in a London recording studio on albums of songs, Khvostenko invited Brodsky to record his poetry. Brodsky readily agreed, and the recording has been preserved (Khollboll 2009).

Despite their long-standing friendship, Khvostenko and Brodsky ultimately chose different poetic paths. A comparison of "The Calamities of Peski" with "A Stop in the Desert" reveals that by the mid-1960s, their poetry shared only thematic similarities. Nonetheless, at this time, Brodsky's St. Petersburg neoclassicism still intersected with Khvostenko's version of Moscow Concretism. By the mid-1960s, both poets had spent time in psychiatric clinics, both had been accused of social parasitism, and Brodsky had already served his exile in the Arkhangelsk region. Neither had yet seriously considered emigration, but Vienna awaited them both, where they would have to choose a new country of residence. Brodsky had already been "biographed", as Anna Akhmatova grimly joked about his persecution by the authorities. Mean-

67 Maramzin, who published the first typewritten collection of Brodsky's works, may also have initiated this publication.

while, Khvostenko's departure from the USSR was preceded by his increasing involvement with the Moscow neo-avant-garde and his affinity for the "barracks school" and Concretism. At the height of Brodsky's persecution – culminating in his exile – Khvostenko wrote *The Suspector*, a self-portrait depicting the nonconformist hero of the following two decades.

CHAPTER 3

The Suspector

Nonconformist Innovation

The interaction between Moscow and Leningrad nonconformists helped unify the underground movement. By the mid-1960s, it had become a significant community coexisting with Soviet officialdom. The neo-avant-garde eclecticism of the early Thaw, which repurposed the innovations of the early twentieth-century avant-garde, laid the foundation for the next generation of nonconformists. Aleksei Khvostenko played an essential role in bridging the Moscow and Leningrad nonconformist scenes and shaping the neo-avant-garde movement. Like Joseph Brodsky, he endured persecution by the authorities. The absurdity of the Soviet system turned literature and art into a realm of risk, imbuing nonconformism with heightened existential tension. By 1964–65, writing had become a dangerous occupation, inseparable from a writer's personal biography and often in direct conflict with official laws. *The Suspector*, one of the most unexpected and significant works of the Thaw era, emerged from this precarious intersection of reality and text. Contemporaries held it in high regard,[68] as we show in this chapter.



Fig. 16

68 See, for example, Brui 2005; Sapgir 1999; Pligin 2013: 23.

During the same period, the Moscow artist Ėrik Bulatov, a close friend and collaborator of Vsevolod Nekrasov since 1965, sought to create neo-avant-garde paintings that explored the extreme limits of artistic and existential experience, as well as the boundaries of creative expression and human perception. He described one of his artistic experiments from 1965–66 – a series of canvases titled *Razrezy* ("Incisions") – as follows:

> «Разрезы» <1965-66, х., м., 110×110, хранятся в Третьяковке> […] обязаны тому сильному впечатлению, которое было связано с тем, что я ходил рисовать хирургические операции. Простые, на аппендицит. Был знакомый врач, разрешавший мне присутствовать, если случалась операция при его дежурстве. Две вещи тогда мне казались очень важными для формирования моего профессионального сознания — рисование этих операций и чтение «Процесса» Кафки. Одинаковым образом они на меня подействовали. Привозят острый аппендицит. Смотреть сначала практически невозможно. Голова кружится, сейчас вырвет и потеряешь сознание. Но тут наступает какой-то момент, когда ты видишь руки врача, сестры, которые что-то передают, и осознаешь важность этой работы и как точно и быстро делается. Когда необходимость этого дела осознается, совершенно исчезает ощущение эстетического неприятия или болезненности. Наоборот, все становится на место, именно от сознания необходимости того, что происходит. И вот этот пункт, что надо не отворачиваться от больного места, которое невыносимо болит, а прямо на него смотреть, быть в этом месте и что-то здесь делать, мне стал очень ясен. Поэтому у меня советская тема и получилась […]
> (Alekseev 2022: 458)

> *Incisions* <1965–66, oil on canvas, 110×110 cm, housed in the Tretyakov Gallery> were inspired by a powerful experience: I attended surgical operations to draw from life. Simple procedures, like appendectomies. A doctor I knew allowed me to be present during surgeries on his watch. Two things had a profound impact on my artistic consciousness at the time – sketching these operations and reading Kafka's *The Trial*. They affected me in the same way. They would bring in a patient with acute appendicitis. At first, it was almost impossible to watch – I felt dizzy, on the verge of vomiting or passing out. But then a moment came when I noticed the hands of the surgeon, the nurse hand-

> ing over instruments, and I suddenly grasped the significance of their work and the precision with which it was done. Once I understood its necessity, my initial feelings of revulsion or pain completely disappeared. On the contrary, everything fell into place – the awareness of its necessity gave it clarity. This realization – that one should not look away from what is unbearably painful but confront it directly, be present in that space, and engage with it – became pivotal for me. That allowed me to effectively express the Soviet theme in my art […]

This reflection speaks to an extreme degree of creative tension, requiring not only immense self-control but also the ability to perceive and depict what lies beyond ordinary human experience. It involves overcoming trauma and transforming it into art. Here, the traumatic experience serves as a metaphor for Soviet life, which Bulatov sought to comprehend in his painting, attempting to distance himself from it.

In the 1960s, Vsevolod Nekrasov and the poets of the "barracks school" explored the mundane and the ordinary, themes that took on radical new forms in Bulatov's work. Sketching in the operating room pushed Bulatov to the extreme limits of working with everyday subjects. His painting *Zhivu vizhu (I Live I See),* which incorporates Nekrasov's poem of the same name, clearly articulates this principle of representing the ordinary. As Bulatov explained in an interview about their collaboration: «Общее для нас — сосредоточенность на банальном, т. е. на том, что составляет знание обыденное, самоочевидное, явное. Творчество Всеволода Некрасова строится на живой речи. Она не только его материал, но и мера подлинности его поэтического голоса» (Nekrasov 2019: 355–356).[69] Nekrasov's younger contemporary, poet and critic Mikhail Aisenberg, highly valued the creative potential of such aesthetic banalization: «Человек „проще простого". Совершивший в поэзии „бескровную революцию"» (Nekrasov 2019: 421).[70] The presence of the banal in artistic work was just as important to Khvostenko as it was to his Moscow friends and colleagues. This is evident in

69 "What we have in common is a focus on the banal – that is, on what constitutes commonplace, self-evident, and obvious knowledge. Vsevolod Nekrasov's creativity is built on everyday speech. It is not only his material but also the measure of authenticity in his poetic voice."

70 "A man of 'simple simplicity' who made a 'bloodless revolution' in poetry." Mikhail Aisenberg's words about Vsevolod Nekrasov are quoted by the writer Viktor Koval'.

both "The Calamities of Peski" and, even more so, in his programmatic work *The Suspector.*

The Suspector depicts both the banal in its immediate reality and extreme existential experience. It was written under the impression of a stay in a psychiatric clinic.[71] The profane, the meaningless, and the absurd – these are the very elements from which the suspector creates poetry. Later, in the years of emigration, Khvostenko published a text titled "Obmanshchik" ("The Deceiver") in the almanac *Apollo 77* and accompanied it with an epigraph from the "First Epistle to the Corinthians of the Apostle Paul": «*И* незнатное мира […], и униженное […], и ничего не значащее избрал Бог, чтоб упразднить значащее» (Shemiakin 1977: 168).[72]

The Suspector itself was not accompanied by an epigraph, but this quotation retrospectively describes Khvostenko's experiment in the text. As a result of this experiment, Soviet reality was replaced by a narrative of existence on the border of the mental norms imposed by punitive psychiatry. Khvostenko went further than Bulatov – he was not merely an observer of treatment; he was the patient being treated.

Unlike "The Calamities of Peski", which was analyzed in the previous chapter, and *Ten Poems by Verpa Dedicated to Igor' Kholin, The Suspector* stands out due to its existential tension – pushing the limits of human endurance. This tension is absent in the other two works, which focus on formal neo-avant-garde experimentation. "The Calamities of Peski" synthesizes the everyday descriptiveness of Nikolai Nekrasov, the naturalism of barracks poetry, and the Concretist appreciation of spoken language. *Ten Poems by Verpa Dedicated to Igor' Kholin* explores linguistic experimentation in the same spirit of barracks poetry and Concretism. In contrast, *The Suspector* is a neo-avant-garde text that introduced an existential subject or autobiographical protagonist.

This kind of writing, isomorphic to lived experience, shares more with the Abstract Expressionist "concretions" of Mikhnov-Voitenko than with the

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71 December 1965 is given as the date of the text in the 1985 edition, as well as in several surviving typewritten copies. In the article Vladimir Ėrl' wrote about Khvostenko in 1977, published in the samizdat magazine *Chasy* (The Clock, 1977, 8), *The Suspector* is also dated 1965. A typewritten copy of the article is preserved in the Vladimir Ėrl' collection in Bremen (FSO 01-037/W-030).

72 "God chose the unknown of the world […], the humiliated […], and the worthless to abolish the meaningful" (1 Corinthians 1:28).

Concretist poetic formulas of Vsevolod Nekrasov. In *The Suspector*, the Concretism of "The Calamities of Peski" was taken to its existential extreme. This is not just a sketch of urban life – it is, to some extent, a self-portrait of a nonconformist who refused to compromise with the authorities.

Contemporaries recognized the significance of this new poetic voice: «Ничего похожего на его „Верпу" или „Подозрителя" прежде не появлялось. И это уже в начале 1960-х»,[73] wrote Genrikh Sapgir (1999) about Khvostenko's work. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the artists and writers of the late 1950s and 1960s lived and invented the new – innovation was the driving force of the Thaw. Sapgir identified Khvostenko not only as an innovator but also as a unique figure who merges the roles of author and lyrical hero: «[…] в поэзии Хвостенко предстает в чистом виде, сам по себе» (ibid.).[74] Beyond Sapgir, others who knew Khvostenko personally echoed similar sentiments. Larissa Volokhonsky-Pevear, the sister of Anri Volokhonsky – Khvostenko's co-author and friend – described him as possessing "aristocratic nonchalance, fearlessness […] and absolute fidelity to oneself".[75]

This testimony highlights the poet's uncompromising nature, akin to the Renaissance concept of *sprezzatura* – the unforced mastery that grants both intellectual and existential freedom. It adds depth to the portrait of a man who, as early as the 1960s, embraced the motto of the Abbey of Thélème: "Do as you will".[76] Many contemporaries remembered Khvostenko not only as a beatnik – immortalized in the pages of the anthology *The Blue Lagoon*[77] – but also as a Leningrad follower of brother Jean and his like-minded friends.[78] Sapgir and

73 "Nothing like his *Verpa* or *The Suspector* had ever appeared before. And this was already in the early 1960s."

74 "In his poetry, Khvostenko appears in pure form, by himself."

75 «[…] аристократическая беспечность, бесстрашие […] и полное равенство самому себе» (Pligin 2013: 23).

76 In 1961, as mentioned at the beginning of the book, Nikolai Liubimov's translation was published (Rable 1961), which was much more successful than the versions by Vladimir Piast (Rable 1929) and Anna Ėngel'gardt (Rable 1901), and was not adapted, unlike the remarkable retelling for children by Nikolai Zabolotsky (Rable 1935). It met with the approval of, among others, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose book *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura Srednevekov'ia i Renessansa* ("François Rabelais's Works and the Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance") was published in 1965.

77 Kovalev/Kuz'minskii 1983: 2A, 223–390.

78 In his unfinished autobiographical novel *Maksim*, Khvostenko speaks with admiration and reverence about his Viennese friend, Father Gavrila, the reincarnation of brother Jean (chap-

Volokhonsky-Pevear's characterizations align with that of artist William Brui, who knew Khvostenko well, both during the Thaw and in his Parisian years. Brui noted: «<Он> «создал своего героя, свою формулу, свое видение, свое желание коммуникации с остальным миром» (Brui 2005).[79]

These three retrospective characterizations come from intellectuals who had known Khvostenko for decades. The complimentary nature of their assessments does not diminish their credibility – especially since neither Sapgir, Volokhonsky-Pevear, nor Brui were close friends of the poet. Khvostenko is undeniably a significant figure not only in the history of the neo-avant-garde and nonconformism but also in the broader history of the Thaw. Although Sergei Chuprinin's seminal, elegant, and nostalgic encyclopedia of the Thaw does not include a biographical essay on Khvostenko, this omission is likely due to the fact that the nonconformist movement as a whole is only modestly represented in his two-volume work.[80] To some extent, this editorial choice is justifiable, as the underground scene became a cultural, social, and political force primarily in the 1970s and 1980s. However, given that Chuprinin includes Joseph Brodsky – unlike many of his contemporaries – among the poets of the Thaw, a more complete picture would also recognize those who were not only close to the future Nobel laureate in the 1960s but also equally renowned at the time. Khvostenko, without a doubt, would have been a fitting inclusion in an expanded edition of *The Thaw Encyclopedia*.

Artist William Brui firmly believed that the statement "from 1965 and even earlier, he <Khvostenko> was known by everyone in St. Petersburg' (Brui 2005)[81] is not an exaggeration. Indeed, 1965 was the year Khvostenko composed "The Calamities of Peski", *Ten Poems by Verpa Dedicated to Igor' Kholin*, *The Suspector*, and other landmark texts. It was also the year of his exhibition at Kira Sapgir's apartment. Nevertheless, as a neo-avant-gardist, Khvostenko

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ter "Otets Gavrila" ("Father Gavrila") in: Khvostenko 2005a). Konstantin Kedrov recalls how, as early as the 1990s, Khvostenko confessed: "adhere to the code of Thélème Abbey […] Everyone does what he wants!" (Kedrov 2005). Art historian Ksenia Muratova, who knew Khvostenko well, writes that he was a man who "believed that everything was allowed to him, no matter what he wished" («своеволи<е> человека, […] внутренне считавшего, что все дозволено, чего бы он ни пожелал»; Pligin 2013: 151).

79 "<He> created his own hero, his own formula, his own vision – his own way of communicating with the rest of the world."

80 Chuprinin 2022a; Chuprinin 2022b.

81 «[…] с 1965-го года и даже раньше в Питере его <Хвостенко> знали все».

was known exclusively within the nonconformist circles of the 1960s. To the general public in Russia, if he is known at all today, it is primarily as a songwriter.

His work and life experience during the 1960s – when poets' and artists' reputations were shaped not by official media but by tacit rankings within the nonconformist community and through contacts with foreign publishers and art experts – remains frustratingly obscure. However, reviews by Sapgir, Volokhonsky-Pevear, and Brui help us begin to reconstruct the innovations Khvostenko brought to poetry and artistic life in those years. Similar studies have been successfully undertaken by Grigory Drobinin (2015) and Ilja Kukuj (Kukui 2017a and 2024a),[82] and in this chapter, we will build upon their work in conceptualizing Khvostenko's poetics.

Before proceeding, it is important to discuss Verpa, which Genrikh Sapgir also identified as one of the most significant artistic innovations of the 1960s. This discussion is all the more necessary given that Khvostenko himself considered *The Suspector* to be part of the Verpa's corpus.

Verpa

The notion of "artistic experiment" describes the activities of Verpa more accurately than the terms "group", "movement", or "artistic circle". It is difficult to speak of its poets as members of a single collective. Besides Khvostenko, the poet and biochemist Anri Volokhonsky and the poet Leonid Entin perhaps had the closest ties to Verpa. In addition, the writer and artist Yury Galetsky, the scholar Ivan Steblin-Kamensky (who later became a well-known Oriental Studies scholar), the writer and poet Kari Unksova, and a few others were also connected to Verpa. Still, Volokhonsky, who was closest to Khvostenko both as a creator and as a friend, consistently maintained that his relation to Verpa was oblique. At first glance, this statement seems easy to rebut, because a significant number of works were co-authored by Volokhonsky and Khvostenko. But on this point, it is worth distinguishing texts signed with the initials "A.Kh.V." (further as AXV) from Verpa works that frequently bear a different artistic character. Although Verpa and the works of AXV converge on similar artistic preoccupations, they were published separately and remain distinct, even though drawing a line between them can be challenging. Verpa's

82 See also: Vishniakova 2009.

activities fall within a period from the beginning of the 1960s through the middle of the 1970s that coincides almost entirely with the time the Malaya Sadovaya cafeteria was popular with artists and writers[83]. In the only dissertation we are aware of to investigate Khvostenko's work and to propose its own chronology, Grigory Drobinin limits that chronology to the 1960s and 1970s (Drobinin 2015). In his introductory article to the 2003 publication of Khvostenko's Paris diary, Ilja Kukuj establishes more precise perimeters of Verpa's work, indicating that the group was active from 1962 up to 1974 (Kukui 2017a). New variants will be proposed in the future for the obvious reason that Verpa was never an institutionalized project registered in distinct socio-political, socio-cultural, or spacio-temporal coordinates. Verpa's nature was elusive, something the second generation of Moscow conceptualists aptly called "kolobkovost'" ("kolobokness"), denoting a tendency to avoid identifying with any kind of representatives of Soviet society. Verpa was the fruit of freedom during the Thaw, with hopes for consistent liberalization in the post-Stalin USSR. While primarily advocating for a new relevance of the avant-garde tradition, Khvostenko and Anri Volokhonsky, along with their associates, were also drawn to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.



Fig. 17

Khvostenko and his circle are frequently classified as Soviet beatniks, but during the 1960s neither he nor his friends attempted to imitate the Amer-

83 On the Malaya Sadovaya circle, see: Bukovskaia 2025; Gaivoronskii 2004; Nikolaev 2024; Morse 2025.

ican Beats. Excerpts from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* were translated in the second half of the 1960s by the Moscow writer Andrei Sergeev, who, for all his interest in the American Beats, shared none of their behavioral characteristics. While Khvostenko was continually engaged in literary translation, he never translated Kerouac, Ferlinghetti, or Ginsburg.

Vagueness and elusiveness as sociocultural strategies characterize Khvostenko's artistic experiment with Verpa. In the foreword to Verpa's sixth collection – one of the few texts that can be regarded, with some reservations, as a manifesto – Leonid Entin asserted: "<T>he fundamental achievements in this sphere are his" (Kovalev/Kuz′minskii 1983: 2A, 380). Late Soviet nonconformists created their declarations and manifestos in isolation from the audience addressed by Futurists or Surrealists in their appeals. Verpa's inherent feature was its private, chamber quality. Unlike George Maciunas, the leader of Fluxus, Khvostenko did not scrupulously collect documentation of Verpa's literary experiments. Verpa's samizdat collections and typewritten publications were preserved thanks only to Vladimir Ėrl′, who collected and published them via Pol′za, his samizdat publishing house, and to Volokhonsky, who published Khvostenko's works posthumously in *Verpa* (2005). Khvostenko did not work to promote Verpa and had no ambition to make his venture as public as possible. As someone who lived in Paris for several years with no passport and, according to his friends, gave away the rights to the first record of his songs for two bottles of wine, Khvostenko treated Verpa's works as a mythopoetic life-creating experiment; it was "work in progress", and anyone could take part by picking up on this made-up literary-mythological game.

Today, Verpa is thought of as Khvostenko's most significant literary creation. And yet there is no doubt that what made him famous was his songs, including the one performed by Russian rock star Boris Grebenshchikov, "Nad nebom golubym" (text by Volokhonsky; "Above the Blue Sky"; in his version, Grebenshchikov mistakenly sings "beneath the blue sky"). Many of these songs were written together with Volokhonsky. The well-known Russian rock group Auktsyon, as well as its individual members, recorded several successful albums in the 1990s and 2000s – some very successful – with Khvostenko and Volokhonsky. We should say that, for his part, Khvostenko was by all accounts deliberately careless in relation to his songs, as he considered himself primarily an artist and theater director. His paintings and graphic works, his shows and theatrical experiments are, unfortunately, less well known, at least for now.

But Khvostenko's literary legacy – which can hardly be separated from his songs, his plays, his stage productions, his drawings, and paintings – is sought by a readership that values avant-garde and postmodern experiments. And in this regard, Verpa best represents Khvostenko's creative output.

Verpa's name is greatly revealing when it comes to the essence of Khvostenko's literary project. As a homonym and a neologism, it is polysemic. The poet explains its meaning in the following terms:

> «Верпа» — отчасти шутка. С одной стороны, это — муза, с другой — небольшой якорь, который служил на больших судах, чтобы вывести судно в море. Вернее, его называли «верп». Этот «верп» вывозили на шлюпках в открытое море, закидывали в воду и подтягивали на него корабль.
> (Khvostenko 2005c: 257)

> In part, Verpa is a joke. One the one hand, it is a muse, and on the other – a small anchor on big ships, which served to guide the ship out to sea. More precisely, it was called a "verp". This kedge anchor was hauled out on dinghies into the open sea, thrown into the water, and then used to wind the ship out.

In the anthology *The Blue Lagoon*, Larissa Volokhonsky-Pevear considers how the word "verpa" might have come about:

> Во время пребывания Анри Волохонского в городе Мурманск, где он работал химиком в НИИ, в сказанный институт получилась телеграмма следующего содержания: «При погрузке траулера вышли из строя подшипники у балеров. Верпование невозможно».
> (Kovalev/Kuz′minskii 1983: 2A, 356)

> While Anri Volokhonsky was staying in Murmansk, where he was working as a chemist for NII <the Scientific Research Institute>, a telegram with the following content happened at the said institute: "Ball-bearings on the trawler out of order. Can't kedge <Verpovanie nevozmozhno>."

According to another version, Verpa is the result of the kind of typo that the avant-gardists and their successors valued so highly. Grigory Drobinin draws

attention to the fact that in Latin "verpa" means penis; he then juxtaposes this meaning with Khvostenko's artistic pseudonym Khvost ("tail"), making the analogy penis = tail (Drobinin 2015: 57). Taking Khvostenko's taste for obscenity into account, we should certainly welcome this observation.

The poet's own remark that Verpa is a muse should not be ignored. In Verpa's typewritten collections (with the collaboration of Volokhonsky, Galetsky, Steblin-Kamensky, and others) and in Verpa's publications in The *Blue Lagoon*, the journal *Ėkho*, and other publications abroad during the late Soviet period, we encounter a mythical being with features of an animal and a plant, endowed with geographic (!) prolongation and an ability to create artistic works, who also knows first-hand what a hangover is. As Khvostenko's muse, Verpa represents the metamorphoses of his poetic mythology, which amounts to a syncretic artistic experiment where definitions and boundaries are elements in a continuously creative game that fits, in general, within a temporal frame bounded by the beginning of the 1960s and the middle of the 1970s, while possibly continuing even later.

The Helenucts relied on Verpa's experience a great deal in their own art and life-creation practices, and Khvostenko stood out as the link between Leningrad's older and younger avant-gardist generations. Verpa lies outside Soviet reality. Verpa's poetic creativity strives toward freedom; it was one of the most active life-creation strategies in late Soviet unofficial art. We should note that Verpa was distinct from many other projects oriented toward modernist and avant-garde practices pursued by representatives of unofficial culture insofar as it was not just compatible with modernist archaism, but also open to many other traditions, including, as stated above, styles and plots from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This is where Verpa and the Helenucts differ.

A New Hero

Let us return to *The Suspector*, one of *Verpa's* most striking works. This unusually titled text embodied what, in 1965, was perceived by Moscow and Leningrad nonconformists as entirely new – something that, over time, became the *modus vivendi* of underground artists and freethinkers. Khvostenko managed to create a hero not of his own time but of the not-too-distant future. As the Thaw came to an end, a new type of artist – and perhaps a new form of artistic expression – emerged.

The underground of the 1960s certainly had no shortage of heroes. Aleksandr Aref'ev, Leonid Gubanov, Anatoly Zverev, Aleksandr Kondratov, Valentin Khromov, and Sergei Chudakov – these were the rebels, freethinkers, flamboyant bohemians, and eccentric dandies of the Thaw era. In Mikhail Pyliaev's time, they might have been called "weirdos" or "originals";[84] today, following Andy Warhol and his Factory entourage, they might be considered "freaks". In Anatoly Zverev's circle, bohemianism took on extreme forms.[85] Equally radical in their rejection of social norms were figures like Sergei Chudakov[86] and the Aref'ev circle – also known as the Order of Mendicant Painters or the Boltaika group.[87] Within Leonid Chertkov's circle, deliberate marginalization was seen as the most effective path to freedom from Soviet society.[88] The Philological school,[89] Ivan Likhachev,[90] Nikolai Vil'iams[91] – these names belonged to a diverse and restless underground scene. However, there were far fewer nonconformists in the 1960s than in the 1970s and 1980s. More on the artistic behavior of the nonconformists will be discussed below, in chapter 8.

To illustrate the liberties taken by nonconformists, we will recount a story from writer Lev Losev about how Aleksandr Kondratov came up with the pseudonym "Sandy Conrad":

> Школа <милиции, где учился одно время А. Кондратов> помещалась в здании Главного штаба <на Дворцовой площади в Ленинграде>. Однажды Сашу послали красить крышу, и он говорил, что той же рыжей кровельной краской решил написать свое имя на чугунных мошонках коней, несущих колесницу русской Славы, — по букве на яйцо. Для САША-КОНДРАТОВ яйца не хватало, и это будто бы дало ему идею псевдонима СЭНДИКОНРАД! (с восклицательным знаком).
> (Losev 2010: 294)

84 See Pyliaev 1898.
85 See Vorob'ev 2011; Shteinberg 2011; Savitskii 2023.
86 Orlov 2014.
87 Nazanskii 2011; Savitski 2006.
88 See Khromov 2025; Nikol'skaia 2002: 292–303.
89 Losev 2010: 227–238, 279–288; Kullė/Ufliand 2005.
90 Nikol'skaia 2002: 249–260; Nikol'skaia 2024; Likhachev 2006.
91 Vil'iams 1980.

> The school <of militia, where Aleksandr Kondratov studied at one time> was located in the General Staff building <on Palace Square in Leningrad>. Once, Sasha was sent to paint the roof, and he decided, using the same red roofing paint, to write his name on the cast-iron scrotums of the horses pulling the chariot of Russian Glory – one letter per testicle. However, there weren't enough testicles for *SASHAKONDRATOV*, and it was as if this limitation inspired his pseudonym: *SANDYCONRAD!* (with an exclamation point).

Theater scholar Irina Nagishkina, in her memoirs about Khvostenko, recalls the atmosphere within the nonconformist circle:

> Один <поэт Леонид> Губанов чего стоил! Помнишь, ты вошёл в порезанной куртке, весь в царапинах:
> — Хвост, что это?
> — А, Губанов у подъезда спрашивает: «Хвост, кто как поэт лучше, я или Данте?» Я ему: «Да ты и до Пушкина не дорос!» Он и бросился на меня с ножом.
> (Pligin 2013: 123–124)

> That Gubanov <poet Leonid Gubanov, leader of the Moscow group SMOG> alone was something! I remember you came in with a torn jacket, all scratched up:
> – Khvost, what happened?
> – Ah, Gubanov stopped me at the entrance and asked, "Khvost, who's a better poet, me or Dante?" I told him, "You're not even on Pushkin's level!" And he lunged at me with a knife.

In 1965, among the flamboyant bohemians, poets inspired by Mayakovsky's heroism, eccentric outsiders, and dissident freethinkers, a *new* hero emerged: *the suspector (podozritel')*. This neologism – suspect + (spectat)or = suspector – was coined by Khvostenko, a devoted reader of Khlebnikov and Rabelais, both of whom were dedicated inventors of new words. For the generation of the sixties and the Thaw as a whole, Khvostenko's term never became a widely adopted buzzword. However, within Moscow and Leningrad's nonconformist circles, the suspector resonated as an ominous premonition of what was to come. After all, the era of liberal reforms and hope soon gave way to disillusionment.

Khvostenko seemed to anticipate one of the emerging strategies for surviving outside a system that had abandoned dreams of 'socialism with a human face'. The suspectors would become those who, in the 1970s, deliberately marginalized themselves, distancing themselves from Soviet society to create a parallel literary, artistic, theatrical, and scientific life outside the official framework.

The text opens with the declaration: «Я — дегенерат, имеющий все основания» (Khvostenko 1985: 3).[92] A degenerate examined in a Soviet psychiatric clinic has every reason *not* to be a unit of the collective, building socialism or dreaming of it, but instead to embrace "degeneration" in defiance of established behavioral norms. In his famous book *Entartung* (1892–1893; *Degeneration*), Max Nordau described the culture of his era, that of the 'fin de siècle', as a deviation from a psychological norm representing traditional values – an idea that Khvostenko may have been playing with at the beginning of *The Suspector.*[93] It is the self-portrait of a neo-avant-gardist who opposes Nordau more than half a century after the publication of his notorious work.

However, the suspector is not simply a new kind of deviant rebelling against the Soviet regime. While the psychopathological motif in the text has autobiographical roots, the neologism – formed in the spirit of Khlebnikov and the Futurists – was not coined merely to describe a personal episode. Imprisonment in a psychiatric clinic serves only as a backdrop and catalyst for a new poetic experience. The neologism introduces us not to someone who is merely suspicious in the eyes of ordinary people and the state's controlling institutions (there were already plenty of such figures among the 1960s nonconformists), but rather to a peculiar observer of life – one who deliberately distances himself from the world and experiences a profound sense of relief in doing so.

What matters here is the passivity of the observer, detached from society ("apathy is the strongest passion"; paragraph 30)[94], and the preference for contemplation – the *vita contemplativa* – over active existence. Laziness, idleness, *dolce far niente, otium* – these are essential to the worldview of the Leningrad-Moscow monk of Thélème Abbey. Sergei Dovlatov paints a similar por-

92 "I am a degenerate of every reason."

93 The Nonconformists' interest in Nordau in the mid-1960s is reflected by a 1963 diary entry by Mikhail Grobman: "Chitaiu Maksa Nordau" ("Reading Max Nordau"; Grobman 2002: 32).

94 «[…] апатия — самая сильная страсть».

trait of Joseph Brodsky in the mid-1960s: «[…] он жил не в пролетарском государстве, а в монастыре собственного духа» (Dovlatov 1999: III, 26).[95]

One of Khvostenko's first songs, "L′et dozhdem iiun′" ("Pouring Rain in July", 1959; Khvostenko/Volokhonskii 2006: 7), composed in collaboration with the writer Boris Dyshlenko, captures the intoxicating idleness of those whom Soviet legislation had labeled "social parasites" (*tuneiadtsy*):

Льет дождем июнь, льет дождем июнь
А мы с Васей вдвоем под дождем стоим
Мы стоим под дождем и когда пройдет он ждем
А когда пройдет он мы домой пойдем

Под дождем стоять нам резону нет
Мы хотим в кабак только денег нет
Хоть бы кто-нибудь нас пригласил с собой поесть
Но у нас кто не работает так тот не ест

А работать мы не хотим никак
На зарплату нам не купить коньяк
Ну а водку пить мы эстеты не хотим
Вот потому мы не работа-им

It's raining in June it's raining in June
And Vasia and I are standing in the rain
We're standing in the rain and waiting for it to pass
And when it passes we'll go home

There's no reason for us to stand in the rain
We want to go to a pub but we don't have any money
We wish someone would invite us to eat with them
But if you don't work you don't eat

And we don't want to work
We can't buy cognac on our wages

95 "[…] he lived not in a proletarian state but in a monastery of his own spirit".

And we aesthetes don't want to drink vodka
That's why we don't work
(Transl. Thomas Campbell)

In 1980, visiting Anri Volokhonsky in Tiberias, Khvostenko composed with him "Pesnia o nezavisimosti" ("Song of Independence") – a declaration of the suspector's existence as someone who is free from social and political engagement:

Кто от мира независим кто ему узду не рвет
Кто ему от ямы лисьей волчий корень не кует
Кто дубовою пенькою в печь не мечет сгоряча
Кто кумы его тюрьмою не кивает от плеча
Голова лежит поодаль руки-ноги в стороне
Бродит узник на свободе в незнакомой стороне
Черт на редкий ладан лает сладкий дым меняет масть
Ветер-ветер собирает зубы в каменную пасть

[…] Узник бродит вкруг темницы головой ломая дверь
Все течет перемениться говорю я вам теперь
Ах, поверь поверь поверьте, говорю, поверьте мне
Волчий дуб не стоит смерти в незнакомой стороне
Слез не знает пень в природе чтоб лепить на обух плеть
Кто от мира на свободе чтобы хвалу ему не петь?
(Ibid.: 114)[96]

Who is independent of the world, who does not spur the world on
Who forges not a wolf's root for him from the foxes' pit
Who throws no oaken stump into the furnace in the heat of the moment
Who nodes from his shoulder with the prison of the fox
His head lies at some distance, his hands and feet apart
The prisoner is wandering free around an unknown land
The devil barks at rare incense sweet smoke changes its suit
The wind-wind gathers teeth into its stony mouth

96 See also the memoirs of Larissa Volokhonsky-Pevear: Pligin 2013: 20–47.

> […] The prisoner wanders around the dungeon, breaking door with head
> Everything flows, all will change, I tell you now
> Ah, believe me, believe me, believe me all, I tell you, believe me
> A wolf oak is not worth death in an unknown land
> A stump in nature knows no tears to wrap a whip around the axe
> Who is free of the world not to sing its praise?

The experience that first emerged in Leningrad is now transformed into a broader statement of freedom beyond the Soviet system – asserting the autonomy of a man of the world. The hero celebrated in "Song of Independence" would return to post-Soviet Russia in the early 1990s – not as an exile, but as a rock star, welcomed with great enthusiasm.

So, the suspector is a kind of observer – a witness, and a subject who has distanced himself from Soviet reality. But what kind of observation is he conducting? The observation of the suspector is not based on imagination in the way reality is often perceived, nor is it an objective, scientific form of observation (such as sociological or psychological analysis). Rather, it is a specific artistic vision. The suspector is a kind of "embedded" observer – not a scientist, but a poet – who discovers new realms where poetry can exist, suspecting its presence in places where few would expect to find it. At this point, it is worth recalling again the words of Yan Satunovsky, which inspired Vsevolod Nekrasov: "The main thing is to have the nerve to know that these are poems" (Nekrasov 2019: 37). In a conversation with his friend from the Thaw period, the chemist Boris Filanovsky, Khvostenko characterized himself in precisely this way: «Я не поэт, Боря. Я только исследую те области, в которых может существовать поэзия» (Filanovskii 2021).[97]

The text of *The Suspector* supports this assertion. The appearance of primitive, natural-scientific observation precedes the poet's work:

> 10.
> Люди — канарейки
> Я разглядываю их
> Перед тем как взять перо
> (Hereafter cited from Khvostenko 1985)

97 "I'm not a poet, Boria. I only explore those areas in which poetry can exist."

10.
People are canaries
I scrutinize them
Before I take up my quill

However, this is merely a preliminary procedure for the lyrical hero, who is "living in the Izmailovsky menagerie" (a park in Moscow that was once a menagerie). Notably, this same location would later, in the 1980s, become the setting for the performances of the Collective Action group. Here, the quill is nothing more than a tool for documenting the experience of extreme marginality. The lyrical hero is both detached and a master of embracing idiosyncrasy in everything and anything:

8.
не хочу
не могу
не желаю

9.
сил моих нет
лет моих нет
рыб моих нет
рук моих нет
ног моих нет

8.
Don't want
can not
do not wish

9.
ain't got no strength
ain't got no years
ain't got no fish
ain't got no hands
ain't got no legs

The lyrical hero, like the narrator of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (« un personnage intermittent »), is not constantly present; he alternates between being absent and reappearing.

18.
Разумеется я здесь
Я присутствую
Я исчезаю
Я у

18.
Of course I am here
I am present
I disappear
I'm lea

The form of these apophatic, semi-anonymous, and dystopian statements is fragmentary. At first glance, they resemble random entries in a notebook, but the text is deliberately structured as a list. It includes, among other elements, reiterations of primitive, terse statements:

26.
Что это — тюрьма
Что это — дом
Что это — город
Что это — музыка

26.
That this is a prison
That this is a house
That this is a city
That this is music

The fragmentary phrases, often ambiguous or obscure in meaning, are methodically numbered in a simple sequence. The statements themselves embody linguistic breakdowns – failures and ruptures in language. They exist

as "parts of speech" in the most literal sense: disconnected, refusing to illustrate any coherent linguistic system. This approach differs starkly from that of Brodsky, who, following W. H. Auden, believed in the power of language to transcend time and history (Savitskii 2024). In this divergence between Brodsky and Khvostenko, we also see their opposing poetic philosophies – a contrast previously examined through the juxtaposition of "A Stop in the Desert" and "The Calamities of Peski".

19.
Сиди рядом
Я при
Ладно не
вольно

19.
Sit close by
I'm co
Okay not
at ease

The lyrical hero of *The Suspector* embodies an indifference and uncertainty that emerge from speaking from nowhere. Language is presented here in a state of disintegration – reduced to its raw, concrete immediacy, to the fragmented remains of speech. Words become ruins. They are at once unspoken and spoken, existing as remnants rather than coherent expressions.

Notably, paragraph 32 is left blank, reminiscent of the famous blank page in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. In paragraph 33, the silence and absence from the previous section provoke a reaction akin to that of audiences witnessing John Cage's performance of *4'33"* – as far as such an experience was imaginable in the Leningrad and Moscow of the 1960s.

5.
Ах вот как
Ах вот оно что
Ах вот оно как
Ах вот что […]

32.

33.
O..!
[…]

41.
Улица на которую
Выходят мои окна
[…]

43.
Трамвайная остановка

44.
Почтовый ящик

5.
Ah, that's how
Ah, that's what it is
Ah, that's how it is
Ah, that's what […]

32.

33.
Oh..!
[…]

41.
The street on which
My windows overlook
[…]

43.
Streetcar stop

44.
Mailbox

The stunned exclamation "Oh!" (33) is followed by concretist notations of the ordinary, the mundane, and the insignificant. From these elements, a new poetic language emerges. The tension between the simplicity of the spoken word and the enormity of the neo-avant-garde experiment in poetic reinvention reaches its peak. Here, ordinariness and banality are transformed into sources of poetic otherness.

Returning to the first sentence of *The Suspector* ("I am a degenerate […]"), it is worth noting that this text functions as a self-portrait. Like a Cubist painting, as interpreted by Gleizes and Metzinger (*1912*), it integrates experiences, observations, and associations that accompany its creation. Another avant-garde technique employed by Khvostenko is Surrealist automatic writing, which many authors associated with Verpa, including the Helenucts, embraced.

What makes this text innovative is its complete openness to incorporating any statement. This openness is partly a result of the fact that it is written by someone who introduces himself as a lunatic. What we have before us are the notes of an author officially recognized as insane, someone free to say whatever he pleases – and, more importantly, *however* he pleases. This second freedom (the *how*) leads to great surprises, reflected in the suspector's erratic speech: fragmented phrases, disjointed words, exclamations, and abrupt pauses. The automatic writing of the Surrealists was shaped by psychoanalytic ideas about uncontrolled psychological processes, drawn from Sigmund Freud. However, as a victim of Soviet psychiatry, Khvostenko writes without reference to Freud. *The Suspector* is not mediated by an intellectual theory but instead documents the real disintegration of consciousness.

As a neo-avant-garde act of self-representation, *The Suspector* anticipates several other landmark works of nonconformist literature that blur the boundaries between autobiography and self-portraiture. It predates the samizdat publication of Venedikt Erofeev's bestseller *Moskva–Petushki* (*Moscow Stations*) by several years and precedes Lev Rubinstein's famous "Ėto ia" ("It's Me") – a self-portrait in the form of library catalog cards (Rubinshtein 1996). Also worth mentioning is Ėduard Limonov's *Ėto ia, Ėdichka (It's Me, Eddie)*, particularly because its title was borrowed from *Ėto ia, Gospodi: Avtobiografiia*

Rokuėlla Kenta (It's Me, O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent), which became a Soviet bestseller after its Russian translation in 1965. The second edition, printed in 1966 with a run of 100,000 copies, was produced unusually quickly by Soviet publishing standards.[98] Khvostenko's *The Suspector*, which likely resonated with the widespread interest in Kent, completely subverts the genres of autobiography and self-portraiture by discrediting the subject / lyrical hero / narrator. Among the authors mentioned above, perhaps only Lev Rubinstein managed to create an equally compelling and experimental self-portrait in literary form.

In *The Suspector*, the author / lyrical hero lacks a stable social identity; he is "piecemeal" («кусочен»), as one might have said in the 1920s during the era of literary montage – a significant precursor to the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s.[99] Among the avant-gardists of the early Soviet period, Peter Viazemsky, the author of *Staraia zapisnaia knizhka* ("Old Notebook"), was particularly valued for his exploration of the "fragmentary persona". He wrote: «Бог фасы мне не дал, а дал мне только несколько профилей» (quoted in: Ginsburg 2007: 97)[100].

Khvostenko similarly alternates between "profiles", using fragmented phrases, incoherent speech fragments, and declarative statements. Rather than reflexivity, seriality, or other unifying principles, he embraces the reality

98 Kent 1965 and 1966. The nonconformists seemed to have a critical attitude toward Kent's book and work. Varlam Shalamov, their older contemporary, wrote about him in 1971: «Мертвый художник — Рокуэлл Кент, пустой, не увидевший в Севере ничего, кроме чистой линии. Гоген, примененный к Северу без гогеновских результатов» ("The dead painter is Rockwell Kent – empty, seeing nothing but pure line in the North. Gauguin, applied to the North without Gauguin's results"; Shalamov 2004: 321).

99 On Viazemsky, Shklovsky, and avant-gardist montage, see: Savitskii 2009. In the 1970s and 1980s, literary montage became an integral part of nonconformist literature. A monument to the underground – the anthology of the unofficial Russian poetry, *The Blue Lagoon* – was compiled by one of the key late Soviet neo-avant-gardists, Konstantin Kuz′minsky, as a monumental collection of nonconformist materials. «[…] принцип один, — коллаж» ("[…] the principle is the same – collage"), Kuz′minsky wrote about his work after the publication of the nine-volume anthology (quoted in: Kukui 2022: 17–18).

100 "God did not give me a full face; he gave me only a few profiles." *Profili: ėsse o russkikh khudozhnikakh* ("Profiles: Essays on Russian Artists") is the title of a famous book by Abram Ėfros (1930). The art critic and curator Aleksandr Borovsky, an admirer of Ėfros, titled his own collection of articles on contemporary artists *Siluėty sovremennykh khudozhnikov* ("Silhouettes of Contemporary Artists"), referencing Ėfros' renowned work (Borovskii 2003).

of failure, discontinuity, omission, and what one might call *under-observation* – to borrow a pun in the style of *The Suspector*, Rabelais and Khlebnikov.

In Khvostenko's text, disease competes with madness: «[…] история и фауна — болезнь, флора — безумие».[101] Speech, in this context, is a means of breaking free from established meaning: "Saints are insane" («святые умалишенные»). This is an escape not only from language but from poetry itself. Grigory Drobinin, in his dissertation on Khvostenko's poetics (previously cited), interprets *The Suspector* as "the lyrical subject's transcendence of his present state in order to achieve a higher qualitative status" through "the destruction of his social shell and the deconstruction of social reality" (Drobinin 2015: 13).[102]

Indeed, the text chronicles the transformation of the lyrical hero – the poet's rebirth into a new kind of author. This is a process of creative self-destruction and reassembly, reminiscent of the kinetic sculptures of Khvostenko's contemporary, the *schizo-engineering* genius Jean Tinguely.

In *The Suspector*, poetry is destroyed, burned away:

46.
[…]
На тарелках
На блюдцах
На полу
47.
Я сжигаю стихи на лестнице

46.
[…]
On plates
On saucers
On the floor

101 "History and fauna are a disease; flora is madness."

102 «[…] преодоление лирическим субъектом своего настоящего состояния для получения более качественного статуса» с помощью «разрушения своей социальной оболочки и деконструкции социальной реальности».

47.
I burn poems on the stairs

The Suspector is a work of neo-avant-garde *anti-poetry*, operating outside the established, institutional understanding of poetic creation. The types of poems published in magazines *Yunost'* or *Novyi Mir*, those that once appeared in the pre-war *Zvezda*, or those written in the hope of being recited at poetry readings by the Mayakovsky monument – Khvostenko ritually burns them. He finds *new* poetry in the fragmentation of words, in the fragmentation of life, in places where no one expects poetry to exist. The suspector is precisely that poet-researcher of new poetic forms and unexpected poetic spaces, the kind of figure Boris Filanovsky describes in his memoirs.

The suspector's speech is foreign speech – an act of dissimulation, a dissimulation of language itself, a dissimulation of verse. Yet the suspector ultimately remains true to himself, just as Aleksei Khvostenko remained true to himself in the retrospective accounts of his contemporaries, including Genrikh Sapgir, Larissa Volokhonsky-Pevear, and William Brui, whose recollections open this chapter. This fragmented, deconstructed text – arranged in a simple, numbered sequence – presents us with the kind of nonconformist hero familiar from the prose of Leon Bogdanov, Aleksandr Il'ianen, Evgeny Kharitonov, Viktor Sosnora, and Vladimir Ėrl', who wrote in the 1970s and 1980s.

But in 1965, the suspector was a radically new figure – one that already contained within it the future Aleksei Khvostenko, who would later declare himself a *citizen of the world*, live stateless in Europe and the United States, and regain Russian citizenship only shortly before his death. The suspector was hardened in his opposition to authority, inspired by the libertinism of the Thélème Abbey and legitimized by the bohemian experience of nonconformity.

The Suspector is particularly interesting for its fragmented, encapsulated form as a neo-avant-garde self-representation on the border of Concretism, Minimalism, and automatic writing. Genrikh Sapgir, in one of the literary portraits discussed above, wittily describes the innovativeness of the nonconformists' works: «[…] может, поэзия в современном мире и есть какая-то

непонятная самоделка, ну вроде деревянного бруска, так отовсюду продырявленного, что дерево тонет в воде» (Sapgir 1999).[103]

The Suspector was new to contemporaries not only because it introduced a new literary hero but also as an "incomprehensible homemade doodad" – an experimental form of literary self-portrait. This text ranks alongside the programmatic works of Igor′ Kholin, Aleksandr Kondratov, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Yan Satunovsky, Valentin Khromov, and other classics of unofficial literature of the 1960s. The genre of "incomprehensible homemade doodad" would later be developed by the Helenucts, the inventors of dramagedies – a topic that will be discussed in a separate chapter.

The significance of *The Suspector* is that it does not merely describe a new literary hero but actually creates one. *There was no Suspector before the Suspector*, to paraphrase one of the epigraphs of this book. Typologically, this text is performative in a way similar to the performativity that underlies, for example, Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*. There are certainly more differences than similarities between *Essays* and *The Suspector*, but in one respect they are comparable: both works create their author. This process happens differently in each case: Montaigne analyzes himself over many years, supplementing his self-portrait with new observations and reflections, while Khvostenko documents his autobiographical hero's immediate experiences, asserting himself in a new role. Unlike Montaigne, Khvostenko is not concerned with intellectualism or the depth of cultural and existential experience. He writes what is directly given in reality, making writing a form of fixation, similar to the dripping technique invented by Jackson Pollock.[104]

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103 "[…] maybe poetry in the modern world is some incomprehensible homemade doodad, something like a block of wood so perforated with holes that the wood sinks in the water".

104 Mikhail Grobman, with whom Khvostenko began communicating in the late 1960s, started keeping a diary in 1963 – a kind of performative chronicle of nonconformist life that simultaneously captures this life and, through the process of documentation and reflection, legitimizes it, stimulates its formation, and anticipates future victories of the underground (Kantor-Kazovsky 2022: 1–97). Grobman's interest in 1963 in chronicling and everyday documentary is telling: he sides with Tolstoy in his criticism of Shakespeare, and in 1965, he enjoys reading Sleptsov's *Trudnoe vremia ("Hard Time"*; Grobman 2002: 80). At first glance, this is surprising, as the neo-avant-garde differs from the naturalism of the nineteenth century, at least in its elitism. However, considering that "The Calamities of Peski" is inspired by the poetry of Nikolai Nekrasov and the literary physiologies of the nineteenth century, it is not unexpected that nonconformists in the 1960s might have also been drawn to Reshetnikov's *Podlipovtsy*.

Pollock's work, showcased at a 1959 exhibition of American art in Moscow, left a strong impression on many Soviet artists. Khvostenko's friend, Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko, was particularly drawn to Abstract Expressionism for some time. Khvostenko may have developed the literary equivalent of dripping. The transfer of artistic techniques across different mediums is a hallmark of both modernist and postmodernist culture. Such syncretic experiments fascinated many of Khvostenko's contemporaries. For example, in the late 1970s, Dmitry Prigov developed a similar approach, finding a literary equivalent to Conceptualist art.

Diana Vin′kovetskaya recalls Khvostenko experimenting with dripping in her memoirs. She describes one of her first encounters with nonconformist artists in the early 1960s:

> Вошли в большую-большую комнату, заполненную людьми, дверь открыла какая-то взлохмаченная девица, сразу исчезнувшая. […] Никто не обратил на нас внимания. Вся комната представляла несколько странную картину: вдали несколько человек разговаривали, кто-то печатал на машинке… Ближе к двери один небритый играл на половине стола в какую-то игру, на другой половине лежали обрывки картин. На стенах висело несколько цветных бумажных абстрактных картинок, вразброд, но это не выставка. Шторы на окнах раскрашены полосами или так повешены одни на другие? На полу лежал холст, и под ним кто-то растянулся, виднелись только ноги. […] Я присела на краешек тахты. Смотрю. Два парня около окна давят тюбики краски. Один из давящих — изящный, красивый с длинными волосами, будто трубадур. Его партнер обращается к нему: «Хвост! Где ты вчера завис?» Тот, к кому обратились «Хвост», что-то ответил, потом расстелил газеты и стал кистью, наотмашь разбрызгивать облака красочной пыли. Появлялись какие-то узоры, красивые абстрактные кляксы. «Енот <*писатель и критик Леонид Ентин*>, подкинь еще пару…» Я поняла, что это и есть художник Алексей Хвостенко, о котором слышала.
> (Vin′kovetskaia 2008)

> We entered a very big room filled with people. The door was opened by some disheveled girl who immediately disappeared. […] Nobody paid any attention to us. The whole room presented a somewhat strange picture: in the distance,

> a few people were talking, someone was typing on a typewriter… Closer to the door, an unshaven man was playing some game on half a table, while the other half was covered with scraps of paintings. A few abstract colored-paper pictures hung on the walls, scattered about, but it wasn't an exhibition. The curtains on the windows were colored in stripes – perhaps layered on top of each other? There was a canvas on the floor, and someone was lying under it, with only their legs visible. […] I sat down on the edge of the couch and watched. Near the window, two guys were pressing tubes of paint. One of them was graceful, handsome, with long hair, like a troubadour. His partner addressed him: "Khvost! Where did you hang out yesterday?" The one called "Khvost" replied something, then spread out newspapers and began to brush, swatting clouds of colorful dust. Some patterns appeared, beautiful abstract blots. "Enot <writer and critic Leonid Entin>, throw in a couple more…" I realized that this was the artist Aleksei Khvostenko, who I had heard about.

However, Khvostenko may not have developed his performative documentary writing – where the act of writing both records and creates the author – solely under the influence of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism. Other, equally significant influences and contexts have played a role as well.

The Documentaryism of *The Suspector*

The Suspector encapsulates the tradition of (neo)avant-garde documentary aesthetics by developing its methods in the context of neo-avant-garde experiments of the 1960s.[105] We will attempt to outline this context, which served as an important background for the creation of *The Suspector*, though it did not directly influence the work. Understanding the diversity of this context will help appreciate the originality of Khvostenko's project, which was unique primarily because it juxtaposed existential experience with artistic experimentation. Perhaps it is thanks to this duality that Khvostenko succeeded in creating a work in sync with the neo-avant-garde movements of American minimalists and the French "nouveau roman". This will be discussed in the conclusion of this chapter.

105 For more on the documentary aesthetics of the 1960s, see the substantial collection of articles: Günther/Schwartz 2024.

On the one hand, nonconformist documentaryism was a reaction to the "literature of fact", which, to a certain extent, anticipated Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's books. Ilya Kukulin writes about this in his article published in the volume *Documentary Aesthetics in the Long 1960s in Eastern Europe and Beyond* (Kukulin 2024).[106] Another significant documentary project of the Soviet era was the literary experimentation of the Constructivists, which influenced neo-avant-gardists such as Yan Satunovsky and Konstantin Kuz′minsky among others. However, Khvostenko had little interest in Constructivism and its rationalist approach; in fact, he was alien to it.

Another documentary tradition that shaped the development of modernist prose is the "description of the underside of life", as Sergei Dovlatov successfully characterized his debut novel *Zona (The Zone*), listing Isaak Babel, Maxim Gorky, and Ernest Hemingway among his literary forerunners (Dovlatov 1999: II, 17).[107] This artistic experience was not close to the author of *The Suspector*, who aristocratically distanced himself from Soviet society. In *The Suspector*, there are no day-to-day descriptions of life in a psychiatric clinic.

Curiously, Khvostenko was interested in the expressiveness of a mundane detail or a word captured as a fragment of everyday life for its immediacy and concreteness. In this respect, one might assume his writing could be compared to Expressionist writing, but this is not the case. The difference between *The Suspector* and Expressionist works is that Expressionist representation is

106 Varlam Shalamov's understanding of prose as both an existential and a historical testimony stands as an alternative to Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's work. Under the impression of Renato Guttuso's exhibition at the Hermitage (Leningrad) in 1961, he writes in his diary about modernist subjectivity, the interplay between figurative and nonfigurative representation, primitivist graphic style, and Christian iconology – all of which shape contemporary realism: «*В Эрмитаже. Выставка Гуттузо*. Граница реализма проходит ныне в другом месте, чем сто и тысячу лет назад. Импрессионистов никак не обойдешь, <нрзб>. Граница между абстракционизмом и реализмом. Поиски Пикассо с символикой идеограмм, искусством фрески — все это попытки наметить новые линии, границы, рубежи» ("*At the Hermitage. Guttuso's exhibition*. Today, the boundary of realism lies in a different place than it did a hundred or even a thousand years ago. The Impressionist experience is impossible to avoid <unclear in the original handwriting>. The line between abstraction and realism. Picasso's explorations with symbolic ideograms and frescoes – all of these are attempts to define new lines, boundaries, and frontiers"; Shalamov 2004: 277).

107 Dovlatov did not mention Varlam Shalamov, although he, too, could have been included in this list. In this regard, Khvostenko's and Grobman's fascination with Nikolai Nekrasov and Vasily Sleptsov, respectively – both of whom depicted "the underside of life" in their works – is characteristic of the 1960s.

mediated by social psychology (psychophysiological studies of body structure and character), the influence of fashions for certain types (movie stars, fashion, advertising), notions of normality and deviance (hygiene, sociocultural attitudes toward mental and physical health), the tradition of caricature, and monumental typologies, such as August Sander's photographic portraits of a nation (Groos/Höhne/Richter/Vieth 2023). Khvostenko did not engage with these cultural filters, which influenced the documentary representations of movements like Die Brücke or Neue Sachlichkeit.[108]

Another important literary experience that influenced the development of 1960s documentary aesthetics – making the appearance of *The Suspector* possible – was *Poem without a Hero*, which Anna Akhmatova was completing in the mid-1960s. This work, summarizing the entirety of Akhmatova's poetry, was "[…] an inventory of all the themes, subjects, principles, and criteria that characterized her writing. Beginning as a review of what she had experienced – and therefore written – it immediately took on the function of an accounting ledger, where all the major cycles were "noted" in a specific manner, along with some things that stood apart, including Akhmatova's entire body of Pushkiniana. In passing, Akhmatova quite consciously composed *The Poem* as a dispassionate chronicle of events […]".[109]

Of course, Khvostenko did not set himself such a goal and was too young to conceive such a retrospective project. However, the very fact that work on an epochal meta-autoportrait/meta-autobiography was taking shape during these years stimulated new literary experiments. Equally important is the fragmentation in *Poem without a Hero*, elevated to a principle of writing that summarizes creative failures:

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108 To a certain extent, expressionist documentary is characteristic of the prose of Khvostenko's contemporary, the writer and translator Andrei Sergeev (e.g., his book *Omnibus*), who was also a close friend of Joseph Brodsky's. Sergeev, known for his translations of English and American poetry, depicts Soviet life in a phantasmagoric and caricatured manner. Among other works, he translated Cummings, Kerouac, and Ginsberg, whom Khvostenko appreciated.

109 «[…] сводом всех тем, сюжетов, принципов и критериев ее поэзии. […] Начавшись обзором пережитого — а стало быть, написанного, — она <поэма> сразу взяла на себя функцию учетно-отчетного гроссбуха […], где, определенным образом перекодированные, „отмечались" […] все крупные циклы и некоторые из вещей, стоящие особняком, равно как и вся ахматовская пушкиниана. Попутно Ахматова совершенно сознательно вела Поэму и в духе беспристрастной летописи событий […]» (Naiman 1989: 129).

> […] это «поэма в поэме» и «поэма о поэме», произведение, рассказывающее о своем собственном происхождении. Можно даже сказать, что сюжетом его является история художнической неудачи, история о том, как не удавалось написать или дописать «Поэму без героя», повесть, сотканную из черновиков, наметок, отброшенных проб, нереализованных возможностей.
> (Timenchik 1989: 3)

> […] it is a "poem within a poem" and a "poem about a poem", a work that tells its own origin. One could even say that its subject is the story of artistic failure – the story of how one failed to write or finish *Poem without a Hero*, a tale woven from drafts, hints, discarded trials, and unrealized possibilities.[110]

Khvostenko, too, speaks of failure and fragmentation, though his approach is much more radical. Additionally, *The Suspector* problematizes the hero, the subject, the author-narrator, and the person depicted. It is a text without a hero in the traditional sense, or a text that portrays and creates an (anti-)hero. The suspector bears little resemblance to the poet who survived decades of persecution. Yet, the nonconformists of the 1960s were not indifferent to the experience of the Silver Age poets. While they did not borrow directly from them, they were influenced by them in one way or another. After all, even Brodsky and "Akhmatova's orphans" said that it was not Akhmatova who was their teacher when it came to poetry. Brodsky was much closer to the poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Slutsky, and W. H. Auden. Akhmatova did not teach them literature; rather, she taught them dignity, greatness, and a special, intense way of living fate and literary experience (Losev 2006: 68–71).

Anatoly Naiman, in his memoir prose, seemingly adopted from Akhmatova this experience of mutual reflection between life and literature, the double refraction of reality in literature, and the multilayered nature of memories and their realization in literature. His books will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter. It seems that Khvostenko was as little interested in the

110 The poetics of *Poem Without a Hero* and Akhmatova's later works may seem, at first glance, far from neo-avant-garde. However, the poet herself noted similarities between them and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), which she read in February 1966 (Akhmatova 1996: 711–712).

mocumentary worlds created in Naiman's novels as he was in Akhmatova's poetry, which he knew quite well.[111] However, the personal tragic testimony that Akhmatova's poetry conveyed, along with the sophistication of the construction of *Poem without a Hero*, could serve as an example of heroism and a complex aesthetic system for a neo-avant-garde experimentalist living in defiance of the Soviet system.

A transcript of Brodsky's trial, authored by the writer and journalist Frida Vigdorova, had been circulating in samizdat since 1964. Khvostenko must have known this literary document testifying to the trial of the poet, who was a close friend of his. Nevertheless, documentary reportage is hardly relevant to *The Suspector*, as Vigdorova's transcript is a journalistic reworking of what actually took place (Rozenblium 2018; Tippner 2024).

In this rich context of modernist documentary aesthetics, Khvostenko managed to invent his own without reproducing already existing "literatures of fact", including Solzhenitsyn's version, Constructivism, modernist everyday life writing, Expressionism, or Akhmatova's "story of artistic failure" (Timenchik 1989: 3). This context was diverse enough for Khvostenko to create a neo-avant-garde work of international scope, even though few people in 1960s Leningrad and Moscow were familiar with contemporary European and American art and literature. Despite the fact that in the mid-1960s, he appeared in one of the capitals of a country behind the Iron Curtain, he could have made a name for himself in the art scenes of New York or Paris. One gets a similar impression from reading the *ABC Art* (1965) program article by Barbara Rose, one of the key American critics who wrote about Neo-Dada and Minimalism. In her description, the international artistic context of the mid-1960s is close to what Khvostenko contemplates and embodies in *The Suspector*, although, of course, neither Barbara Rose nor her colleagues and associates had any idea of the existence of the Leningrad artist and writer:

> […] the rejection of the personal, the subjective, the tragic, and the narrative in favor of the world of things seems remarkable […]. <N>either in the new novels nor in the new art is the repudiation of content convincing. […] <A>s

111 He may have known about Akhmatova since childhood through his father, Lev Khvostenko. Akhmatova often earned money through translation and was published alongside Lev Khvostenko in various editions.

> the catalogue, of things again mainly, has become part of poetry and literature, so the document is part of art. […] <W>hereas the unusual and the exotic used to interest artists, now they tend to seek out the banal, the common, and the everyday. This seems a consequence of the attitude that among young artists today, nothing is more suspect than "artiness", self-consciousness, or posturing. Not only do painters paint common objects, and sculptors enshrine them, but poets seek the ordinary word. Carl Andre has said that in his poetry he avoids obscene language because it calls attention to itself too much, and because it is not yet sufficiently common. Along these same lines, one of the most interesting things the young dancers are doing is incorporating nondancer movements into their work.
> (Rose 1988: 68–69)

The rejection of the modernist subject in favor of a new (anti-)hero, the rejection of traditional narrative in favor of a text organized as a list or series, the choice of the profane or unconventional as the central theme, and the maximum inexpressiveness of the artistic statement were all experienced in Leningrad as clearly and acutely as in New York. The key difference was that in the USSR, such artistic expression often led to conflict with the authorities and persecution, which, in turn, heroized it, whereas in the United States, it was intellectually demanded and fashionable, though this did not eliminate the existential risks involved. The comparison of *The Suspector* to Neo-Dada and minimalism is not a unique one; similar analogies can be drawn with the work of other artists and poets, including those from Moscow. For example, Georg Witte (2024) convincingly shows the commonality between Yan Satunovsky's poetry and arte povera.

Neo-Dadaism in art and literature during the Thaw and Stagnation periods was an important element of the Soviet neo-avant-garde. However, Soviet neo-avant-gardists were not directly connected to the activities of the Fluxus group or the Neo-Dadaist movement in the United States and Europe. During these periods, Fluxus and New Realism in the USSR were known only to a select few. Nonconformist artists had only a vague understanding of Pop Art and no direct connection to it. What is striking, however, is that, independently

of American and European Neo-Dadaism, artists and writers in Moscow and Leningrad engaged in similarly intense artistic experimentation.[112]

The entry of literature and art into reality was one of the key subjects of the French "nouveau roman". Alain Robbe-Grillet, one of its most prominent representatives and theorists, wrote in 1956:

> Or le monde n'est ni signifiant ni absurde. Il *est*, tout simplement. C'est là, en tous cas, ce qu'il a de plus remarquable. Et soudain cette évidence nous frappe avec une force contre laquelle nous ne pouvons plus rien. D'un seul coup toute la belle construction s'écroule : ouvrant les yeux à l'improviste, nous avons éprouvé, une fois de trop, le choc de cette réalité têtue dont nous faisions semblant d'être venus à bout. Autour de nous, défiant la meute de nos adjectifs animistes ou ménagers, les choses *sont là*. Leur surface est nette et lisse, intacte, sans éclat louche ni transparence. Toute notre littérature n'a pas encore réussi à en entamer le plus petit coin, à en amollir le moindre courbe.
> (Robbe-Grillet 1963: 18)

Again, this artistic experience may have been relevant to Khvostenko, although neither Robbe-Grillet, the Neo-Dadaists, nor the Minimalists directly influenced the formation of *The Suspector*. Khvostenko was likely aware of both the "nouveau roman" and new American art to some extent, but ultimately, this is more of a typological comparison. It is all the more surprising that in different parts of the world, independently of each other, writers and artists worked with the ordinary, the non-linear, the directly given, and the concrete. Among Khvostenko's acquaintances and associates, only a few showed interest in this, and they were his closest friends, some of whom may have even served as prototypes for *The Suspector.*

The suspector was one of the first characters to foreshadow artistic and literary developments in the 1970s and beyond. [113] He was indomitable – whether

112 For a typological comparison between the Neo-Dadaists and the Helenucts, see: Savitski 2026 (in print).

113 The aesthetic experience of the nonconformists became heroic not only in response to the pressure of short-sighted authority, but also in parallel with the tragic lives of Stalin's victims. At the same time, it was in the mid-1960s that numerous memoirs about Stalin's repressive regime – and its profound existential impact – began to appear, both in print and in sam-

drugged in a psychiatric clinic, forced to leave the USSR with no hope of seeing his family and friends again, or returning to post-Soviet Russia and becoming a rock star. The neo-avant-garde documentary nature of Khvostenko's projects was shaped by the avant-garde and Silver Age traditions while drawing on the artistic movements of his time – particularly Abstract Expressionism and Concretism. *The Suspector* transcended national and cultural boundaries. The presence captured in the text, along with personal experience embodied in artistic expression, ensured its longevity for decades. Khvostenko remained consistent in his artistic vision. Even in Leningrad, isolated from contemporary art and deemed an outsider and a harmful element by the Soviet system, he managed to align himself with artists and writers in the world's artistic capitals. In this sense, he was a cosmopolitan figure, and emigration did not alter him. When he left the USSR in 1977, he unexpectedly found himself in an artistic environment that felt entirely natural to him. His true "emigration", however, had already occurred in 1965, when he created *The Suspector* – and, in a sense, became one himself.

izdat. These included works by Nadezhda Mandelstam, Ilya Ėrenburg, Evgenia Ginsburg, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Kornei Chukovsky, Varlam Shalamov, and others. From Aleksandr Gladkov's "Diary": «Когда-то я сокрушенно думал, что наша эпоха не оставит великих мемуаров. Оказалось, что оставит» ("Once, I crushingly thought that our era would leave no great memoirs. It turned out that it would"; Gladkov 1966, 19 September).

CHAPTER 4

Marginalization and Schizophrenia

The Great Losers

The suspector is a marginal, detached hero. He belongs to the cohort of the great losers of the twentieth century – characters like Malte Laurids Brigge from Rainer Maria Rilke's famous novel, Venechka from Venedikt Erofeev's *Moskva–Petushki*, or the Dude from the Cohen brothers' *The Big Lebowski*. The loser is one of the most popular figures in twentieth-century literature, art, theater and cinema. However, it should be noted that there are different forms of marginality. There are significant differences between Rilke's protagonist, who experiences the limits of loneliness and alienation in a European metropolis, and Soviet nonconformists, who were labeled asocial elements in a collectivist society. These figures were not only marginalized within different cultural and political systems but also lived through fundamentally different existential and artistic experiences. The specific marginalization of the nonconformists of the 1960s must be described with greater precision in order not to overlook the crucial circumstances that led to the creation of *The Suspector* and the emergence of such a hero.

Representatives of the underground avoided official social life, did not consider it shameful to associate with the criminal world, and – being viewed as deviant by the authorities – were often classified as individuals requiring psychiatric intervention. By choosing the role of detractors, nonconformists took considerable risks. Refusing to fully integrate into a collectivist society often led to repressive measures from the state.

The nonconformist heroes of the twentieth century did not invent this strategy of artistic and existential marginalization. Intellectuals had embraced it long before. As early as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, alienation became an artistic alternative to conventional social life. With the publication of his *Confessions*, Rousseau experienced both fame and disgrace. He and his follower Senancourt, who intensified the experience of sociophobia, were forerunners of Verlaine and Rimbaud – the modernist troublemakers who scandalized the public and dominated the headlines. Figures such as Arthur Cravan, Wols, Emil Cioran, and Andrei Egunov each embodied modernism's engagement with marginality in their own way.

Beyond provocative alternatives to official artistic and literary life, there has long been a tradition of intimate artistic circles and salons. In Russian literary history, the role of the Arzamas society or the group behind the pseudonym Koz′ma Prutkov – which will be discussed later in this book – is signif-

icant in this regard. The Miriskusniki (World of Art movement at the begin of the twentieth century) also cultivated a private, salon-like atmosphere, and this appreciation for chamber work and small close-knit artistic circles was widely shared by late Soviet intellectuals, especially the nonconformists. They continued the tradition of literary salons and exclusive artistic communities while avoiding engagement with official institutions, such as the "Sisipiatniki". This neologism, coined by Valentin Khromov from the initials of the Union of Soviet Writers (SSP – Soiuz Sovetskikh Pisatelei), was used in Moscow to mock representatives of literary officialdom. Like Arzamas, Koz′ma Prutkov's circle, and the Miriskusniki, the underground artists of the 1960s were elitist. In this respect, the nonconformist neo-avant-garde echoed the elitism of the avant-garde as described by Clement Greenberg in his seminal essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1989 [1939]).

Like some of their predecessors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nonconformist circles faced pressure from repressive state institutions. The moral arbiters of Victorian society contributed to Oscar Wilde's imprisonment, just as Soviet authorities abused vagrancy laws to exile Joseph Brodsky to the Arkhangelsk region. There are also striking parallels in the preferred social spaces of independent intellectuals across different eras. Voltaire settled in the French village of Ferney, just a few kilometers from the Swiss border, as his works teetered on the edge of what was permissible. Likewise, Aleksei Khvostenko lived on the edge of what was permitted by Soviet law and experienced firsthand the realities of psychiatric hospitals and state persecution.[114] He too managed the symbolic capital of a sphere that existed at the margins of – or entirely outside – official legitimacy. These figures were explorers of sociocultural borderlands, connoisseurs of secluded spaces where the power of the state did not fully extend. Ilya Kabakov provides a compelling analysis of this type of Soviet "unofficial man", whose existence unfolded in hidden, private realms:

114 Khvostenko's collage book *Ukazy* ("Decrees", 1965) is composed of documents attesting to the persecution of its author. Excerpts from it were published in the anthology *The Blue Lagoon* (Kovalev/Kuz′minskii 1983: 2A, 341–347). Even the court summons for an overdue library book is featured in this absurd selection of court reports and notices.

> […] человек, живущий сам по себе, сжавшись в какой-то комок в каком-то углу и производящий там свой творческий продукт. […] он как бы чуть ли даже не «защищен» «в углу», темном, пыльном, незаметном, его как бы оттуда не достать, поскольку он уж совсем невидная фигура. И тем не менее оттуда слышен человеческий голос, там идет человеческая деятельность, абсолютно незаметная, чистая, какого-то тихого и ясного звучания […]
>
> И вот эта самая проблема «угла» существенна и важна, поскольку является проблемой не столько «жилищной», сколько психологической. Это человек, который никогда в жизни не выйдет на середину, где носится железная полирующая щетка, которая все чистит, полирует и всасывает. Люди, о которых я говорю, — те самые, «невыметаемые» обстоятельствами. У них психология «угольного» существования; и топографически в Москве они были размещены именно так — «незаметно».
>
> (Kabakov 2008: 210–211)

> […] a man who lives by himself, shrinking into a lump in some corner and producing his creative product there. […] it is as if he is almost even protected "in a corner" – dark, dusty, unnoticeable – as if he cannot be reached from there, because he is a completely invisible figure. And yet, from there, a human voice can be heard, human activity is going on there, absolutely imperceptible, pure, of some quiet and clear sound […].
>
> The very problem of the "corner" is significant and important because it is not so much a "housing" problem as a psychological one. This is a person who will never, in his life, go out into the middle where an iron brush is running around, scrubbing, polishing, and sucking everything up.
>
> The people I am talking about are the very people who are "un-sweepable" by circumstances. They have a psychology of "corner" existence; and topographically in Moscow they have been placed just so – "unnoticed".

This portrait captures the defining traits of the Moscow nonconformist. The Leningrad one differed little from him and perhaps even surpassed the capital's "man of the corner" in his ability to conceal himself and live inconspicuously. The ability to exist outside the system – shunning society and especially officialdom – was familiar to many nonconformists of that time. However,

Khvostenko, like Joseph Brodsky or Oskar Rabin, was not one to hide in a corner.

In this description, Kabakov speaks primarily of himself and his peers, as he, too, preferred in the 1960s and 70s to avoid public declarations of nonconformity. Yet, within the underground movement, there were also those who, despite living in their own corners, actively sought to socialize as nonconformists, emphasizing the importance of their alternative experience. Khvostenko, Brodsky, and Rabin were in direct conflict with the authorities. Most nonconformists were not devotees of Voltaire or Rousseau, yet, in some cases, their experience of social detachment is comparable to that of the great skeptic and defender of the "natural man".

The Marginal as Hero

The image of the marginal figure was also present among contemporaries of the Soviet nonconformists – notably, the American Beat writers, to whom Khvostenko and his circle were often compared. Despite this common comparison, there is an important difference. The Beat writers were actively present in public literary life: they published their works through publishing houses and in periodicals, achieved success, and gained recognition in the United States and abroad. The obscenity trials surrounding William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* did not diminish their role in public life. By contrast, marginalization among Soviet nonconformists took a particularly radical form: in its most extreme and conflictual manifestations, it resulted in persecution by the authorities and ultimately in emigration.

Even among the bohemians, Khvostenko stood out in that he viewed socialization mostly as an amusing aspect of life rather than as a serious pursuit. Whether attempting to revitalize the Necropolis of the Aleksandr Nevsky Lavra as an employee of the Committee for the Protection of Monuments, searching for his place in life among the staff of Leningrad Zoo, or taking an equally unusual position in a bathhouse, Khvostenko pushed the absurdity of the Soviet social experience to its limits. Since the early 1960s, following the publication of the law on social parasitism (1961), the Soviet system defined such a free-spirited existence as harmful to society. This, in turn, endowed the carefree lifestyle of writers and artists with symbolic capital – exclusivity, and even heroism. Although Khvostenko's work was neither explicitly political

nor activist in nature, his falling under the law on social parasitism positioned him, along with other nonconformists, as a figure with enough significance to be regarded as a hero.

One important detail should not be overlooked: during the Thaw, choosing an underground life over an official career as a writer or artist required a certain degree of determination. At the time – and even later – there were possibilities for integration into the official system, which offered the prospect of a writing career and legitimized a bohemian lifestyle. By starting in literary associations (LITO), moving from youth publications to participating in collections of works by promising young authors, and joining the Writers' Union with the backing of mentors, an aspiring writer could gradually establish a professional career.

Moreover, those who admired the avant-garde or the Silver Age could find patrons even within the Writers' Union. Nikolai Aseev, Ilya Ėrenburg, Gennady Gor, Semen Kirsanov, Dmitry Likhachev, Leonid Rakhmanov, Ilya Sel′vinsky, Mikhail Slonimsky, and Viktor Shklovsky – these figures represented a liberal wing that was far from marginal in Soviet literature. During the Thaw, many of them gained significant influence.

In this context, the career trajectory of Andrei Bitov – who attended the same first English school in Leningrad as Khvostenko – was not particularly unique or exceptional. With the support of Lydia Ginzburg, Gennady Gor, and Mikhail Slonimsky, he quickly transitioned from being a young talent in the Leningrad branch of the Soviet Writer publishing house to one of the most promising new authors, with his first short story collection *Bol′shoi shar* ("The Big Balloon", 1963), receiving widespread acclaim. The case of Andrei Bitov will be discussed in more detail in the last chapter.

Leningrad had numerous literary associations for young writers. In addition to the "Sovpis" literary associations (LITO "Sovetskii pisatel′"), where Aleksandr Volodin, Viktor Goliavkin, Viktor Konetsky, and others began their careers under the mentorship of Gennady Gor, Leonid Rakhmanov, and Mikhail Slonimsky, there were also literary circles at the First Five-Year Plan Culture House (LITO DK Pervoi Piatiletki) and at the Mining Institute, where Gleb Semenov's workshop helped shape nearly all major Leningrad poets and prose writers of the late 1950s–1960s (Shtern 2010: 19). Other notable literary groups included the Narvskaya Zastava literary association, where Aleksandr Morev, Nikolai Rubtsov, and Ėduard Shneiderman studied (Gorbovskii 1991:

277), and David Dar's literary circle at the Culture House of Vocational Technical Education (DK Proftekhobrazovaniia), which attracted writers such as Boris Vakhtin, Gleb Gorbovsky, Sergei Dovlatov, Vladimir Maramzin, and Viktor Sosnora. Another figure who gathered aspiring writers was Kirill Kostsinsky, although his circle had no official status (ibid.: 211–212).[115] Meanwhile, Dmitry Bobyshev, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoly Naiman, and Evgeny Rein owed much to Anna Akhmatova's mentorship.

The case of "our redhead", as Akhmatova ironically referred to Brodsky, demonstrates the role of the liberal intelligentsia. Brodsky was prosecuted by the authorities, but his defense was taken up by writers, journalists, and lawyers from both Leningrad and Moscow. Their efforts ultimately helped persuade high-ranking officials of the injustice of his sentencing, leading to his release from exile. This conflict, which resulted in a relatively favorable outcome for the poet, leaves no doubt about the influence of the liberal community in the 1960s (Morev 2023; Okhotin 2000).

Aleksei Khvostenko, who grew up in a family of a translator and a poet and was well acquainted with the literary world from childhood, disregarded most career opportunities. He possessed a kind of aristocratic self-sufficiency. This aristocratism was, in a way, based on a deliberate and consistent marginalization – understood as a strong social position and an artistic strategy for becoming a new kind of author, one who invents a new literary voice. While Khvostenko did not remain entirely aloof from literary circles, his engagement was uniquely detached. At one point, he was a regular guest at the Saturday gatherings hosted by Ivan Alekseevich Likhachev, a translator and literary scholar who spent fifteen years in GULAG and was rehabilitated during the Thaw. These gatherings attracted translators, writers, philologists, classical music enthusiasts, and people with disabilities whom Likhachev supported. He considered this kind of help particularly important (Nikol′skaia 2002, Nikol′skaia 2024). These individuals understood marginalization not merely as an artistic or literary stance but as a lived experience. Many in this circle were given nicknames. The younger members of the group – Oleg Grigor′ev, Yakov Vin′kovetsky, Anri Volokhonsky, Leonid Entin, and Khvostenko himself – were collectively dubbed "scum" (*podonki*; Nikol′skaia 2002: 251). The host of these gatherings, Ivan Likhachev, coined the term for these young

115 See also: Bobyshev 2003: 235–244.

intellectuals who, following the example of older generations of nonconformists, sought to push their marginality even further. Unlike other literary circles, Likhachev's salon offered no opportunities for social advancement.[116] Its value lay instead in the intellectual experience of engaging with like-minded people and in its deliberate disregard for the privileges of the Soviet system. Khvostenko's choice of this particular "circle" speaks volumes about his character and artistic ethos.

The Underground and Criminality

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the social world of a nonconformist writer and artist sometimes bordered on the criminal, which was not unusual during those years. At the time, many people like Likhachev who had been unjustly sentenced to labor camps or exile were rehabilitated and allowed to return to major cities. Repression also affected Khvostenko's family – his grandfather, Vasily Khvostenko, an engineer and opera singer, was among those persecuted. In Soviet life, the horrors of the labor camps coexisted with the privileges of an elite background – Khvostenko was the son of a translator, literary scholar, and teacher who had spent his childhood in England. Some of the leading figures of the Moscow underground in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Lev Kropivnitsky, Boris Sveshnikov, and Ülo Sooster, had also passed through the camps.

116 Joseph Brodsky attended the translation seminar at the House of the Writer, which Likhachev took over after the death of Lev Khvostenko, the seminar's first head (Staviskaia 2008). According to Diana Vin′kovetskaya's recollections, Brodsky held Likhachev in high regard. Vin′kovetskaya quotes Brodsky's words about him: «Замечательный был господин […] Большой, тонкий человек» ("He was a wonderful gentleman! A big, subtle man"; Vin′kovetskaia 2008). Evgeny Rein, in his memoirs, writes about Likhachev with the same respect: «Это был один из самых образованных филологов в Ленинграде. Он знал несколько языков, много переводил, писал стихи и дружил […] с Михаилом Кузминым» ("He was one of the most educated philologists in Leningrad, knew several languages, translated extensively, wrote poetry, and was friend […] with Mikhail Kuzmin"; Rein 2005: 377). According to Rein, Likhachev inspired Brodsky to write "The Great Elegy to John Donne" in February–March 1963 (ibid.: 378). Likhachev's letters characterize him not only as a connoisseur of literature, art, and music but also as a wonderful writer (Likhachev 2006). Perhaps Ivan Likhachev referred to his young visitors as "scum" because the café that opened in September 1964 on the corner of Nevsky and Vladimirsky Avenues – popular with nonconformists – was initially and, of course, unofficially called the "Club of Intellectual Scum" (Andreeva 2012: 370). This well-known Leningrad café later became known as "Saigon", a name likely adopted in reference to the Vietnam War.

Sooster, for instance, was convicted on false charges and imprisoned. Raised in Estonia and deeply influenced by French Surrealism and the Parisian modernist scene, he learned Russian while in the camp, where he was surrounded by Georgian inmates. He spoke Russian fluently but with a unique accent. It was there that he met his future wife, Lydia Serkh-Sooster, who had previously lived in Moscow. After his release, she insisted they settle in the capital, where Sooster became part of the nonconformist circle while simultaneously building an official career as a book illustrator and animator.[117] Like Sooster, many underground artists led "double lives". Figures such as Ėrik Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, and Oleg Vasil′ev found success as illustrators of children's books, while Mikhail Shvartsman established his own design school.

Many of Khvostenko's acquaintances and members of the nonconformist community lived outside the established legal framework. The artist Valentin Vorob′ev, a longtime friend of Khvostenko's since the early 1960s, referred to them in his memoirs as "levaki" (leftists, illegitimate artists).[118] Valentin Vorob′ev also titled his third book of memoirs about the nonconformist era *Levaki* (Vorob′ev 2012). His work stands out as a uniquely scandalous account of the underground scene. Few of his contemporaries managed to gather as many shocking and obscene stories about figures such as Anatoly Brusilovsky, Konstantin Kuz'minsky, Lev Nusberg, Igor′ Kholin, Aleksei Khvostenko, and even Irina Emel′ianova (the daughter of Olga Ivinskaya, Boris Pasternak's muse in the 1950s and 1960s). Much of Vorob′ev's work is fictionalized, designed to

117 L. Sooster 2000; Iu. Sooster 2007; Kabakov 1996.

118 In his memoir *Studio*, Anatoly Brusilovsky describes the range of meanings associated with this Russian word in detail: «[…] как-то надо было назвать художников, чей стиль, чья манера не походили на привычный насаждаемый 'соцреализм'. Терминология не существовала, о том, что происходит в мире искусства — свободном мире! — не было понятия. Сами художники работали очень по-разному, как Бог на душу положит, а вот поди, разберись, как это назвать… Так что были 'левые'. В пестром ряду <таких> слов, как левак, продать налево, левый заработок и левый марш оказались левые художники!» ((Brusilovskii 2001: 52; "[…] somehow, it was necessary to find a name for artists whose style and manner did not resemble the usual, imposed 'socialist realism'. There was no terminology, no understanding of what was happening in the art world – the free world! The artists themselves worked in all sorts of different ways, each doing as they pleased – but try figuring our what to call it all… And so, there were the 'leftists' (levaki). In the motley array of words such as illegitimate ('left') goods, sell illegally (sell in an unofficial, 'left' way), side ('left') income, and left-wing march, there were also left-wing artists!").

highlight the lawlessness of the nonconformist existence within the Soviet system – an existence that defiantly opposed the regime and its rules.[119]

Vorob′ev was not the only one to portray the underground as anarchic and immoral. The behavior of artists such as Anatoly Zverev and poets like Sergei Chudakov serves as further illustration. Zverev, one of the leading Moscow Neo-Expressionists of the 1960s and a favorite of avant-garde collector George Kostakis, was notorious for his outrageous and unpredictable conduct. Many who knew him described him as lacking basic etiquette and behaving in a way that made communication with him almost unbearable. The researcher of Chudakov's works and biography, Vladimir Orlov wrote that he had been involved in illicit activities such as pimping.[120] Whether true or not, the fact that nonconformists depicted themselves in memoirs as figures who disregarded Soviet laws underscores how deeply marginality was ingrained in the underground movement of the 1960s.

This peculiar nonconformist criminality was not only a deliberate rejection of social norms or a consequence of Stalinist repression – it was also, for many, a direct result of their post-war autobiographical experiences. Children growing up during and after World War II had been exposed to extreme hardship and violence. Dmitry Plavinsky, an artist crucial to the underground movement of the 1960s, recalled in his memoirs how he stumbled into art following a teenage act of hooliganism:

> Нам опять стало скучно. В голове пустота. Рука бездарно подбрасывает и ловит коробок спичек. И снова озарение:
> — Пошли поджигать почтовые ящики.
> — Ура! — и мы направились к парадному соседнего дома.
> Большинство почтовых ящиков, в те далекие времена, были сколочены из фанеры и прибивались к дверям квартиры. У одной из квартир вместе с ящиком полыхнула обивка двери. В панике, задыхаясь от дыма, побежали этажом выше, для удобства наблюдения за пожаром.

119 Another example of such cruelty is an episode from Ludmila Shtern's memoir about Joseph Brodsky: *Brodskii: Osia, Iosif, Joseph* ("*Brodsky: Osia, Iosif, Joseph*"). Stern recounts how she played a cruel trick on Brodsky, convincing him that he was responsible for the suicide of the Leningrad poet Lev Kuklin. However, both the suicide and the entire story were fabricated (Shtern 2001: 90–93).

120 Orlov 2014.

Вскоре, из квартиры выскочила растрёпанная старуха с чайником и стала заливать пламя. Меня поймали, друзьям удалось смыться. За шиворот втащили в квартиру и «арестовали» в одной из комнат до прихода милиции.

Пока я обречённо ждал кары, рассеянно рассматривал обстановку. На столе несколько кувшинов, набитых разнообразными кистями, по углам папки, рулоны ватмана. Рядом с кистями — планшет с начатым морским пейзажем, вокруг коробки и тюбики с акварельными медовыми красками, бумажки с пробами цвета. Стены украшены изображениями шторма, штиля, восхода, заката. Как потом оказалось, я попал в мастерскую известного в своё время акварелиста Бойма. Я жадно пожирал глазами всё, что находилось передо мной, и буквально ноздрями вбирал запах этой сказочной комнаты.

Вошёл милиционер выволакивать меня. Я же не мог оторваться от покидающего меня волшебного мира.

Дверь захлопнулась и снова меня объял мрак. Но он отныне был не страшен. Передо мной распахнулась дверь, за которой мир, полный ожидания своего воплощения. Он принадлежал мне.

Так я стал художником.

(Plavinskii 2006)

We were bored again. My mind was empty. My hand absentmindedly tossed and caught a matchbox. And then – another flash of inspiration:

– Let's go set the mailboxes on fire!

– Yay! – and we rushed to the entrance of the neighboring building.

At the time, most mailboxes were made of plywood and nailed to apartment doors. At one of the apartments, the upholstery on the door caught fire along with the mailbox. Panicked and breathless, we ran up a floor to watch the flames from above.

Soon, a frazzled old woman dashed out of the apartment with a kettle and started dousing the flames. I got caught – my friends managed to escape. They dragged me into the apartment by the collar and "arrested" me in one of the rooms until the police arrived.

As I sat there, doomed to punishment, I absentmindedly looked around. There were jugs full of brushes on the table, folders and rolls of paper in the corners. Next to the brushes, a canvas – an unfinished seascape. Paint boxes and water-

> color tubes were scattered around, along with sheets covered in color swatches. The walls were adorned with images of storms, calm seas, sunrises, and sunsets. As I later found out, I had stumbled into the studio of Boym, a well-known watercolorist of the time. I devoured the sight, inhaling the intoxicating smell of the room.
>
> A policeman arrived to take me away. I couldn't tear myself away from this magical world that was slipping from my grasp.
>
> The door slammed shut, and darkness enveloped me again. But it was no longer frightening. A door had opened before me, revealing a world waiting to be explored. It belonged to me.
>
> And so, I became an artist.

Plavinsky frames the start of his artistic journey as an outgrowth of youthful delinquency. His account is not tragic; if anything, it carries a tone of irony.

This absurd yet natural overlap between the underground and criminal worlds often bordered on the phantasmagoric. Anatoly Naiman, for example, recounts an incident in which he and Joseph Brodsky – newly released from exile near Arkhangel′sk – found themselves at a private screening of *Some Like It Hot* at a cultural club for KGB officers:

> Однажды утром он <писатель Василий Аксенов, очень популярный в годы Оттепели> позвонил и, похихикивая, сказал, что передовая творческая интеллигенция сегодня идет на (и он через кого-то приглашен и приглашает меня) нигде еще не идущий и, может быть, никогда не *пойдущий* американский фильм […]. […] просмотр — в клубе на *Лубянке* […], в центре экстерриториального города-крепости КГБ […].
>
> Следующий […] звонок был не менее ошеломителен: звонил Бродский, который *только что* приехал в Москву *прямо* со станции Коноша Архангельской области, где *позавчера* получил документ о досрочном окончании пятилетней ссылки. […] Звоню Аксенову, выброс воодушевления, в три встречаемся на *Большой* Лубянке у *Большого* дома. […] В три встречаемся. В дверях клуба […] ждал человек, как всегда спортивного типа, как всегда молодой. […] «Василий Павлович?» «Вот мои друзья». По мне легонько наждачком глаз прошелся, но на «Бродский Иосиф» немножко его качнуло: «Как? Тот самый? Как же вы?..»

> Вошли в мраморное нутро, сдали пальто, получили номерки: на каждом — «КГБ».
> (Naiman 1999: 33–34)

> One morning, Vasily Aksenov <a writer, very popular during the Thaw years> called me, and, giggling, told me that the progressive creative intelligentsia had been invited to a screening of an American film that hadn't been shown anywhere yet – and might *never be released here* […]. […] The screening was to be held at a club on *Lubianka,* […] right in the heart of the KGB's fortress city […]. The next […] call was just as stunning: the caller was Brodsky, who had *just* arrived in Moscow directly from Konosha station in the Arkhangel'sk region, where, *the day before yesterday*, he had received a document regarding the early termination of his five-year exile […]. I call Aksenov. He's really excited – let's meet at three o'clock on *Bolshaia* Lubyanka, by the *Bolshoi* House.
> At three o'clock, we met at the entrance to the club. As always, a young and athletic-looking man was waiting for us. "Vasily Pavlovich?" he asked. "Here are my friends". He cast me a brief, appraising glance, but when Brodsky introduced himself, he hesitated. "Wait… THE Brodsky? How…? But you…?"
> We stepped inside the marble-clad interior, handed over our coats, and received cloakroom tokens – each stamped KGB.

The story seems almost too absurd to be true, but that was precisely the point of Naiman's prose – he played with the boundaries between documentary and fiction, often in risky ways. Whether this event truly happened is beside the point. His goal was to highlight the strange proximity of seemingly opposite worlds.[121] In the Soviet Union, the innocent could always be threatened with repression.

Meanwhile, modernist literature and art created an alternative moral and legal system, often ignoring or outright violating official laws. Figures like Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Oscar Wilde – whom Soviet authorities would have deemed persistent offenders – were key inspira-

121 Evgeny Rein recounts in his memoirs his version of how Joseph Brodsky spent his first day after exile. According to Rein, Brodsky first visited him, after which Rein, together with Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Vasily Aksenov, organized a celebration of the poet's release. Yevtushenko took the group to the fashionable Moscow restaurant "Aragvi", but Brodsky did not appreciate the lavish feast and quickly left (Rein 2005: 132–136).

tions for the nonconformists. "The law of the elements is lawlessness",[122] wrote Mikhail Gershenzon about Vasily Rozanov, other scandalous predecessor of the underground's writers (Proskurina 1991). Osip Mandelstam and Ilya Ėrenburg were inspired by the biography of François Villon, to whom myths and legends attributed murder and robbery. The alternative law system created by the great modernists was a crucial backdrop for Soviet neo-avant-gardists.

Given the Soviet system's repressive labor laws, particularly after the passage of the 1961 law against social parasitism, Khvostenko was inevitably classified as a social parasite – a "harmful slacker" in need of rehabilitation. Yet he remained indifferent to the dangers that his carefree life as an independent artist entailed. Over the first half of the 1960s, he gradually came to embody a new heroic archetype: the suspector.

A Schizoalternative to the Soviet System

The Suspector summarizes Khvostenko's experience in a psychiatric clinic, which was not solely the result of a conflict with the authorities. The nonconformists themselves were willing to engage with mental deviations. "Schizoidism" had been one of the alternatives to Soviet life since the 1960s, as discussed by various figures in the underground scene, including Moscow artists Katia Kompaneets, Anatoly Brusilovsky, and Ilya Kabakov. In her memoirs about her teacher, the artist Mikhail Roginsky – a painter who developed a new system of realism parallel to pop art – Katia Kompaneets writes:

> В 1960-е годы психические заболевания стали модной темой разговоров и стилем жизни. Шизня, шизеть, шизанутый, шизоид, псих были популярными словами молодежного сленга. Знакомые мальчики гуманитарных и артистических профессий ложились в психиатрические больницы. Некоторых семья или власти насильно укладывали. […] Психические заболевания были, так же как и пьянство, формой диссидентства, уходом в другое, неподконтрольное государству состояние. В моде были рисунки психбольных или шизофреников: шизофренией тогда было принято называть почти все заболевания.
> (Roginskii 2009: 179)

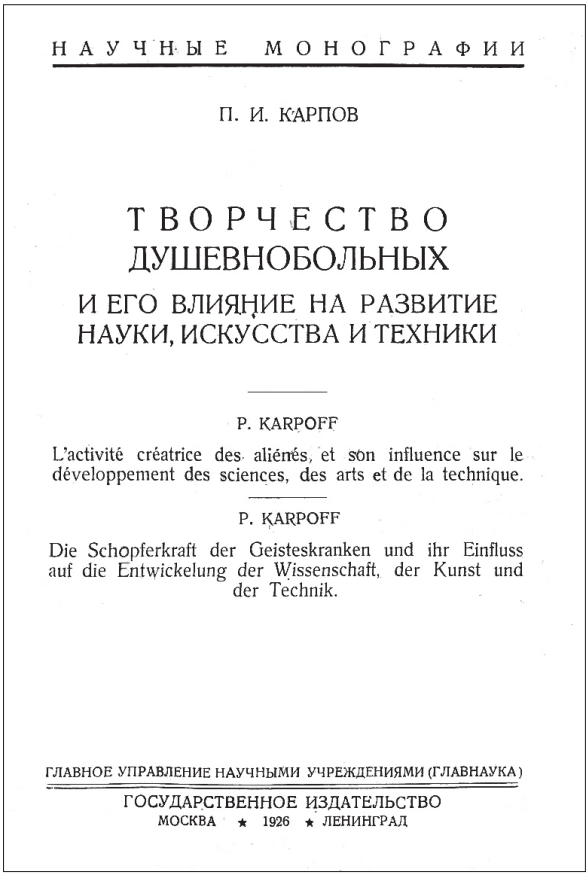
122 «[…] закон стихий — беззаконие».

> In the 1960s, mental illness became a fashionable topic of conversation and a lifestyle. *Shiznia, shizet', schizanutyi, schizoid, psikh* were popular words in youth slang. Boys I knew from the humanities and artistic professions ended up in psychiatric hospitals. Some were forcibly institutionalized by their families or the authorities. […] Mental illness, like drunkenness, was a form of dissidence, an escape into another state of being beyond the control of the state. Drawings by mental patients or schizophrenics were in vogue; at the time, schizophrenia was used as a catch-all term for nearly all disorders.

Among those forcibly placed in a psychiatric clinic by his family was the artist Mikhail Chernyshov. His parents, a well-to-do Moscow professor's family, attempted to "correct" their son's infatuation with modern art through Soviet psychiatry. Against all odds, Chernyshov became an artist, even introducing some of the doctors who treated him to new artistic techniques (Chernyshov 1988: 16).

Interestingly, the notion of psychic deviation as an alternative to Soviet life was not associated with art brut. In the USSR of the 1960s, little was known about this Western art movement. Neither Hans Prinzhorn – who systematized the collection of works by psychiatric patients at the Heidelberg University Hospital and wrote a famous book on the art of the mentally ill – nor Jean Dubuffet, who coined the term *art brut*, was widely recognized in Moscow or Leningrad at the time. However, as in many other cases, there was no need to seek foreign examples. As early as the late 1920s, the art of the mentally ill had been studied by the Leningrad psychiatrist Pavel Karpov (1926), whose books were valued by Daniil Kharms.

In the late Soviet period, figures such as Vladimir Ėrl′ and the poets of his circle also took an interest in this field. Exhibitions of works by psychiatric patients were organized in Moscow. Mikhail Grobman attended one such exhibition – a showcase of drawings by mental patients, which opened in April 1966 at the Moscow House of Sanitary Enlightenment (Dom sanitarnogo prosveshcheniia). In his diary, he criticized the public's fascination with the project: «[…] есть любопытные вещицы, полно народу, людишки, падкие на сенсацию и дешевый модерн, любуются рисунками сумасшедших


НАУЧНЫЕ МОНОГРАФИИ

П. И. КАРПОВ

ТВОРЧЕСТВО ДУШЕВНОБОЛЬНЫХ

И ЕГО ВЛИЯНИЕ НА РАЗВИТИЕ НАУКИ, ИСКУССТВА И ТЕХНИКИ

P. KARPOFF

L'activité créatrice des aliénés, et son influence sur le développement des sciences, des arts et de la technique.

P. KARPOFF

Die Schopferkraft der Geisteskranken und ihr Einfluss auf die Entwickelung der Wissenschaft, der Kunst und der Technik.

ГЛАВНОЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЕ НАУЧНЫМИ УЧРЕЖДЕНИЯМИ (ГЛАВНАУКА)

ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО

МОСКВА ★ 1926 ★ ЛЕНИНГРАД

Fig. 18

и проходят часто очень равнодушно мимо серьезной современной живописи» (Grobman 2002: 137).[123]

As this entry suggests, Grobman reproached the public for their lack of interest in contemporary art and their morbid curiosity about what he saw as

123 "[…] there are some interesting pieces, a lot of people, but also an element of sensationalism – people indulging in cheap Art Nouveau, admiring the drawings of madmen while often passing indifferently by serious contemporary paintings".



Fig. 19

a rather grim exhibition. Unlike Dubuffet's *art brut*, madness for the Moscow and Leningrad nonconformists marked the boundary between Soviet common sense and artistic freedom. In some cases, it even became a marker of belonging to the nonconformist community. Anatoly Brusilovsky, the creator of Moscow's main nonconformist salon – a hub attended by nearly all artists and intellectuals of the 1960s, as well as many foreigners – describes this phenomenon. The salon was particularly important for *dip-art* (art for diplomats), which allowed the underground to gain international recognition. He writes:

> Тогда, в 60-х […], была актуальна тема «шизоидности». Это было модно, это было на слуху. Общество живо обсуждало проблемы психиатрии, как насущные, связанные с выживанием «под совком». Официальная пропаганда упорно определяла каждого, кто хоть как-то не вписывался в плоский, картонный образ «советского человека», как шизофреника, душевнобольного, негодного для их общества субъекта. Делалось это упорно, долго, многие интеллектуалы прошли через «опыт» насильственной «психиатрички», они и впрямь чувствовали себя в «нашей буче, боевой и кипучей», как сошедшие с колеи, сбившиеся с прямого и ясного пути. Можно сказать, что ходкое тогда определение человека как «шиза» было вполне желательной и уместной рекомендацией человека к общению.
> (Brusilovskii 2001: 13)

> Back then, in the 1960s […], there was a hot topic of "schizoidism". It was fashionable, it was in the air. Society vividly discussed the problems of psychiatry as urgent, tied to survival under the Soviet regime. Official propaganda persistently defined anyone who did not fit into the flat, cardboard image of the "Soviet man" as schizophrenic, mentally ill, or otherwise unfit for society. This was done relentlessly, for years. Many intellectuals had been through the "experience" of forced psychiatric hospitalization. They genuinely felt that, amid "turbulence so full of struggle and fervor", they had gone off track, having strayed from the straight and clear path. […] We could say that the then-popular definition of a person as "schizo" was quite a desirable and appropriate recommendation for social interaction.[124]

If we try to differentiate those involved in the nonconformist fashion of *schizoidism,* we can distinguish several types.[125] Some were artists and intellectuals

124 On the same topic, see also: Kabakov 2008: 320–329.

125 It was not always a punishment to be placed in a psychiatric hospital; sometimes, for one reason or another, people went there to have their mental state assessed in order to avoid imprisonment. In addition to punitive psychiatry and clinical cases, there were relatively harmless manifestations of mental illness. Among Khvostenko's acquaintances and colleagues were those who turned to psychiatrists for help. Gleb Gorbovsky tells how, at invitation of writer Viktor Konetsky, he went with him to a clinic on Vasil'evsky Island (Leningrad) to get rid of his addiction to alcohol: «<Виктор Конецкий> весьма непринужденно пригласил меня

whose aesthetic preferences diverged sharply from Soviet officialdom – their "madness" lay in their refusal to conform to Soviet artistic canons. They constituted the majority among the nonconformists. Others, like the aforementioned Sergei Chudakov, disregarded Soviet laws and lived on the fringes of the criminal world, sometimes in direct contact with it. Lastly, there were those who enacted monstrous fantasies reminiscent of Dostoevsky's characters.

In the spring of 1965, the writer Vladimir Shveigol′ts was tried in Leningrad for the murder of his mistress. He attempted to frame the event as a botched double suicide driven by religious motives – allegedly, he and his girlfriend had planned to make an atoning sacrifice, but he executed it clumsily and survived. However, the nonconformist community viewed the incident negatively. Shveigol′ts was known to many Leningrad nonconformists. Dmitry Bobyshev mentions him in his memoirs,[126] and Boris Ivanov's novella "*Podonok*" ("Scum"; Ivanov 2009) is dedicated to him. Joseph Brodsky's poem "Zdes′ zhil Shveigol′ts…" ('Here lived Shveigol′ts") also offers a stark commentary on the tragedy (Brodskii 1997: 328–329).[127] There is no doubt that *The*

в ближайший ресторан. […] За столиком под 'фешенебельную' закуску последовало предложение, на обдумывание которого давалось несколько секунд. […] Над моей стопкой […] был занесен пузатый, 'тяжкий' графинчик. […] Я знал: покуда не отвечу на предложение — из графинчика ничего не исторгнется. […] „Такое дело, старичок… […] Как ты посмотришь на то, чтобы малость подлечиться? На пару со мной? Условия шикарные: врач — свой человек, после шести вечера его кабинет на отделении — наш, в полном распоряжении. Там пишмашинка, бумага. Даже копирка. Будешь писать стихи. Я — доводить сценарий. Устраивает?" Графинчик накренился в мою сторону, однако ничего из себя не извергнул. И тогда я усердно кивнул: „Устраивает!"» (Gorbovskii 1991: 307–308; "<Viktor Konetsky> casually invited me to a nearby restaurant. […] At the table, under a 'fashionable' appetizer, a proposal was made, which only took a few seconds to consider. […] A round-bellied, 'heavy' little decanter was poised above my shot glass. […] I knew that nothing would come out of the decanter until I responded to the proposal: 'Here's the thing, pal… […] How would you feel about a little treatment? With me? The conditions are great: the doctor is a friend of me, and after six o'clock in the evening, his office on the ward is ours, at our complete disposal. There is typewriter. Paper. Even carbon paper. You'll write the poems. I'll finish the script. All right?' The decanter tilted in my direction, but nothing came out. Then I nodded eagerly: 'Suits me!'"). Cf. Evgeny Rein's account of his treatment for depression in Rein 2005: 58–61.

126 Bobyshev 2016.

127 Shveigol′ts was a close friend of Leonid Aronzon, one of the major figures of Leningrad unofficial poetry. For Aronzon's attitude toward this case, see, for example: Shved 2024.

Suspector had no connection to this kind of marginality, where madness intersected with criminality and moral depravity.

Regardless of the fashion for "schizo" and "schizoidism" strategies as means of liberation from the Soviet system, the protagonist of *The Suspector* was clinically examined in the psychiatric hospital on Pryazhka. His case was probably similar to that of Petr Chaadaev – more political than medical. Many years later, in interviews, Khvostenko spoke indignantly about the cruel treatment methods used by Soviet psychiatrists. From the perspective of the authorities and the psychiatric institutions that served them, Khvostenko and Brodsky were antisocial individuals – at best, subjects for psychiatric evaluation; at worst, candidates for forced treatment. The system sought to define them as insane, but after passing through its inhuman mechanisms, they ultimately exposed the true madness of the system itself.

CHAPTER 5

No Anxiety of Influence

Epigraphs Only

The marginalization of the nonconformists differed from the image of the marginal figure that the beatniks chose for themselves: in the USSR, marginalization was inherent in the very existence of the artists and their social experience, rather than in their public role. Interest in schizoidism and deviations from the mental norm did not fit within the framework of art brut; instead, it served as an alternative to Soviet experience and creativity, which was constrained by the limits of official aesthetics. The art and literature of the Soviet underground cannot be reduced to the experience of the beatniks, art brut, or other foreign neo-avant-garde or avant-garde movements. While nonconformists had a genuine interest in Western art and literature of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they existed in a distinct socio-cultural context. This context was not comparable to the democratic society and art market of Western Europe and the United States, due to the USSR's different political structure and peculiar system of cultural institutions.

It is also important to emphasize that most underground artists and writers were primarily focused on self-definition within their local context, rarely attempting to establish themselves in the London or New York art scenes. As noted in the conclusion to the introductory chapter, many of them unjustly downplayed their knowledge of modern and contemporary art, insisting that they had to start from scratch during the Thaw years after decades of repressive Soviet cultural policy. However, the extent of their ignorance was often greatly exaggerated. At the same time, the intensity with which they, drawing on the traditions of the avant-garde and modernism, sought to develop their own artistic and literary experiences is only now being fully recognized through a detailed examination of the artistic life of the 1960s.

In this regard, it is essential to describe more precisely how Moscow and Leningrad neo-avant-gardists assimilated the experience of the Western avant-garde while constructing their own artistic approach. A valuable case study in this process is Aleksei Khvostenko's *Poėma ėpigrafov* ("The Poem of Epigraphs", 1965), in which he transforms the ideas of the American avant-garde classic Edward Estlin Cummings into a neo-avant-garde poetic form. This work plays a particularly significant role in Khvostenko's oeuvre, as well as in the activities of Verpa and the Helenucts.

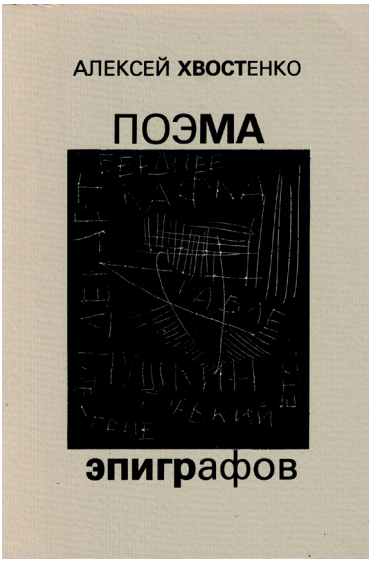


Fig. 20

After Khvostenko's death, Verpa's main texts and several other works were compiled by his co-author and close friend Anri Volokhonsky into a book titled *Verpa (*Khvostenko 2005), which remains the most complete and accurate representation of Verpa's literary project to date. A scholarly edition of the group's works, accompanied by historical and literary commentary, has yet to be published.

The book opens with *The Poem of Epigraphs*, as per the editor's intent. All indications suggest that *The Poem of Epigraphs* is one of Verpa's significant texts and a key work in the construction of the Verpa myth. The book dates the poem to 1965, meaning it does not belong to the group's first or earliest works (Khvostenko 2005b: 422).[128] Whatever Volokhonsky's reasons for placing the poem first in the collection (it should not be forgotten that an epigraph usually precedes the text), its prominence suggests that it holds a distinct status among the group's writings.

128 This dating is confirmed by typewritten copies of *The Poem of Epigraphs*, which are preserved in the Vladimir Ėrl′ collection in Bremen (FSO 01-037/W-030).

It can be assumed that the poem draws attention to itself by signaling the author's approach to literature and literary practice. It serves as a statement – a declaration of intent and a demonstration of creative potential. Khvostenko deliberately breaks conventions and challenges the reader's expectations. The text consists solely of materials for epigraphs, commentary on epigraphs, or fragments that could function as epigraphs. Yet, paradoxically, the epigraphs do not serve their traditional role within the poem – if they can even be considered epigraphs at all. What emerges is a text without a "text", a literary work devoid of linear narrative, coherent reflection, or a recognizable poetic form or genre. It is, in essence, a neo-avant-garde gesture.

In his book *Seuils*, Gérard Genette identifies four functions of the epigraph: clarification of the title, clarification of the text, accession to the symbolic capital of the quoted author, and designation of belonging to an era, genre, or literary group (Genette 1987). Some elements of these functions can be found in *The Poem of Epigraphs*, but this alone does not allow the epigraphs to be read in the traditional sense. The poem consists of a collection of numerous fragments, each prefaced by an epigraph. However, in this case, the epigraph does not precede the text in its usual role but instead stands as part of the text itself, deprived of the contextual interaction that typically defines its function.

Here, the epigraph serves as a starting point, an upbeat before the beginning, and even an object of ridicule. Each epigraph is, in some way, enacted or subverted in the accompanying text. In some instances, its form is playfully manipulated; in others, it is rendered absurd; in still others, it sets the theme for improvisation. There are also incoherent, fragmented epigraphs – a phrase taken out of context, sometimes breaking off mid-word. For example, Malevich's truncated quote (or pseudoquote)[129] "I imagine moo…" («Я представляю себе му…») plays out as a jumble of fragmented language, culminating in the pronoun 'I'.

п
мас
тр
оэлущ

129 On pseudoquotes in Khvostenko's text and their interpretation, see: Drobinin 2019; Vlasova 2024.

…уг
…ат
гено…
% % %
Я
(Khvostenko 2005: 19)

p
mas
tr
oelushch
…ug
…at
geno…
% % %
I

The phrase "Reasoning a priori" («Рассуждая a priori»), ostensibly quoted from Berdiaev, is visually represented through the repeated use of "here", which signifies an a priori assertion. This effect is further reinforced by the use of ellipsis and percent signs.

вот
вот
вот
вот
вот
вот
вот
вот
……
……
% % %
вот
(Khvostenko 2005: 20)

here
here
here
here
here
here
here
here
……
……
% % %
here

This is how Khvostenko represents an a priori judgment.

An elementary, everyday observation taken from Alain Robbe-Grillet's prose – "I saw the door opened…" («Я видел, как открывалась дверь…») – is reproduced with refinements introduced by adjectives:

столб
телеграфный столб
бар
пивной бар
мостовая
булыжная мостовая
(Khvostenko 2005: 21).

pole
telegraph pole
bar
beer bar
pavement
cobblestone pavement

Both the word "time" and the word "child" are brought into question, and the text ends with a sudden interruption of speech:

время
? время
ребенок
? ребенок
стоп
(Ibid.)

time
? time
child
? child
stop

The Concretist mockery of the epigraph is not limited to these examples. Phrases that should meaningfully explain or enrich the text they preface are mostly unclear, having been taken out of context; in some cases, they are fragmented and rendered meaningless, becoming little more than inarticulate utterances. The relationship between the epigraph and the related text is often difficult to establish with certainty.

The epigraphs appear to have been taken from the works of famous writers and thinkers (as well as Kazimir Malevich and *Popol Vuh*), some of whom are representatives of the national pantheon of culture. Thus, epigraphs serve as the material for dismantling literary tradition, literature as an institution, and conventional ideas about literature. The comparison between *The Suspector* and Jean Tinguely's self-destructive installations has already been made (Chapter 3). *The Poem of Epigraphs* is a similar self-destructive construction, assembled from the materials of epigraphs.

Maxim Gorky, the founder of Socialist Realism, bears the brunt of Khvostenko's critique. His emphatic rejection, expressed in the laconic phrase "No, no, and no…" («Нет, нет и нет…»), is mocked through repetition until it loses its meaning – unlike Vsevolod Nekrasov's tautologies, which generate meaning:

нет
и
нет

и
нет
и
нет
и
нет
и
нет
(Khvostenko 2005: 26).

no
and
no
and
no
and
no
and
no
and
no

We hear the hum of voices from famous intellectuals. The chorus of celebrities sounds disconnected, confused, and erratic. Out of this chatter and stumbling – which subverts the literary canon – emerge fragments of speech or linguistic events, compiled into series, lists, or rows that adhere to no grammar, syntax, or punctuation. This elegant and inventive reckoning with the classics and literary Parnassus culminates in a series of ellipses inspired by the name of Pushkin. The epigraph here is a symbolically absent statement: "And……" («*И*……»). The text that follows mirrors this absence:

Ф……
М……
М……
Ч……
Т……

Е……
В……
И……
Т……
Т……
И……
(Khvostenko 2005: 28)

F……
M……
M……
Ch……
T……
E……
V……
I……
T……
T……
I……

If René Descartes, Franz Kafka, or Louis-Ferdinand Céline are represented in the poem by meaningless excerpts from their works, Pushkin, as a key figure of Russian culture, is inescapable – even in his absence.

Khvostenko and Cummings

One of the keys to these Concretist improvisations and inventions is the poem's dedication to Edward Estlin Cummings. Behind this reference lie several ideas and values central to Khvostenko. First and foremost, Cummings saw poetry as the act of reassembling language, transforming it into a new pictorial material and into the form-creative reality of the printed text. In the preface to his book *is 5*, Cummings speaks of "Making" as the poet's obsession with poetry's rivalry with reality: Poet is "anybody who is obsessed by Making. […] It is with roses and locomotives(not to mention acrobats Spring electricity Coney Island the 4th of July the eyes of mice and Niagara Falls)

that my 'poems' are competing. They are also competing with each other,with elephants,and with El Greco" (Cummings 2016: 235).

A similar idea is expressed in the first fragment of *The Poem of Epigraphs*: the poetic word is performative – it is a gesture, an action, a making, a deed. The poet is *homo faber*. The primacy of gesture, declared in the epigraph from a certain A. Tatishchev – "In everything, gesture prevails" – finds expression in a series of infinitives that culminate in a breakdown, marked by several fragmented infinitive endings, before affirming the verb 'to live':

напиться
утолить (жажду)
разрушить
воспроизвести
иметь (что-либо)
кусаться
…иться
…аться
…уть
…ыть
жить
(Khvostenko 2005: 8)

to get drunk
to quench (thirst)
to destroy
to reproduce
to have (something)
to bite
to …ete
to …out
to …ove
to …ive
to live[130]

130 It is curious that in their language games, both Cummings and Khvostenko are dedicated Francophiles. See, for example, Cummings's third nonlecture (1959: 47) on Paris, which

In the very first fragment of the poem, Cummings' poetic techniques are recognizable: the absence of capitalization at the beginning of a line, word fragmentation, the omission of normative punctuation and syntax, playful ellipsis, and use of parentheses. These stylistic choices, combined with abstractly labeled infinitive endings, represent life in its various manifestations. The words not only depict vitality itself but also reinforce the dominance of gesture – an idea that, by association, leads to a discussion of vitality. *The Poem of Epigraphs* is hardly separate from Khvostenko's larger *life-creative* project. Life, in this context, encompasses the artist's entire existence, including the mundane. In this regard, we can observe a key distinction between Cummings' *form-creative* experimentation and Khvostenko's *life-creativity.*

Neo-avant-garde sculptor Vadim Kosmachev, who knew Khvostenko well in Moscow before and during the years of his emigration, prefaces his memoirs about the poet with a quote from Vasily Rozanov (a great admirer of parentheses, ellipsis, and fragmentary phrases, whose *Uedinennoe* (*Solitaria)* begins with similar stylistic choices): «Литературу я чувствую, как штаны, так же близко и вообще „как свое", всегда в них (постоянно ношу), но что же с ними церемониться???!!!» (Pligin 2013: 75).[131]

According to Kosmachev, Khvostenko was as integral, organic, and natural as Rozanov. This judgment, expressed in an elegant and touching essay by an old friend, is shared by many admirers of Khvostenko's work (including the authors of the collection of memoirs about him: Pligin 2013). Meanwhile, the autobiographical dimension was largely absent from Cummings's poetry. This contrast highlights a fundamental difference between his work and the artistic project of his admirer, Khvostenko. While Cummings's avant-garde techniques inspired him, Khvostenko's artistic experience took a different course. Khvostenko's fascination with wordplay was so profound that, in the dedication of *The Poem of Epigraphs*, he transformed even Cummings's last name into material for language games in the spirit of the American poet:

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also draws attention to the close connection between the life-creative project and Rabelais's Thélème Abbey. Both the Rabelaisian linguistic maestria and the experiments with the language of the Dadaists and Surrealists bring Khvostenko and Cummings closer together, although, for all their love of France and Paris, both felt, to some extent, outsiders to French culture.

131 "I feel about literature the way I feel about pants: it is as close to me as anything, as much "my own" (I always wear it). So why should I stand on ceremony with it???!!!"

эта поэма по!
свящается по
камингсу кам
иксу и в той
же степени
его игреку
которого я ни
когда не знаю
который мог
не быть
(Khvostenko 2005: 6)

this poem de!
dicated to de
cummings cum
x and to
the same degree
his y
whom I ne
ver know
who could
not be

Khvostenko's "Cummings" is rendered as "cum x", also known as "his y" – the latter of which, according to the author, does not exist. The disembodiment of the poem's addressee precedes its beginning. Cummings disappears into wordplay and clownish linguistic distortions, similar to those he himself loved and inspired in his readers. The dedication presents the authorial persona as mere material for linguistic combinatorial games – a set of letters or signs that signify a ghostly identity or the reality of language as play. Khvostenko makes Cummings's name isomorphic to his poetry.

The dedication contains several Cummingsian devices. Besides the lack of capitalization at the beginning of lines, these include splitting words across lines, the nonstandard use of exclamation points, and letter scrambling (thmesis). The first line ends with «по!» ("de!"), either echoing the first syllable of "поэма" or anticipating the next line "(de)dicated" = (по)священа, which is

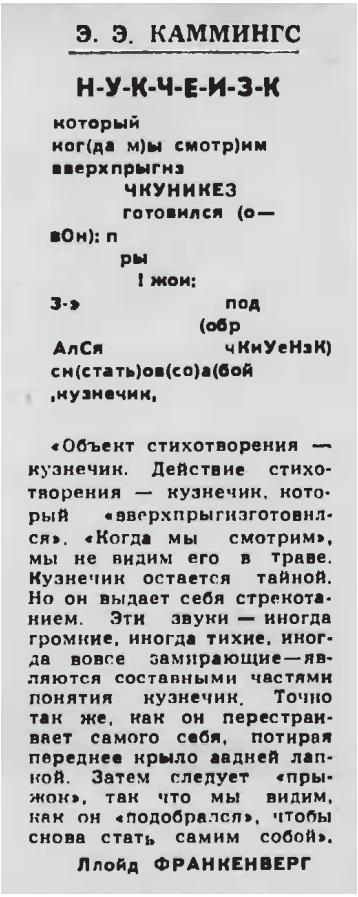
again followed by «по» ("de"). Similar techniques create tautological play, as seen in the manipulation of Rabelais's phrase "The four of them drank and ate…":

бочка
бочк..
бо.к.
.о.ка.
б….
бочка
..ч.а
бо.ка
[…]
(Khvostenko 2005: 24)

barrel
barre..
ba.r..
.a.r..
b…..
barrel
…r.l
ba.rel
[…]

Parts of the words are set free – of course, such techniques are not exclusive to Cummings and appear in other avant-garde works, including those of the Futurists. In addition, Khvostenko borrowed heavily from Khlebnikov and Rabelais, which likely reinforced his fascination with Cummings.

To some extent, this fascination was sparked by the publication of Cummings's poem "Grasshopper" in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in 1964, accompanied by Lloyd Frankenberg's commentary (25 June 1964, p. 4). The translation – whose author was uncredited – was remarkably well done. A year earlier, an article about Cummings had appeared in the Russian-language magazine *America* (April 1963). However, it is also possible that Khvostenko's home library, largely



Э. Э. КАММИНГС

Н-У-К-Ч-Е-И-З-К

который
ког(да м)ы смотр)им
аверхпрыгнз
ЧКУНИКЕЗ
готовился (о—
вОн): п
ры
! жои:
З-» под
(обр
АлСя чКиУеНзК)
сн(стать)ов(со)а(бой
,кузнечик,

«Объект стихотворения — кузнечик. Действие стихотворения — кузнечик, который «аверхпрыгизготовнлся». «Когда мы смотрим», мы не видим его в траве. Кузнечик остается тайной. Но он выдает себя стрекотанием. Эти звуки — иногда громкие, иногда тихие, иногда вовсе замирающие — являются составными частями понятия кузнечик. Точно так же, как он перестраивает самого себя, потирая переднее крыло аадней лапкой. Затем следует «прыжок», так что мы видим, как он «подобрался», чтобы снова стать самим собой».

Ллойд ФРАНКЕНВЕРГ

Fig. 21

assembled by his father, included books by Cummings.[132] Either way, by the mid-1960s, the American avant-gardist had caught the attention of Leningrad and Moscow nonconformists. Gennady Aigi recalled his first impression of Cummings's poetic experiments:

> Впервые я о нем услышал от замечательного поэта-переводчика Андрея Сергеева, друга С. Красовицкого. Это было в году 56–57-ом […]. Андрей рассказывал об Эзре Паунде, Каммингсе, но тогда еще переводили только Фроста. В разгар хрущевской войны с абстракционизмом […] в Литгазете […] издевательски напечатали «Кузнечика», не указав имени переводчика. А перевод был — превосходный! — я был в восторге… Приблизительно через полтора-два года после этого удалось достать номер журнала «Америка» (на русском) с большой статьей о Каммингсе, были и СТИХИ, и очень понравившиеся мне рисунки.
> (quoted in: Ianechek [Janecek] 2000)

132 A copy of Cummings's *Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1938) – the only Cummings edition represented in the Leningrad Public Library (now the Russian National Library) – entered the library in July 1953 and was kept in special storage (*spetskhran*) until 2004 (!). The fact that, a few months after Stalin's death, the library received a book by the author of an anti-Soviet travelogue, albeit microscopic in the scale of political history, is nevertheless a symptom of the coming transformation. Khvostenko could read this book; his father Lev Khvostenko and Ivan Likhachev, the head of the translation seminar at the House of Writers, could help him get a pass to the special storage. I would like to thank my colleague Evgeny Gollerbakh for providing this information.

> I first heard about him from the wonderful poet-translator Andrei Sergeev, a friend of S<tanislav> Krasovitsky. It was in the year 1956–1957 […]. Andrei talked about Ezra Pound, Cummings, but at that time only Frost was being translated. At the height of Khrushchev's war against abstractionism […] *Lit-gazeta* mockingly printed "Grasshopper", omitting the translator's name. And the translation was excellent! I was delighted… About a year and a half or two later, I managed to get hold of an issue of the magazine *America* (in Russian) with a major article on Cummings – there were poems, and drawings that I liked very much.

Aigi also recalled that, not knowing English at the time, he perceived Cummings's poetry visually, as a series of graphemes – as pictures. Translations by Andrei Sergeev and Leonid Chertkov (with later translations by Vladimir Britanishsky) were well known among the nonconformists, and Khvostenko could have read them, though he was not closely connected to Chertkov's literary circle. Unlike Aigi, however, Khvostenko knew English well and read Cummings in the original.

Like his American counterpart, Khvostenko fragmented words, turning their parts into independent elements of speech. He dissected them arbitrarily, bringing the text closer to a phonetic transcription of spoken language, or blurring the boundaries between words. Aside from "Grasshopper", one could compare this to Cummings's "I will be"[133] and "ygUDuh"[134].

Khvostenko frequently used parentheses as explanatory markers, often reducing them to absurdity:

> «утолить (жажду)» – to quench (thirst),
> «нужда (в чем-либо)» – need (something),
> «с (междометие)» – with (interjection),
> «сморчок (гриб)» – morel (mushroom), and so forth.

In these word lists, meaning is specified within brackets yet disrupted by new insertions. For instance, a quotation from Dostoevsky in the epigraph is annotated with explanations of words in pre-reform Russian orthography, which

133 See his book & (Cummings 1925: 57).
134 See his book *1×1* (Cummings 1944: vii).

morphs into a scabrous rhyme – a parodic substitution of *Crime and Punishment*'s protagonist for the hero of Tvardovsky's poem:

снурокъ (шнурок)
мостъ (мост)
вѣсы (весы)
бобок (лобок)
свидригайлов (теркин)
[…]
(Khvostenko 2005: 12)

las (lace)
brig (bridge)
waigh-scales (scales)
bobok (cock)
svidrigailov (tyorkin)
[…]

Thus, using Cummings's poetic techniques, Khvostenko adopts the former's graphism but, as with Cummings's concept of "Making", does not merely copy it – he transforms it to his own liking.

It is particularly interesting how both poets incorporate mathematical elements into their poetry. Fragments of mathematical formulas appear in the titles of two books by the American avant-gardist: *1×1* and *is 5*. Similarly, each of the two parts of Khvostenko's *The Poem of Epigraphs* – "Tropiki lubvi" ("Tropics of Love") and "Sumerki tvorchestva" ("Twilight of Creativity") – is preceded by formulas that contradict each other: "A>A" and its inverse, "A<A". For both authors, mathematics serves as a metaphor for common sense, for language as a medium of everyday communication, which poetry then transforms into artistic experience. The coherence, connections, and relationships between the elements of verse become the central theme of Cummings' book & (1925) and also shape the structure of *1×1* (1944). In Khvostenko's formula of the (non)equality of the two A's, the poet challenges the validity of identity itself: identity and sameness are contingent and mutually reversible. A is both greater than and less than A. There is no fixed identity, no self, no individuality – everything is equivalent to everything else. The relationship between the

two A's can also be interpreted as that between the epigraph and the literary invention it inspires. In such a reading, one part of the formula represents the dominance of the epigraph, while the other corresponds to its interpretation within the poem.

In the preface to *is 5*, Cummings insists that poetry overturns conventional logic, turning 2 + 2 into 5. Poetry disrupts rational order and establishes its own. For Cummings, poetry embodies extreme individualism. In *1×1*, tautological multiplication absolutizes singularity and individuality, and, arguably, also denotes avant-garde uniqueness (*1×1*). Individualism was the most significant takeaway from Cummings's trip to the USSR. He returned from the collectivist society of the Soviet Union – a place he had once idealized – disillusioned and transformed into an anti-Soviet thinker, a poet of individual freedom: "Разубедившись в ценностях капитализма и теперь — еще более — в социалистической альтернативе, Каммингс все более убеждается в единственно возможной для него идеологии — идеологии поэта самого для себя" (Feshchenko/Rait 2013: 31).[135]

This idea is reflected in the title of Cummings' travelogue, *EIMI* (1933), a Latin transcription of the Ancient Greek phrase for "I am." It is also central to his philosophy of creativity and poetry, as he states in his *Six Nonlectures*: "[…] poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality" (Cummings 1959: 24).

By the 1950s, Cummings viewed egocentricity as an essential characteristic of the modern intellectual and a defining trait of the modernist anthropological type. He opens his *Nonlectures* with a declaration of egocentrism, which is accompanied by a deep skepticism that categorically denies the possibility of reliable knowledge.

This skepticism, bordering on agnosticism, is a point of convergence between Cummings and Khvostenko. Cummings calls himself an "ignoramus" in his *Nonlectures*, while Khvostenko, as noted by the authors of *Pro Khvosta* ("On Khvost"; Pligin 2013), was also an agnostic. However, this similarity does not erase the fundamental differences between them. Unlike Cummings, Khvostenko does not affirm identity, selfhood, or individuality. He did not

135 "Disconvinced of the values of capitalism and now – even more so – of the socialist alternative, Cummings became increasingly convinced of the only ideology possible for him: that of a poet for himself".

develop any distinctive individual poetics or a recognizable authorial manner. The lyrical hero of *The Suspector* is an indeterminate subject, appearing in the text only sporadically. This fragmented speaker possesses a blurred and unstable identity that does not conform to conventional mental norms. At the same time, Khvostenko's neo-avant-garde poetry is only one part of his broader creative legacy, which includes painting, drawing, songs, dramagedies, and theater productions. In Paris and New York, he engaged in assemblage art objects. These diverse works, created with different techniques and materials, lack aesthetic unity. What binds them together is the creative life of their author – the persona of a nonconformist and neo-avant-gardist, formed in the Leningrad and Moscow underground of the 1960s. His artistic identity remained largely unchanged throughout his years of emigration and even after his return to Russia in the early 2000s. In his memoirs about Khvostenko, the musician Dmitry Matkovsky tellingly writes: «Он мог быть оценен только по однобальной системе: 1×1 – он и был этой шкалой» (ibid.: 237).[136] Khvostenko's individuality does not stem from a single origin or a defining trait; rather, it integrates his diverse projects and wide-ranging interests.

Cummings was a major influence on Khvostenko. He was regarded as a kindred spirit, on par with François Rabelais, Velimir Khlebnikov, Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko, Anri Volokhonsky, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Igor′ Kholin, and other writers and artists important to Khvostenko in the 1960s. However, Khvostenko did not merely follow Cummings's ideas – he also diverged from them in fundamental ways. Yet at the beginning of Verpa's experiments, Cummings became an irreplaceable interlocutor for Khvostenko. His engagement with Cummings's work, his debates with the poet's ideas, and his reinterpretations of them played a crucial role in shaping his neo-avant-garde experiments and in inspiring his peers, including the Helenucts.

In her book on Mikhail Grobman, Lola Kantor-Kazowsky convincingly demonstrates how Grobman and other Moscow artists shaped their artistic practice by assimilating both the Western avant-garde and early twentieth-century Russian experimental art and literature (Kantor-Kazovsky 2022). These artists did not fear influence; rather, they embraced it. Khvostenko's dialogue with Cummings followed the same principle. The Helenucts had a similar experience.

136 "He could be evaluated only on a one-point system: 1×1 – he was that scale."

CHAPTER 6

The Helenucts and *The Suspector*

The New Generation of Neo-Avant-Gardists

The assimilation and reworking of Western and Russian avant-garde movements by Moscow and Leningrad nonconformists in the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s set the stage for the emergence of a new generation of artists. By 1966, when the Helenucts group formed, nonconformism – having gained momentum since the beginning of the Thaw – entered a new phase: what had begun with Chertkov's circle, Aref'ev's circle, and Verpa had evolved into a new form.

The works of the historical avant-garde and contemporary Western art and literature, which had become accessible in the second half of the 1950s after more than two decades of isolation, were no longer new to the Helenucts' generation by 1964–65. Unlike their predecessors, who had to start with the fundamentals of Futurism or Surrealism (e.g., Yury Vasil′ev-Mon), or with the shock of seeing Malevich's *Black Square* in the vaults of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in the 1950s – the Helenucts had the advantage of building directly on contemporary neo-avant-garde works. Instead of beginning where their forerunners did, they could engage with the latest artistic experiments by their immediate predecessors: Aleksei Khvostenko's work, inspired by the texts of Velimir Khlebnikov, Edward Estlin Cummings and Igor′ Kholin; Valentin Khromov's poetry, influenced by avant-garde combinatorial techniques; Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko's Abstract Expressionist compositions; Mikhail Chernyshov's Pop Art works; and Vsevolod Nekrasov's Concretism, where poetic language and everyday speech intertwined.

For the Helenucts, careers in the Union of Artists or the Union of Writers held little appeal. Although figures like Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko had influenced the Helenucts in their youth, by the mid-1960s, the work of these early Thaw-era stars no longer resonated with them. At best, officialdom was unappealing; at worst, associating with it was shameful. Meanwhile, the 1964 case of Joseph Brodsky (his trial and exile), solidified the image of the intellectual as a heroic outsider who lived in defiance of the Soviet system. Inspired by Brodsky, Solzhenitsyn (who simultaneously took a stance in opposition to the Soviet authorities), and other independent intellectuals, nonconformists sought alternatives to Soviet life, creating literature and art that existed independently from the system – a creative space liberated from the stagnation of Soviet reality.

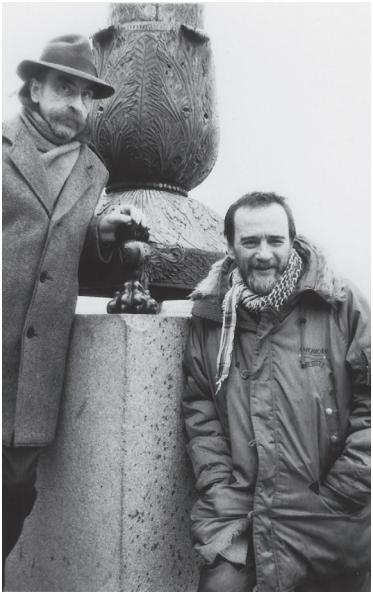


Fig. 22

The stakes in this game – at the intersection of life and art – were high, sometimes blurring the borders between creativity and psychological instability. The young people who entered the underground scene in the mid-1960s provided both a crucial support for the nonconformist community and a source of competition in the struggle for artistic and intellectual freedom. The new generation built upon what had been initiated in the 1950s, taking for granted what had once seemed impossible under Stalinism. And, of course, in doing so, they inevitably challenged their older contemporaries.

Under these circumstances, a new nonconformist figure emerged in 1965: the suspector. Then, in 1966, the Helenucts group formed, embodying this figure. As noted earlier, the group was created a few months after the meeting of Vladimir Ėrl′ and Aleksei Khvostenko – an event that took place sometime between August 1965 and March 1966.[137] Their meeting and subsequent exchanges may have contributed to the group's formation. That same

137 This information is confirmed in an interview with Vladimir Ėrl′ (1997j*).

year, coinciding with the group's emergence, at least six typewritten books by Khvostenko were published through Pol′za, the samizdat publishing house founded by Ėrl′.[138] Around this time, Dm. M. and Vladimir Ėrl′ wrote the poem "Vershina Khvostenko" ("Khvostenko's Peak"), while Ėrl′ also penned "Dve virshi Khvostenko" ("Khvostenko's Two Verses").[139] Khvostenko, whom Ėrl′ sometimes jokingly and sometimes seriously called an "honorary member" of the group, became one of its most important figures.

At this point, we will provide general information about the Helenucts, some of which was briefly introduced at the beginning of the book.

The Helenucts were a neo-avant-garde group active in Leningrad from 1966 until about 1970–1971. The Helenuct movement's instigator and ideologue was Vladimir Ibragimovich Ėrl′ (the literary pseudonym of Vladimir Ivanovich Gorbunov, 1947–2020). Others who belonged to the group include:

– VNE (pseudonym meaning "outside" from the initials of Viktor Nemtinov, born 1947);
– Dm. M. (the initials Dmitrii Makrinov, born 1946, used to sign his texts);
– Aleksandr Mironov (1948–2010);
– N. F. (the initials Natalia Fediuchek, born 1947, used to sign her texts);
– Aleksei Khvostenko (1940–2004).

Sergei Dorofeev and Aleksandr Prokof′ev, classmates of Vladimir Ėrl′, also took part in the group's activities.

The group belonged to the Malaya Sadovaya artistic circle, an association of writers, artists, and intellectuals who frequented the cafeteria on Malaya Sadovaya – a short street in the heart of Leningrad that connects Nevsky Prospect to Ital′anskaya Street (then called Rakov). Khvostenko, who founded and

138 For example, the following typewritten books from 1966 are preserved in the Ėrl"s collection in the FSO: *proizrastadii neumashinnogo nekotorogo tvorchestva* ("Sprouting Phases of Some Unmachined Creativity"), *Soobschenie o delakh v Peterburge* ("A report on affairs in St. Petersburg"), *10 stikhotvorenii Verpy posviachennykh Igoriu Kholinu* ("Ten Poems by Verpa dedicated to Igor′ Kholin"), *Uchenik Base* ("The Pupil of Basho"), *Tri tsikla Verpy* ("Three Verpa Cycles"), *1962–1966* (FSO 01-037/M/div-082).

139 These texts are dated 13–14 November and 4 October 1966, respectively. "The Helenucts' Manifesto" was completed on 16 September 1966.

led the creative association Verpa, was also a familiar presence on Malaya Sadovaya.

The Malaya Sadovaya literary association lasted until approximately 1972. The Helenucts joined it in the middle of the 1960s and actively took part right up to the moment when this artistic milieu dissolved into other micro-associations. If we attempt to identify the wider literary circle the Helenucts were associated with in one way or another, it is worth naming the following figures, aside from those already mentioned: Leonid Aronzon, Leon Bogdanov, Konstantin Kuz′minsky, and Oleg Okhapkin. These writers and artists later became key players in the late Soviet underground.

The Helenucts were young. Around the time "Vstupitel′naia stateika Khelenuktov" ("A Little Introductory Article by the Helenucts"), a manifesto from 16 September 1966, was written, Dm. M. had turned twenty, VNE and Ėrl′ were nineteen, and Mironov was eighteen. The members of the group got to know one another in the middle of the 1960s. In the summer of 1964, Ėrl′ was vacationing in Lisii Nos, a town near Leningrad on the shore of the Gulf of Finland. His school friends Roman Belousov, Nikolai Nikolaev, and Aleksandr Prokof′ev introduced him to Dm. M., who was living in a dacha nearby. When they returned to Leningrad, Ėrl′ initiated an acquaintance with Mironov at the Public Library. Before long, the future group began meeting at the cafeteria on Malaya Sadovaya, because the library was close by, just across Nevsky Prospect (Ėrl′ 1997a*). A year and a half later, writer and scientist Aleksandr Churilin introduced VNE to Dm. M., and a little later to Ėrl′ (Nemtinov 1997*). Ėrl′ married N. F. in 1967 (Ėrl′ 1997b*).

During the group's early years, its members worked at Leningrad's University Library ("Gor′kovka") and as service staff at the Ethnography Museum. In 1969, Ėrl′ and Mironov found jobs as parking lot guards, while VNE found work at Lenfilm, where he became a cameraman's assistant (Nemtinov 1997*). Dm. M. became a graduate student at the Faculty of Philology at Leningrad University.

Incongruity Unlimited

The group's name emerged after another variant – "Absurdisty" ("Absurdists"), was rejected because the word was so worn out, while another, "Nelepisty" ("Ridiculists"), was an admitted failure. Ėrl′ suggested reading "nelepist"

(нелепист) as though confusing the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets (Нелепист → Helenuct): capital 'н' as capital 'h', 'е' as 'e', 'л' as 'l', 'п' as 'n', 'и' as 'u', 'с' as 'k', 'т' as 't'. And so they arrived at the word "Helenuct", which turned out to be to everyone's liking. A Helenuct manifesto was created a short time later.

The incongruity that gave the group its name was quintessential mid-1960s nonconformism. It incorporated much of what the predecessors of the Helenucts had realized as an integral part of their existence. Rejecting an official career and not engaging with Soviet cultural institutions was both absurd and socially impractical. In his memoir *Vulkan Parnas. Samografia*, Valentin Khromov (2025) repeatedly emphasized the principled detachment of his circle from the Writers' Union and official culture. Artists such as Mikhail Chernyshov, Mikhail Roginsky, Boris Turetsky, and Oleg Tselkov took a similar stance. The next generation, including Aleksei Khvostenko, widened the gap between nonconformists and the official Soviet cultural sphere.

The Helenucts were eager to compete with their older contemporaries in pushing the boundaries of marginality within the Soviet system – and they were hardly inclined to concede in this contest. The list of jobs held by Khvostenko and Ėrl′ speaks for itself. As mentioned earlier, Khvostenko worked for the Committee for the Protection of Monuments in the Necropolis of the Aleksandr Nevsky Lavra, as an auxiliary worker at the Leningrad Zoo, as a bathhouse attendant, a laundry operator, and an assistant to the prominent linguist Knorozov. Ėrl′, in his responses to a 1983 questionnaire, mocked bureaucratic forms with his characteristic thoroughness as a "neo-avant-gardist and archivist". He listed his jobs as follows:

> б) библиотекарем; и) инструктором ППГ (пожарной охраны); к1) книгопродавцем; к2) контролером КПП ОВО (сторожем); к3) контроллером-приемником (тоже сторожем); м1) младшим библиотекарем (не путать с §б); м2) музейным рабочим; о1) оператором газифицированной котельной; о2) организатором экскурсий; п1) подсобным рабочим (не путать §м2); п2) почталионом <sic>; р) руководителем драм. кружка; с1) секретарем; с2) старшим лаборантом.

> a) auxiliary worker (not to be confused with §m); b) bookseller; c1) checkpoint controller (watchman); c2) controller-receiver (also watchman); e) excursion organizer; f) fire department instructor; g) gasified boiler room operator; h)

> head of theater circle; j) junior librarian (not to be confused with §l2); l1) letter-carrier <sic>; l2) librarian; m) museum worker; s1) secretary; s2) senior laboratory assistant.[140]

The Helenucts embodied nonconformist social escapism, sustaining their defiance for at least a decade. Their example demonstrates that in the mid-1960s, asociality and marginality were not only tolerated but also worn as badges of honor.

Incongruity also meant rejecting the dominant literary practices and forms of the time, whether they belonged to the Socialist Realist canon, village prose authors (*derevenschiki*), or the poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky. The Helenucts were drawn to absurdist reinterpretations of established forms, aesthetic experimentation, and alternative sociality. As had happened repeatedly in the twentieth century, they sought to disrupt the literary system – stripping it down to its essence, engaging in *anti-literature*, and producing work that the majority of the literary community did not even recognize as literature.

By elevating the ridiculous to a defining principle, the Helenucts radicalized the avant-garde. They drew inspiration from Futurism, Dadaism, and contemporary artistic experimentation, pushing for greater extremes in their uncompromising search for the new. For them, neo-avant-gardism took the form of aesthetic extremism.

Additionally, their embrace of absurdity could be linked to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of laughter, developed in his study of François Rabelais – one of Khvostenko's favorite authors. Bakhtin's work gained attention in the 1960s, and the Helenucts experimented with the concept of the holy fool (*jurodivyi*), infusing their neo-avant-garde games with the spirit of *sacra insanitas* – sacred madness.

As models for their activities as an unofficial literary group, the Helenucts oriented themselves toward the SMOGists, who influenced the whole Malaya Sadovaya circle (Aleinikov 2008; Batshev 2007; Batshev 2017). Leonid Aronzon was in contact with SMOG members Vladimir Batshev and Vladimir Aleinikov (Ėrl′ 1997c*). Thanks to Aronzon, Ėrl′ and Mironov met with the Moscow neo-avant-gardists, including Leonid Gubanov, one of their leaders,

140 Stanislav Savitski's collection.

during a trip to Moscow in the summer of 1965. As an analogy to the SMOGists' samizdat publishing houses, Ėrl′ founded the typescript publisher Pol′za, which released a good number of poetic collections and artistic brochures. The plan to publish a Helenuct yearbook, *Moguchaia kuchka* ("A Mighty Handful", a second name for the group that did not catch on), in September 1967 never advanced beyond the project stage (Ėrl′ 1997c*). Pol′za lasted until 1971, when the Helenuct movement came to an end. At that time, the publishing house was renamed Palata Mer i Vesov (Bureau of Weights and Measures) as a tribute to their fascination with the work of Koz′ma Prutkov, whose imaginary biography included service in the Assays Office (Ėrl′ 1992; Ėrl′ 1997b*).

The chronological framework of the group's activities, then, established according to their publishing activity, encompasses the period from 1965 through 1971. It is interesting that both the Helenucts and the Malaya Sadovaya group were falling apart as the 1960s transitioned to the 1970s. This is precisely the period that has traditionally been described by those active in unofficial culture as a historical milestone (Kalomirov 1985 [1979]; Belkin 1997*). Politically, the time is defined by the end of hopes for the Soviet system's humanization and liberalization after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. At the same time, opportunities for self-realization in official literature outside the limitations and prescriptions imposed by state regulation of culture were collapsing. The fact that several poets were going through a transitional creative period on the cusp of the 1970s might also be connected to this phenomenon. Mironov sums up his early poetic experience with the poetic collection *ἐποχή* (Mironov 1970). The same date divides the creative work of Vladimir Ėrl′ into two periods: *Kniga Tapir* (1963–1969) and *Kniga Trava* (1970–1985).

The literary group's status in Leningrad in the second half of the 1960s entailed, to a great extent, private literary practice. Although the Helenucts had a manifesto like their older contemporaries Verpa and Gorozhane, they were not an organization registered as an institution. Likewise, Helenuctism had no economic or political goals. Despite the fact that samizdat output could be sold illegally and could even turn a profit for a few enterprising samizdat publishers,[141] the Helenucts did not convert their literary experiments

141 For example, see Aleksandr Gladkov's diary: «7 июля <1965>. […] Б-ий третьего дня мне сказал: — А вы знаете, А. К., что *вами* торгуют?.. Оказалось, что в Лен-де продолжается перепечатка 'самиздатом' рукописи 'Встречи с П<астернаком>', и цена экземпляра,



Fig. 23

into cash. Nor did they have a relationship with the dissident movement or any form of opposition. They were drawn together primarily for friendly creative interactions, just like the majority of micro-associations in the late Soviet underground. Typewritten publications and oral presentations were the forms of socialization their literary work took.

With a few exceptions – Vladimir Batshev, Yury Galanskov, Aleksandr Ginzburg, Natalia Gorbanevskaya, or Viktor Krivulin – representatives of the underground were not engaged in political activity. One of the most prominent figures of nonconformism, Joseph Brodsky, was far from being a dissident, devoting himself entirely to poetry. Even his emigration was a forced, if not coercive, step. He would hardly have dared to leave the country on his own. While already in exile, he spent years blaming Yevgeny Yevtushenko for his expulsion from the USSR. The latter was unlikely directly involved in the authorities' decision but was most likely compelled to participate in discussions with officials about Brodsky's forced emigration (Okhotin 2000;

размноженного 'на паях', колеблется от 3 р. 50 к. до 4 р. Это, в частности, делают в Пушкинском доме» ("July 7 <1965>. […] On the third day, B-ii said to me: 'Do you know, A.K., that *you*'re being traded?' It turned out that in Len<ingra>d, the samizdat manuscript *Meetings with P<asternak>* continues to be reprinted, and the price of a copy, reproduced 'on shares', ranges from 3 rubles 50 kopecks to 4 rubles. This is being done in particular at the Pushkin House"; Gladkov 2014/3).

Morev 2023; Morev 2025; Volkov 2000: 115–131).[142] The formal pretext for his emigration was an invitation to Israel from David Krasnoglaz, a member of a Zionist circle who helped publish Brodsky's poems in Hebrew translation. Brodsky's acquaintance, Ėster Veinger – an expert on old books at the famous Leningrad antiquarian bookshop "Bukinist" on Liteiny, who knew many nonconformists – recounts this episode in *Ierusalimskii zhurnal* (Veinger 1999).[143] Brodsky had no direct ties to Zionism or dissidence. The only documented connection to the Zionist movement was an application he submitted to the Israeli Consulate to volunteer for the Israeli army, which was rejected. The Soviet authorities forced him to accept the invitation to Israel, threatening further persecution if he refused. In this episode – masterfully reconstructed by Gleb Morev (2023 and 2025) – there are no political struggles or hidden plots that would link Brodsky to dissidence. He was absorbed in literature and saw himself, above all, as a poet. Like Khvostenko and the Helenucts, he was not a dissident. However, while poets' lives were not directly threatened by the Soviet system, they did not fit neatly within its established framework. To some degree, they inevitably faced pressure, no matter how absurd the authorities' claims against them may have seemed.

Many neo-avant-gardists and nonconformists believed that creativity, even if it does not explicitly shape politics, is closer to the essence of historical experience than political activism. The absurdity of life in the USSR – especially the absurdity of the authorities' persecution of creative intellectuals – became the reality in which the Helenucts and other neo-avant-gardists immersed themselves in art as a means of preserving their independence. This artistic

142 The plan to hijack an airplane, in which Brodsky took part, is a vivid episode from his early youth, occurring at a time when many of his pro-Western peers were obsessed with the idea of leaving the USSR at any price. In his memoirs, the artist Mikhail Chernyshov, who had been running away from home since he was eleven years old and later emigrated to the United States, speaks about this with complete certainty: «Идея смыться из Союза была тогда, не совру, у каждого второго из нашего окружения» ("Back then, I kid you not, every other person in our circle was thinking of getting out of the Soviet Union"; Chernyshov 1988: 44). Additionally, Brodsky and Chernyshov belonged to the generation of migrants who had survived the war as children – some were evacuated, nearly all had to move frequently, and some even lived as vagabonds. The war and postwar years accustomed them to constant relocation.

143 After Konstantin Kuz′minsky emigrated, Ėster Veinger became his confidante, and through her efforts, he eventually obtained (after a series of difficulties) a significant portion of his archive, which enabled him to publish *The Blue Lagoon*.

search did not end with the emergence of the Helenucts, who were both producers and explorers of absurdity in its various forms. In the 1970s and 80s, it was carried forward by the founders of Transfurists group, Ry Nikonova and Sergei Sigei, and other neo-avant-gardists.

Neither during the Soviet era nor after the collapse of the USSR did the Helenucts see themselves at the center of historical events, nor did they fantasize about friendships with the architects of Perestroika. Unlike many Moscow intellectuals – who were far more politicized than Leningrad artists and writers – the Helenucts remained distant from the capital's political scene, where many key events unfolded. Even Khvostenko, the most politically inclined among them, as seen in songs like "Faraon" ("Pharaoh") or "Posviaschenie Solzhenitsynu" ("Dedication to Solzhenitsyn"), was far removed from real political life and did not seek involvement in it.

Unlike Brodsky, the Helenucts never entered into open conflict with the authorities or found themselves caught in a political confrontation between opposing powers. Yet, their neo-avant-garde work – produced "from their corner", as Ilya Kabakov might have said – created a space of freedom and intellectual independence that foreshadowed the broader political changes initiated by Perestroika. Following the example of the suspector, they introduced a new absurdism to the nonconformist community. The very name of their group reflected its position outside established aesthetic and sociocultural conventions. The Helenucts formulated their own laws of aesthetic absurdity as an alternative to the absurdity of the Soviet world – and enacted them in practice. This was the artistic strategy of their neo-avant-gardist movement.

The Helenucts remained outside the official cultural agenda. Incongruity, absurdity, confusion, disorder, unpretentiousness – these were their guiding principles. They perfected themselves in these elements, developing a new form of nonconformist marginality.

This is stated in the manifesto of the Helenucts' movement, "A Little Introductory Article by the Helenucts":

> Сим торжественно объявляем, что мы <…>[144] Хеленуктами сделались.
> Хеленукты всё умеют: что ни захочут, всё сделают.
> <…>

144 Omissions marked <…> are in the original publication. – S.S.

Мы можем:

а) стишки сочинять;
б) прозу выдумывать;
в) пиэссы разыгрывать;
г) нарисовать там чего-нибудь;
д) гулять;
е) смеяться;
ё) в шашки играть;
ж) статейки писать;
з) ……;
и) по телефону разговаривать;
й, к) кашлять и сморкаться;
л) стоять;
м) сидеть;
[…]
п) огурцы резать;
р) в баню ходить;
[…]
у) зубы рвать;
ф) думать;
х) чаевничать;
ц) нюхать;
ч) на веревочке узелок завязать;
[…]
ъ) лобзиком выпиливать;
ы) сеять просо;
ь) запоминать;
э) бросать в воду камешки;
ю) говорить не по-русски;
я) гладить Епифана.

Эка!

Все Хеленукты очень красивые, смышленые и умные.

А еще все мы грамотные и отважные.

Мы — единственные живые стихотворцы.

Мы всё знаем: если нам чего-нибудь скажут, так сразу поймем.

Лучше нас никого нет, да и вообще никого нет.

<…>

Хеленукты — бравые молодцы,
а все остальные — паршивые огурцы!

16 сентября 1966 г.
(Ėrl′ 1993: [73–74])

We hereby solemnly declare that we <…> have become Helenucts. Helenucts can do anything: whatever they want to do, they do it all.
<…>
We can:

a) compose poems;
b) invent prose;
c) put on playes;
d) draw a little something;
e) stroll;
f) laugh;
g) play checkers;
h) write articles;
i) ….……..;
j) talk on the phone;
k, l) cough and blow our noses;
m) stand;
n) sit;
[…]
q) chop cucumbers;
r) go to the bathhouse;
[…]
u) pull teeth;
v) think;
w) drink tea;
x) sniff;
y) tie a knot on a string;
[…]
ab) saw with a jigsaw;

ac) sow millet;
ad) memorize;
ae) throw pebbles into the water;
af) speak a language other than Russian;
ag) pet Epiphan.
Egad!
All Helenucts are very beautiful, quick-witted, and intelligent.
We are also literate and brave.
We are the only living poets.
We know everything: if someone tells us something, we'll understand it at once.
There is no one better than us; really, no one else exists.
<…>
The Helenucts are the best of the rest,
and everyone else is a cucumber pest!

16 September 1966

Inconvenience and unpretentiousness formed the foundation of the Helenucts' laws of aesthetic absurdity. Compared to such an unpretentious form of comic expression, the Concretism of Vsevolod Nekrasov or barracks poetry might seem like extremely serious literature, devoid of even a trace of humor. The absurdism of the Helenucts – who inherited the neo-avant-garde vision of their older friend and colleague Aleksei Khvostenko, synthesizing metropolitan and Leningrad nonconformism – was radical.

Throughout the history of literature and art, absurdity has been highly productive, especially in modernist and avant-garde contexts. Incongruity, misunderstanding, and error have fueled some of the most significant artistic modernist experiments: from the intricate prose of James Joyce to the Futurists' *sdvigologia*, the Surrealists' experiments with slips of the tongue and spontaneous communicative acts, or even Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time)*, which begins with a vague memory of the taste of a madeleine soaked in tea. Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* (*estrangement*) has become an important term in twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural theory. Similarly illustrative is Rainer Maria Rilke's poem in Russian *"I am so one" («Я так один»)*, a phrase written in Russian

that is linguistically incorrect but uniquely modernist in its poetic depiction of the lyrical hero's alienation.[145]

In addition, the Dadaist manifesto of 1921 can be seen as the typological precedent of the neo-avant-garde/Helenucts experience: « Dada soulève tout. Dada connait tout. Dada crache tout. […] Dada ne parle pas. Dada n'a pas d'idée fixe. Dada n'attrape les mouches ».[146]

Many artists and writers in the nonconformist community of the mid-1960s believed that a work of art should break free not only from the art system, but also from the ordinary order of things. The entire artistic system had to be re-initiated, down to the everyday circumstances in which the work of art was created. François Picabia' *L'œil cacodylate* (*Cacodylate Eye)*, which introduces an element of artistic everyday life into the space of easel painting, is not so radical because of its self-parody.

At the core of many artistic movements akin to the Helenucts lies a deliberate defiance of norms – violating rules and rejecting conventional aesthetic attitudes. Misunderstanding itself can be a tool for meaning-making, a gateway to a deeper comprehension of experience. The potential of misunderstanding is vast: absurdity liberates, subverts the conventional, and challenges the unreliable. By shedding established rules and regulations, absurdity creates space for freedom – and the Helenucts succeeded in achieving this through their absurdist project.

Were there precedents that shaped their approach to absurdism? And how did the Helenucts' absurdism compare to other forms of absurdist expression in the 1960s?

145 On the modernist potential of error and misunderstanding, as illustrated by the polemics between the Formalists and the Young Formalists, see, for example, Savitski 2009. Also, see my articles: Savitskii 2017, Savitskii 2024.

146 Tzara 1921.

CHAPTER 7

"Spit on the Wall"

"Homemade Doodad"

The chapter on *The Suspector* quoted a fragment from Genrikh Sapgir's article, part of a series of literary portraits of underground writers. In this text, Sapgir wittily describes the innovativeness of nonconformist works: «[…] может, поэзия в современном мире и есть какая-то непонятная самоделка, ну вроде деревянного бруска, так отовсюду продырявленного, что дерево тонет в воде» (Sapgir 1999).[147]

This insightful remark by the poet of the "barracks school" contains an important observation: it highlights dilettantism, amateurism, and work deliberately unconstrained by established rules. A "thing" that falls outside the system, a nonsense that refutes conventional laws, a nonsense that turns into a miracle – this is the essence of the new aesthetic being invented by the Moscow and Leningrad neo-avant-garde. One of the key reformers of Russian poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, Sapgir saw "poetry in the modern world" as precisely this kind of paradox. Though originally said about the poetry of Elena Shvarts, his words apply equally to the works of many other nonconformist poets, and, of course, to Sapgir's own *poetry.*[148]

The phrase "incomprehensible homemade doodad" is an apt description of the Helenucts' works as well, even though they were not directly connected to Elena Shvarts. Some members of the group began communicating with her later, in the 1970s, after the Helenucts had disbanded. Aleksandr Mironov in particular would later become a close friend of hers.

The Helenucts, who made absurdity their aesthetic credo, radicalized the absurdism inherent in the works of previous generations of nonconformists. Their arsenal included wordplay, parody, black humor, buffoonery, and grotesquerie – all means of dismantling the forms, practices, and meanings that defined contemporary notions of literature.

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147 "[…] maybe poetry in the modern world is some kind of incomprehensible homemade doodad, like a block of wood, so pierced from everywhere that the wood sinks in the water."

148 Contemporaries described Bulat Okudzhava's work in a similar way: many of them felt that neither Okudzhava's poems, separate from the songs, nor their musical component in itself were anything special. Discerning music lovers did not consider the bard's vocal abilities worthy of attention. However, it was Okudzhava's songs in the 1960s that were perceived as a unique and inimitable discovery, an "incomprehensible homemade doodad". Vsevolod Nekrasov greatly appreciated his innovative work. Okudzhava was very popular with the late Soviet intelligentsia.

The Helenucts' Absurdities

Here are a few examples of the Helenucts' absurdist works.

The group often wrote parodies of Soviet literature, particularly of denunciatory articles in the Soviet press, such as those that vilified Joseph Brodsky or Aleksei Khvostenko. One such text, written by Vladimir Ėrl′ and Dm. M, is titled "Obuzdat′ bzdunov i obmanschikov" ("Muzzling the Farters and Swindlers", August 1967):

> Прошло немало времени с тех пор, как мы впервые выступили в печати с мнением о производителях. Сейчас настало время высказаться и о некоторых неурядицах, усердно затеваемых целым полчищем безобразных бздунов. Они, эти двояковыпуклые гниды, и впрямь решили затеять склоки в малонаселенных районах. Жалкое огородничество! Они думают, что это им удастся.
> Но давайте трезво осмыслим происходящее. Современное общество в свете последних достижений электротехники, ботаники и химии представляет собой довольно заурядную картину. На смену арендаторам пришли производители, за ними хлынули целые толпы коротконогих бздунов и обманщиков…
> Они успокоятся только тогда, когда им укажут двери бани. Это шелудивое отребье нуждается в мочалке и мыле. И это они рассуждают о справедливости! Подобно клопам бегают они по стенам наших городов и пачкают наши жилища… Видно, нравы современного общества вполне их удовлетворяют.
> Но помните: мы положим предел зарвавшимся!
> (Ėrl′ 1993; [41])

> It has been a long time since we first spoke out in print about the producers. Now the time has come again to speak out also about some of the turmoil assiduously plotted by a whole horde of hideous farters. They, these double-barreled nits, have indeed decided to go stir up squabbles in sparsely populated areas. Menial jobs! They think they can do it.
> But let us soberly recognize what is happening. Modern society, given the latest developments in electrical engineering, botany, and chemistry, presents a rather mediocre picture. Producers have replaced renters, followed by a whole crowd of short-legged farters and cheats…

> They'll only calm down when they're shown the bathhouse door. This mangy scum needs a washcloth and some soap. And they talk about justice! Like bedbugs, they scurry along the walls of our cities and soil our dwellings… The mores of modern society seem to satisfy them.
> But remember: we will put a stop to those who are insolent!

The genre of the denunciatory article is inherently ridiculous, but what makes this piece complete nonsense is the exaggerated rhetoric of outrage and condemnation. The clumsy formulas of denunciation, indignation, and threat, along with invented colloquialisms and profanity that never existed in Soviet official language, create an intentionally absurd effect. The reinvented rhetoric *of prorabotka* (ideological re-education), the transformation of denunciatory language into neo-avant-garde ornament, is, in itself, comical.

The Helenucts also excelled in absurd, skomorokh-inspired poetry. The poem "V Yerevan" ("*To Yerevan*", 1968) is a ridiculous fantasy in which the classics of Russian literature appear as characters in ridiculous scenes:

> […] темным полем длинным лесом
> мчится всадник на коне
> лезет мышка скачет крышка
> Пушкин лает на луну.
>
> Гоголь сумрачный приходит
> он не низок не высок
> на губах его кусок
> на усах его капуста […]
>
> Грибоедов съел медведя
> написал стихотворенье
> и уехал в Ереван.
>
> В лес пошел печальный конь
> позади кричит огонь
> светят звезды вдалеке
> и мужик сидит на кулаке. […]
> (Ibid.: [7–8])

[…] through a dark field, through a long forest
a rider gallops on his steed
a mouse darts by a lid flies off
Pushkin barks up at the moon.

Gogol, gloomy, makes his entrance
not too short and not too tall
on his lips, a little morsel
on his mustache cabbage hangs […]

Griboyedov ate a bear
sat and wrote a work of verse
and took off for Yerevan.

A mournful steed went to the forest
behind him wails and shouts a fire
the stars gleam dimly in the distance
and a man sits on his fist. […]

This absurd montage of amusing scenes and ridiculous pictures traces its roots to Daniil Kharms's comic stories about Russian literary classics such as Nikolai Gogol, Aleksandr Pushkin, and Leo Tolstoy. However, in the 1960s, similar literary jokes were composed by Vladimir Piatnitsky, an artist and a writer known for his absurdist humor. Khvostenko was friends with Piatnitsky, but it is difficult to determine whether Khvostenko and the Helenucts were more familiar with Kharms's stories or those of Piatnitsky.

In Leningrad, in the second half of the 1960s, neo-avant-garde artists experimented with the so-called "Dadaist hat". The "hat" was a method of creating a text, usually collaboratively. It can be traced back to Tristan Tzara's experiments with the "cut-up" technique in the early 1920s. The text of a printed edition was cut into individual words, mixed in a hat, and then randomly selected to form lines. Within these lines, words could either match in terms of tense, number, and gender or remain inconsistent (see Ėrl′ 1997a*).

The source from which nonconformist artists learned about the existence of the "hat" has not yet been established.[149]

The Helenucts group too experimented with the "Dadaist hat" and developed a distinctive neo-avant-garde absurdism. The poem "To Yerevan" – this montage of amusing sketches and absurd tableaux vivants – is reminiscent, for example, of Tristan Tzara's "Chanson Dada" (1921). There's no reason to claim it was based solely on Dadaism, but it clearly has a neo-Dadaist component.[150] The group was influenced by the "Dadaist hat" and Marcel Duchamp's readymades, which were often regarded as Dadaist works in nonconformist circles.

The techniques of collage and montage, the destruction of linear narrative, the understanding of the author's work as an automated collective activity, the rejection of the figure of the author-creator, and, as a result of these experiments, the irrationalization of the work's content – these are characteristics common to both neo-Dadaism and the Helenucts' absurdism. This taste for the absurd, for the Dadaist *geste gratuit*, was essential for the artistic experiments of the nonconformists of the mid-1960s. The aesthetic work, rendered absurd by the Dadaists and presented in experimental form as something existing at the frontiers of reality and aesthetic experience, was of particular interest to Soviet followers of the avant-garde and, in particular, of Dadaism.

Another of the Helenucts' interests was black humor. The first of the "Piat′ poem napisannykh po pros′be chitatelei" ("Five Poems Written at the Request of Readers") pays homage to the Surrealists, who cultivated this type of laughter, as well as to the Oberiuts, who were no strangers to it. The first poem, "Chto my seichas sdelaem" ("What We Will Do Now") reads:

149 Artist Oskar Rabin describes a similar method used by Vsevolod Nekrasov: «[…] он смешивал слова, нарезанные на бумажках, и случайные сочетания ему иногда удивительно подходили и выражали то, что он хотел. Вот уж действительно — умом не додумаешься, а руки сами выложат» "[…] he shuffled the words he had cut out of pieces of paper, and the random combinations sometimes suited him surprisingly well, expressing exactly what he wanted. That's reality: you can't think with your mind, but your hands can create" (Rabin 2024).

150 For a discussion of Dadaist absurdism, see: Bartsch et al. 2022; Bergius 1989 and 2003; Brill 2010; Dachy 2011; Glanc 2016; Richter 1965.

сейчас
мы ударим кактусом по щеке
ближайшего соседа
сделаем надрез на коже его живота
и вставим туда чайник

сами же
сядем вокруг самовара и будем пить сладкий кофей

когда напьемся
пойдем на луг
и там
поймав кобылу
нальем под хвост ей земляничного варенья
пусть будет ей приятно

прогулка наша
будет длиться
на свежем воздухе

а
чайник в животе
уже поспел наверно

теперь гостям предложим чаю
и сняв с петель ворота
ударим их по голове
да так
чтобы носы не сплющить

потом пойдем в театр смотреть на мавра
а может в зоопарк
там тоже хорошо
там открывается простора много
для новых наших действий
(Ėrl′ 1993: [50])

now
we're going to wack the cheek
of our nearest neighbor with a cactus
we'll make an incision in the skin of his stomach
and put a teapot inside

we ourselves
will sit down around the samovar and drink
sweet coffee
when we've drunk enough

we'll go to the meadow
and there
we'll catch a mare
and pour strawberry jam under her tail
we hope she'll like it

our stroll
will last
in the fresh air

meanwhile
the teapot in his belly
must be ready by now

now we can offer tea to our guests
and taking the gate off its hinges
can hit them on the head
but just enough
to avoid flattening their noses

then we'll go to the theater to see the Moor
or maybe to the zoo
it's nice there, too
it offers a lot of space
for our next actions

The mocking acts of absurd cruelty committed by the poem's characters are no less egregious than the surrealist films, such as *Un Chien Andalou* (*The Andalusian Dog*) and *L'Âge d'Or* (*The Golden Age*). Whether the Helenucts had ever watched these films remains unknown.

Regardless of possible influences, the Helenucts crafted their own brand of absurdity. To understand what Vladimir Ėrl′, Aleksei Khvostenko, and their like-minded friends contributed to the neo-avant-garde tradition of nonsense and absurdity, we must first address a few key questions. Beyond OBERIU and Surrealism, what other movements or ideas helped shape Helenuctist absurdism? How diverse were the "incomprehensible homemade doodad" created by the mid-1960s? And which of these were most relevant to the Helenucts' work?

"Nonsense" Literature Before and During the Helenucts' Time

Nonsense has been an important theme in children's literature since the 1930s. "Lepaia nelepitsa" ("The Good Absurd") was the title of an article by Kornei Chukovsky in which he introduced the concept of *stikhi-perevertyshi* (topsy-turvy poems) for children. First published in the early 1920s, it later became the fourth chapter of Chukovsky's popular book *Ot dvukh do piati* ("From Two to Five", 2012). This book was first released in the early 1930s and was reprinted almost annually before the war, as well as throughout the 1950s and 60s, making it a staple in many home libraries. Chukovsky's absurdist tendencies were not directly linked to the neo-avant-garde, but his literary games – in which he undoubtedly excelled – fueled a broader interest in experimental writing. From the 1930s onward, children's literature became a refuge for many writers who did not conform to the Socialist Realist canon. Among them were the Oberiuts and other avant-garde authors, who produced numerous absurdist works that would later be rediscovered by nonconformist intellectuals in the 1960s. Interest in OBERIU never truly waned after that.

A key figure in post-Futurist absurdism, particularly in the tradition of Velimir Khlebnikov, was Nikolai Glazkov, the inventor of the neologism *samsebiaizdat*. Perhaps he saw himself as a direct heir to Khlebnikov, the "Chair-

man of the Globe".[151] The Helenucts were certainly aware of Glazkov's work, and his presence on the literary scene formed part of the neo-avant-gardist background. However, despite their shared interest in Khlebnikov, Koz′ma Prutkov, and primitivism, Glazkov could hardly be seen as a direct bridge between them.

In the 1950s, Valentin Khromov became interested in avant-garde language experiments, and his use of inversions and neologisms made him one of the most sophisticated neo-avant-gardists. The very name of the Helenucts is itself both an anagram and a neologism, but their connection to Khromov's work was minimal. Although the Helenucts embraced Futurist *sdvigologiia* techniques and admired Khlebnikov, they had little interest in creating a new transrational language (*zaum′*). The new generation of the neo-avant-garde was fundamentally disillusioned with the utopian ideals of the early avant-garde. Works like Khvostenko's *The Suspector* and *The Poem of Epigraphs* – which preceded the formation of the Helenucts – were not attempts to envision a new poetic reality or justify the present through a utopian lens. The Helenucts viewed literature as something that unfolds in existential experience and takes place in real time.

The Helenucts were also distant from the linguistic combinatorics of Aleksandr Kondratov (Sandy Conrad), a poet associated with the Philological school. Nevertheless, his multifaceted literary and intellectual activities – including his neo-avant-garde poetry and popular science writings on ancient civilizations – formed an essential part of their intellectual landscape. Lev Losev described him as a *homo ludens*, always reinventing himself:

151 His love of *zaum′* (transrational poetry) and the Russian Furutirists did not prevent him from getting along with the Union of Writers and the literary nomenclature. The poet and philologist Lev Losev, who was a close friend of Joseph Brodsky's, linked Glazkov to the tradition of graphomaniacal/primitivist poetry of Koz′ma Prutkov, Captain Lebiadkin, and Madame Kurdiukova, which was also extremely important for the 1950s and 60s. However, Losev, not without sarcasm, recalled of him: «[…] соцреалистический Лебядкин, который дисциплинированно восхищался чем положено, негодовал по поводу разрешенных для негодования отдельных недостатков, шутил на таком уровне, что даже Грибачеву <один из классиков социалистического реализма, одиозная фигура> было понятно» (Losev 2010: 291; "[…] the socialist realist Lebiadkin, trained to admire what was proper and to express indignation at shortcomings deemed worthy of indignation, joked at such a level that even Gribachev <one of the classic writers of Socialist Realism, an odious figure> could understand").

«[…] собственная жизнь представлялась ему игровым полем, игровой доской» (Losev 2010: 302).[152]

This theatricalization of biography and life-creation made Kondratov a kindred spirit of the Helenucts, with whom he had close ties. Kondratov helped Khvostenko secure the position as an assistant to the renowned linguist Yury Knorozov, who reconstructed the Mayan writing system. Equally significant to the Helenucts – albeit likely discovered later in the 1970s – were the literary games, parodies, and conceptual arrangements of Vagrich Bakhchanian (1985 and 2010). Around the same time, they may also have encountered Vladlen Gavril′chik's "macaronic verses".

As previously mentioned, the neo-avant-gardists of the 1960s were deeply engaged with a new Russian translation of François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by Nikolai Liubimov, published in 1961. This translation, distinguished by its colloquial style and unrestrained humor, stood in stark contrast to previous Russian versions. Fragments of it had already been circulated in the mid-1950s, coinciding with the 400th anniversary of Rabelais' death, a moment that marked the height of Stalinist absurdity. Rabelais' laughter, his disregard for social taboos, and his subversion of conventions fascinated the nonconformists of his time. Lev Losev noted the strong appeal of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization among nonconformist intellectuals.[153] Bakhtin's seminal work *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura Srednevekov'ia i Renessansa* ("François Rabelais's Works and the Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance") – along with Liubimov's translation – became major intellectual landmarks in the first half of the 1960s. Rabelais was a crucial figure for Khvostenko. However, unlike their predecessors and older contemporaries, the Helenucts favored *Gargantua and Pantagruel* over another classic of "grassroots literature" – Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen's *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* (*Simplicius Simplicissimus*, translated into Russian in 1967). While *Simplicissimus* contained similar

152 "[…] his own life seemed to him a playing field, a game board".

153 Losev especially emphasized the work of Yuz Aleshkovsky – "the cheerful bakhtinshchina of the 1960s" – and his distinctive obscene ornaments. Losev even claims that Aleshkovsky's famous witticism «А низ материально телесный / У ней был ужасно прелестный» ("And her bodily lower stratum / Was terribly lovely"; *Losev 2010:* 313) was to Bakhtin's taste. See also another of Aleshkovsky's jokes «Пора, пора, е… мать / Умом Россию понимать» ("It's time, goddamn it, it's time, / To understand Russia with the mind"; ibid.).

obscenities, buffoonery, and irreverent humor, it was far less widely known than Rabelais' work among nonconformists. *Simplicissimus* became a rather unexpected source of neo-avant-garde absurdism and primitivism.

The most prominent neo-avant-garde absurdist in Leningrad was the poet Vladimir Ufliand. Brodsky, a close friend of Ufliand's who considered himself his disciple, emphasized the latter's significance for the literary landscape of the 1950s–60s in an article about "the country of Ufliandia". During these years, perhaps no one was as free in comic poetry as he was. In his texts, laughter manifested itself in various genres and forms. Ufliand's style encompassed satire, irony, and sarcasm. His "Pesn′ o druge" ("Song of a Friend") is a Sots Art parody. "Vot i Nikifor" ("Here Comes Nikifor", 1965) exemplifies primitivist poetry. A striking instance of black humor is a poem written from the perspective of a prisoner:

> В целом люди прекрасны
> Одеты по моде
> Основная их масса
> Живет на свободе
> (1958)[154]

> On the whole, people are beautiful,
> Dressed in the latest fashions.
> The bulk of them
> Live in freedom.

Ufliand's humor has little to do with André Breton's concept of black humor, despite Breton being one of its key creators and promoters. Losev describes Ufliand as a lyricist with the characteristics of a comic poet, staging "a bril-

154 https://www.ruthenia.ru/60s/ufland/v_celom.htm (29.07.2026). Black humor was also inherent to writers belonging to the Philological school. Losev recalls how Konrad was fond of quoting Rozanov: "The worm gave birth to a worm… such is our life." Let us also compare, in this context, the ending to Nikolai Glazkov's "Voron" ("The Raven"): «Я спросил: — Какие в Чили / Существуют города? — / Он ответил: — Никогда! — / И его разоблачили» (Glazkov 1989: 19; "I asked: 'What cities / Are there in Chile?' / Quoth the Raven: 'Nevermore!' / And he was exposed"). The gloominess of this poem reflects "the epoch when it was written" (Losev 2010: 291–292).

liant verbal clowning"; "his texts integrate the funny, the philosophical, and the lyrical".[155] He is both a great lyricist and a figure akin to Charlie Chaplin.

Neither the Helenucts nor other neo-avant-gardists managed to combine comicism and lyricism as successfully while using everyday language in their poetry – something Brodsky particularly admired in Ufliand's work.[156]

Ufliand's absurdism opened up another dimension. He joked incisively, without a trace of fear. The poet and critic Igor′ Bulatovsky describes Ufliand as a skomorokh of "[…] the infernal 'paradis' of St. Petersburg – i.e., a skomorokh from the world beyond".[157] He continues: «Скоморох внесоциален, он не „нарочито безумен", как юродивый, но „откровенно и зло умен"» (Bulatovskii 2019).[158]

There was insight, an uncompromising nature, existential challenge, risk, and the courage to defy established rules in the laughter of Ufliand and the poets of the Philological school close to him – all of which were so significant to Khvostenko (Losev 2010: 227–238).

Oleg Grigor′ev's much harsher and more cruel black humor also preceded the Helenucts' neo-avant-garde absurdism. Grigor′ev was in contact with Khvostenko; for a period of time, they were regulars at the literary meetings at Ivan Likhachev's salon. Likhachev appreciated Grigor′ev's sadistic poems (Nikol′skaia 2024). In his treatment of the taboo and the profane, Grigor′ev was likely the most radical of the 1960s nonconformist poets.

The Helenucts were not closely acquainted with Ufliand, the poets of the Philological school, or "Akhmatova's orphans" (except for Brodsky). They entered literature after these underground writers had already established themselves. However, the Helenucts contributed to the tradition of nonconformist absurdist literature that had emerged by the mid-1960s.

Like their older contemporaries, they turned to one of the foundations of Russian primitivist literature: the works of Koz′ma Prutkov. These comic texts by Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy and the Zhemchuzhnikov brothers

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155 «[…] гениальную словесную клоунаду», «его тексты интегрируют смешное, философичное и лирику» (Losev's preface to Ufliand 2011, which also appeared as an article in *Zvezda* 2007, No. 1, on the occasion of the poet's seventieth birthday; Losev 2007).

156 Brodskii 1993; Nikol′skaia 2018.

157 «[…] адского „парадиза" Петербурга, т. е. скоморох — от мира того, кромешного».

158 "The skomorokh is extra-social; he is not 'deliberately insane' like the holy fool *(iurodivyi)*, but rather 'frankly and wickedly clever'."

were beloved by Ufliand, Gavril′chik, Khromov, Khvostenko, and their predecessors – the Futurists and the Oberiuts. It is no coincidence that Prince Dmitry Svyatopolk-Mirsky, the author of one of the finest histories of Russian literature, regarded Prutkov as an unsurpassed master of "nonsense poetry" ("vzdornoj poėzii"; Sviatopolk-Mirskii 1924: 189).

The older generation had a taste for primitivism, for stylized old-fashioned writing, and for parody. One of Khvostenko's mentors, Ivan Likhachev – a leading figure at the translation seminar at the House of Writers – was an exquisite joker and a lover of literary and domestic games. He deeply appreciated Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy's play "Liubov′ i Silin" ("Love and Silin"), which was frequently read aloud at his "Saturdays", along with "Oda na plenenie Tairova" ("Ode on the Capture of Tairov"; Nikol′skaia 2002: 255). Prutkov was read, and Prutkov was imitated. Ufliand's poem "Chto delat′, esli ty khudozhnik slabyj" ("What to Do if You Are a Weak Artist") echoes Prutkov's poetry. Vsevolod Nekrasov regarded Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy as a highly relevant poet, and the most convincing in satire, as noted by Mikhail Sokovnin in his diary (Nekrasov 2019: 528; Penskaia 2024).

Even More Absurd Than Absurd

The Helenucts were not inspired by Prutkov's satire, his parodies, or his play with old-fashioned wit. Instead, they focused entirely on absurdity itself, which set them apart from other neo-avant-garde absurdist projects. No one had yet dared to push the profane element of primitivism so far as to make a text embrace the most ordinary and unassuming subjects.

How, for example, should one perceive such a completely ridiculous story?

Мне нравится мужчина
в зеленом пиджаке.
Вот, не боясь пучина,
подходит он к реке.

Стоит парнишка в кепке
вдали, невдалеке,

его умишко крепкий
витает налегке.

(Май 1968, совместно с Дм. М.)[159]

I like the man
in the green jacket.
Look, unafraid of the maelstrom,
he walks down the river.

There's a boy in a cap,
far off, not far away.
His little sturdy mind
is floating, light and gay

(May 1968, with D.M.)

Is this passage a description of an unsubstantial episode which, with its unsophistication, absurd rhyme with a wrong case ending (*muzhchina — puchina*), and unpretentiousness, points toward neo-avant-garde absurdist literature? Or is it a deliberately invented, meaningless scene, devoid of any possibility of constructing meaning, reduced to utter impersonality, thus becoming a neo-avant-garde statement? Or is it a fragment of a lover's speech that, with some skill, could become material for a poststructuralist analysis in the spirit of Roland Barthes?

Constructing an artistic statement as nonsense, nonsense in its purest form, spouting rubbish, is not an easy task, because such buffoonery can remain on the borderline between aesthetic provocation and foolishness. The experience of neo-avant-garde absurdism made such an experiment possible but did not guarantee its success. In the 1960s, the "incomprehensible homemade doodad" that Sapgir wrote about had to be invented, pushing the aesthetic experiment to its ultimate tension. Many artists understood this. In this respect, the Helenucts followed the logic of artists more than the precedents of nonconformist literature. Perhaps Khvostenko's involvement in painting

159 https://www.vavilon.ru/texts/erl2.html (29.07.2026).

and drawing in the 1960s influenced this. Perhaps the nonconformist environment, which was institutionally unconstrained by any rules and in which there were no boundaries between art forms, also played a role. The syncretism of the neo-avant-garde, as mentioned above, had a reliable foundation: the Futurists and representatives of other avant-garde movements also aspired to a total artistic experience, synthesizing different art forms. In one way or another, the Helenucts' absurdism fits into the context of experimentation with the profane, the unaestheticized – closer to everyday life. Artists like Vladimir Slepian, Mikhail Chernyshov, Mikhail Roginsky, Ėrik Bulatov, and Ilya Kabakov were engaged in such experiments in the 1960s. Each of them invented his own "incomprehensible homemade doodad," a strange absurdist art piece.

Vladimir Slepian, in the late 1950s, created abstractions by spraying paint with a pump. Some see this as similar to dripping, which attracted many artists after the American exhibition in Moscow (1959). However, what is more interesting here is not the influence or its source, but the daily nature of the creative act. The use of a bicycle pump or a vacuum cleaner instead of a brush falls far from the elegance with which Yves Klein had created paintings with "living brushes" (pinceaux vivants) a few years earlier. It also runs counter to the ambitions of the new Prometheus that Klein nurtured by taming the element of fire when he painted on canvas with a flamethrower. Neither Klein nor Pollock would have agreed to represent "action painting" as a technical treatment of materials outside Surrealist, Buddhist, or Rosencreuther ideas. Neither a bicycle pump nor a vacuum cleaner could have inspired even Andy Warhol, an opponent of Abstract Expressionism, despite his preference for working with consumer goods.



Fig. 24



Fig. 25

Around the same time, the artist Mikhail Chernyshov created works that were as far removed from fine art as possible – "extremely bad", "idiotic," in his own words:

> <Я> решил назвать свою выставку <в комнате коммуналки, где жил Михаил Рогинский, 1962 г.> «Красный грузовик». Незадолго до выставки мы с Мишей <Рогинским> поздно вечером вышли побродить по району его Хорошевки. Я вооружился клещами и стамеской — мне понравилась его идея посшибать железнодорожные плакаты. Стесняться я не стал — двигал все что можно: жэковские плакаты, окантованные объявления в лифтах, доски почета и прочую советскую поебень. Мне здорово все это пригодилось для выставки. […] Мише понравилась моя работа «Пожарный инструмент» — красная доска с номерами для крепления ломиков и лопат, она тоже была в масть для этой выставки. На ее обратной стороне я впоследствии нарисовал немецкие танки (для экономии места, так что картина стала двухсторонней).
> (Chernyshov 1988: 71–72)

> <I> decided to call my exhibition <in the room of the communal apartment where Mikhail Roginsky lived, 1962> "The Red Truck". Shortly before the exhibition, Misha and I went out late one evening to wander around his neighborhood in Khoroshevka. I took along a pair of pliers and a chisel – I liked his idea of tearing down railway posters. I didn't hold back: I took everything I could find – housing-office posters, framed announcements in elevators, honor boards, and all sorts of other Soviet crap. It all came in really handy for the exhibition. […] Misha liked my piece "Firefighting Tools" – a red board with numbered slots for crowbars and shovels; it also fit the theme of the exhibition. I later painted German tanks on the back of it (to save space, so the painting became double-sided).

Something similar was experienced in the early twentieth century by Guillaume Apollinaire, who introduced the customs officer Rousseau to the Parisian public as an innovative artist, and by Mikhail Le Dantu, who played a major role in recognizing the tavern designer Niko Pirosmanishvili as a modernist painter. Neo-avant-gardists, half a century after the birth of the modernist primitive, sought the same deviation from the canon, the norm, and the school that created artistic innovation. They differed from classical modernism in that they went beyond painting. They understood the work of art as a gesture, a thing, a subversion, and an existential event. The painter Mikhail Roginsky expressed this (anti-)aesthetic creative attitude succinctly: «Работа должна висеть, как плевок на стене» (Roginskii 2009: 177).[160]

Many artists and writers from the nonconformist milieu in the mid-1960s believed that a work of art should fall not only outside the aesthetic system but also outside the established order of things. The entire aesthetic system had to be rebooted, including the everyday circumstances in which the work of art was created.[161] Similar searches for new realism were also undertaken by

160 "Work should hang like spit on the wall."

161 Characteristically, Valentin Kataev, one of the most prominent left-wing Soviet writers, launched a similar artistic experiment in the mid-1960s. He coined the term "Mauvism" (from the French *mauvais*, "bad"). "<T>he essence of Mauvism is to write as one wishes, without reckoning with anything" («[…] в этом и есть самая суть мовизма — писать как хочется, ни с чем не считаясь»; Kataev 1984: 381), he declared in what was hardly his best book, *Trava zabveniia* ("The Grass of Oblivion", 1967), written during these very years. In his book *Sviatoi kolodets* ("The Holy Well", 1964), published three years earlier,



Fig. 26

Roginsky's close friend, the artist Boris Turetsky, who was characterized by an obsessive interest in everyday life. Vsevolod Nekrasov did something similar in poetry, working with the everyday, colloquial word, cleansed of literariness, brought into the concreteness of speech.[162] In 1965, Vsevolod Nekrasov met Ėrik Bulatov. Bulatov's reading of Nekrasov's poems inspired the idea of

Kataev defined his innovation somewhat more ironically: «[…] я являюсь основателем новейшей литературной школы мовистов, […] суть которой заключается в том, что нужно писать плохо, как можно хуже, […] конечно, научиться писать плохо не так-то легко, […] но игра стоит свеч, и если вы действительно научитесь писать паршиво, хуже всех, то мировая популярность вам обеспечена» (Kataev 1984: 220; "[…] I am the founder of the newest literary school of Mauvists, […] the essence of which is that […] you should write badly, as badly as possible; […] of course, learning to write badly is not so easy, […] but the game is worth the candle, and if you really learn to write lousy, the worst, then world popularity is assured to you"). Both books, especially *The Grass of Oblivion*, stood out radically from contemporary literature: while elegant in style and engaging, their genre resembled an "incomprehensible homemade doodad". The similar fusion of "excerpts, memories, pieces, thoughts, plots, essays, notes, quotations" – which surprised even the author himself – became the material for the theory of intermediate genres that Lydia Ginzburg developed in the 1960s and 1970s (Ginsburg 1964 and 1977).

162 See Vsevolod Nekrasov's reflections on innovations at the beginning of Chapter 1.

incorporating text into painting, exemplified by such works as *Zhivu vizhu* (*I Live I See*; Alekseev 2022: 462). Another source of these canvases was the most ordinary, throwaway images – railroad posters. Here's how Bulatov talks about it in an interview with Vadim Alekseev:

> Некрасов вообще замечательно писал. Там главное даже не тучище <в стихах Некрасова про небо>, а, как я понимаю для себя, «я, хотя не хочу и не ищу, живу и вижу». То есть я не выискиваю ничего специального, и это очень важно. Не прекрасное и не ужасное определяет время. […] А определяют время самые банальные, самые пошлые, самые ежедневные, наполняющие нашу жизнь ежеминутно вещи. То, на что мы не обращаем совершенно внимания. […] Поэтому фраза «Я, хотя не хочу и не ищу» очень важна. Я не выискиваю что-нибудь антисоветское, я просто живу здесь и сейчас и вижу, не отворачиваясь от того, что здесь происходит.
> […] Началось с железнодорожных плакатов. Когда в середине 60-х годов сформировалось мое сознание — американцы американцами, это было важно, но самым главным были для меня железнодорожные плакаты. […] *Как поймать жизнь? <Курсив мой. — С. С.>* Ни у кого не научишься, нигде этого нет. И тут серьезная поддержка нашлась в зоне полуискусства: открытки из Крыма «Люби меня, как я тебя» для Олега Васильева, бюрократические бумажки и списки для Толи Кабакова *<sic!>*, для меня это были железнодорожные плакаты. Долгое время я не мог понять, почему они производят на меня такое впечатление. Думаю, если бы выставку сделать наших железнодорожных плакатов того времени, был бы просто шок. […] По-настоящему, это было лучшее, что делалось тогда. С одной стороны, что-то совсем беспомощное. Видно, что это рисование проходило большое количество инстанций, поправок, что художник в полном обалдении что-то такое безликое рисовал — но изображалась ситуация отчаяния. Очень энергичный, страшный текст. И какая-то бесчеловечность нашей советской жизни ужасно точно оказалась выраженной, да и бесчеловечно нарисованной — личного волнения художника уже не было, это столько проходило всяких бюрократических инстанций, что он уже ничего не понимал, совершенно тупо рисовал что-то вообще. […] И получался образ нашей бюрократической и совершенно равнодушной к человеку смертоносной жизни.
> (Alekseev 2022: 460–461)

> Nekrasov wrote wonderfully. The main thing <in his poems about the sky> is not even the huge cloud but, as I understand it for myself, the idea: "I, though I do not want and do not seek it, live and see". That is, I don't look for anything special, and this is very important. Neither the beautiful nor the terrible defines time. The beautiful and the terrible are exceptions, extremes. Time is defined by the most banal, the most vulgar, the most everyday things that fill our lives every minute – things we don't pay any attention to at all. […] That is why the phrase "I, though I do not want and do not seek" is so important. I am not looking for anything anti-Soviet; I simply live here and now and see, without turning away from what is happening around me.
>
> […] It started with railroad posters. When my consciousness was formed in the mid-60s – Americans <artists> were important, but the most important thing to me was the railroad posters. […] *How do you capture life? <Italics mine.* – S. S.> You can't learn it from anyone, you can't learn it anywhere. And here, serious support was found in the zone of semi-art: postcards from Crimea with *"Love me as I love you"* for Oleg Vasil′ev, bureaucratic papers and lists for Tolya Kabakov <*sic!*>, and for me, it was the railroad posters. For a long time, I couldn't understand why they made such an impression on me. I think if an exhibition of our railroad posters from that time were organized, it would be a shock. […] Really, it was the best thing created at that time.
>
> On the one hand, it was completely helpless. It is clear that this artwork passed through a large number of bureaucratic authorities and amendments, with the artist, in a complete daze, painting something utterly faceless – yet depicting a situation of despair. The text was very energetic, even frightening. The inhumanity of Soviet life was captured with terrifying accuracy, drawn in a way that lacked personal emotion. The artist himself was no longer excited or involved; after so many bureaucratic revisions, he no longer understood what he was painting – just something completely mindless. […] And the image of our bureaucratic, absolutely inhuman, and deadly Soviet life emerged.

Bulatov began to imitate the amateurish painting of unknown artists of railroad posters. His painting *Opasno* ("Danger") is the result of similar reflections and experiments with the most unassuming manifestations of modern life.

In his memoirs, cited above, Chernyshov recalls walking through Moscow with pliers and a chisel, tearing down posters and other printed materials that he later used in his exhibition. Mikhail Roginsky was also interested in

similar practices (Chernyshov 1988: 35, 71–72). In the 1950s and 60s, stands with billboards and posters began to be exhibited as independent works by the French artist Jacques Villeglé and his Italian associate Mimmo Rotella. Outdoor advertising returned to art as a representation of reality half a century after the Fauvists used it as an example of non-mimetic colorism and the Futurists found inspiration in the naïve paintings of artisanal artists (*kustari*).

It is worth noting again that the neo-avant-gardists were interested in primitivism in a different way than the artists of the early twentieth century. The neo-avant-gardists valued naïve art as an artistic testimony to life and as an example of a statement that represents contemporary existential experience, particularly the experience of life in the USSR. The formal innovations that modernists sought to derive from primitivist painting were not the focus here. Instead, the Helenucts created artistic statements similar to those of Bulatov, Roginsky, and Chernyshov. This is how Koz′ma Prutkov's incongruity in the neo-avant-garde era became the foundation for a new realism.

Another highly expressive quote from a conversation with Bulatov illustrates how aesthetics developed from the banal and the profane:

> «Процесс» <Франца Кафки> я сначала не мог читать: невыносимо, какой-то кошмар, ну почему я должен это читать? И в какой-то момент вдруг создается ощущение необходимости это читать. Ощущение точно, что режут тебе живот. Не то, что ты видишь, как режут другому. А режут тебе самому. Ни от какого другого писателя у меня не было такого ощущения, а от Кафки было именно то, что он режет мой собственный живот, как во время операции. Здесь очень важно было понять, что это должно делаться очень просто и очень точно. Без каких-то украшений или сравнений. Самый примитивный, как у Кафки, бюрократический язык — которым он выводил из себя наших эстетов.
> (Alekseev 2022: 458)

> At first, I couldn't read *The Trial <by Franz Kafka>:* it was unbearable, a nightmare – why should I read it? And then, at a certain point, I suddenly felt the need to. It felt exactly like being cut open. Not like watching someone else being cut open. It was me being cut. No other writer has ever given me that feeling, but Kafka did – exactly that feeling of cutting into my own stomach, as if during an operation. Here, it was very important to realize that it had to be

> done very simply and very precisely, without any embellishments or comparisons. The most primitive, Kafka-like bureaucratic language – with which he pissed off our aesthetes.

Bureaucratic speech, and unsightly, unattractive objects convey more than any skill, expressive style, or aesthetic form. This idea was shared by another Moscow artist searching for a new realist language at the end of the Thaw. Around 1965 and 66, when Khvostenko's *The Suspector*, *The Poem of Epigraphs,* and "The Calamities of Peski" were written, and the Helenucts group was being formed, Ilya Kabakov was working on new "strange" objects in a studio near the Mayakovsky Museum, which he shared with Ülo Sooster:

> В ней <мастерской> я тоже осенью, зимой и весной делал […] большие картины, вернее, «странные» предметы. Не помню точно датировку, но приблизительно это сезоны 65-66-го годов, года два мы пробыли в этом подвале.
> В этом подвале я стал делать «белые большие предметы». Я сделал «Труба, палка, мяч и муха» (140/200/30), «Диван-картину», «Рука и картина Рейсдаля», «Автомат и цыплята». По-моему, тогда же сделал небольшие картины: «День и ночь» (70/50), «Чья эта муха» (70/50), «Кто написал эти стихи?» (70/50). […] Тогда это называлось «абсурдизм», в 70-м году, когда их увидела Дина Верни, — «русский поп-арт» […]
> (Kabakov 2008: 27–29)

> In that <workshop>, I also made […] large paintings – or rather, "strange" objects. I don't remember the exact dates, but this was roughly during the seasons of 1965–66. For two years, we stayed in this basement.
> In this basement, I started making "large white objects". I made *Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly* (140/200/30), *Couch Painting*, *Hand and Ruisdael Painting*, *Automaton and Chickens*. I think I also made small paintings then: *Day and Night* (70/50), *Whose Fly Is This?* (70/50), *Who Wrote These Poems?* (70/50). […] Back then, it was called "absurdism". In 1970, when Dina Verni saw them, it was called "Russian Pop Art" […]).

Curiously, according to Kabakov's recollections, these artistic experiments were referred to as *absurdist* in the mid-1960s. The Helenucts were also

grouped together as absurdists, deliberately choosing nonsense and absurdity as both material and subject for their work. Kabakov continues reflecting on his mid-1960s assemblages, interpreting them as objects from which meaning has been deliberately extracted – "naked absurdity":

> Первое, с чем я столкнулся, когда стал делать первые три «картины», — сам предмет, вещь, возникающая в процессе ее изготовления. […] Самое интересное, важное и главное — это то, что у этой возникающей «вещи» не было имени. […] вещь, изделие, не имеющее отношения ни к вещам реальной действительности, ни к действительности «запредельной», буквально повисает как абсолютная нелепость, как неудачный, несмешной анекдот.
> Это даже и не утилитарная вещь, которая от перемены места становится «художественной», как у Дюшана. Нет, она просто и навсегда нелепа. […] всякий раз объяснения жалко объясняли «вещь» только с одной стороны, не покрывая и не извиняя собой ее голой нелепости.
> (Ibid.: 30)

> The first thing I encountered when I began making my first three "paintings" was the object itself – the thing that emerges in the process of creating it. […] The most interesting and most important thing was that this emerging "thing" had no name. […] A thing, a product that had no relation either to the things of actual reality or to the reality of the "beyond", literally hung there as an absolute absurdity – like an unfortunate, unfunny joke. It was not even a utilitarian object that became "artistic" simply by a change of context, like Duchamp's readymades. No, it was simply and forever ridiculous. […] Every time, the explanations feebly attempted to define the "thing" only from a single perspective, failing to fully capture or justify its naked absurdity.

"Naked absurdity" was the Helenucts' aesthetic ideal. In the mid-1960s, nonsense preoccupied them and other Moscow artists as both material and subject, heightening the tension between art and life. The most incongruous elements in the artistic context became art and literature that spoke the language of modernity. Brodsky, who in 1964–65 – after the most ridiculous trial and subsequent exile – became the hero of the nonconformist community,

expressed this idea clearly: «[…] чем неизбежнее и нелепей — тем лучше, тем подлинней» (Brodskii 2007: 173).[163]

Brodsky formulated this principle of the new realism retrospectively, in a later interview. The absurdism of the mid-1960s remained significant to him over the years, though, of course, his poems cannot be categorized as neo-avant-garde. Rather, he speaks primarily of existential absurdity – an idea that accompanied him throughout his life. Nevertheless, neo-avant-garde absurdism did not remain just an episode experienced by artists and writers in the 1960s. Over time, the aesthetics of absurdity gave rise to the new nonconformist "incomprehensible homemade doodad". Later, the Collective Action group began their trips out of town; Rimma and Valery Gerlovin developed their own objects; Lev Rubinstein wrote his "cards"; and sculptor Dmitry Prigov initiated the literary project of Dmitry Aleksandrovich Prigov.

These nonconformist experiments began in the mid-1960s, when Bulatov, Kabakov, Roginsky, and Chernyshov developed their "incomprehensible homemade doodad", Aleksei Khvostenko wrote *The Suspector* and *The Poem of Epigraphs,* and the Helenucts group invented "dramagedies". The next chapter will explore this neo-avant-garde genre.

163 "The more inevitable and absurd, so much the better and more authentic."

CHAPTER 8

The Naked Absurdity: Dramagedies

The New Neo-Avant-Garde Genre

The Helenucts, continuing the tradition of Prutkov, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and OBERIU, created a neo-avant-garde variant of absurd literature that bordered on both theatrical experiment and Happening. Collective compositions constitute a significant portion of the group's archive. Ėrl′ was their most proactive author. He came up with the name for Helenuct neo-avant-garde comic writing – "dramagedies". Under this generic fusion of comedy and tragedy they understood a type of absurdist sketch-play, a whimsical travesty where nonsense is aestheticized as form, gesture, and style (Ėrl′ 1997e*, 1997h*). Aside from the group's members, Leonid Entin, Konstantin Kuz′minsky, and Oleg Okhapkin took part in creating Helenuct works.

During the Thaw there was nothing rare about literary absurdist experiments at the cutting edge of dramaturgy. Many plays written during these years were performed much later. Among them were several works by Boris Ponizovsky, one of the founders of contemporary Russian theater, whose students include the director Andrei Moguchy (head of the BDT <Bolshoi Drama Theater> in 2013–2023) and the Petersburg theatrical group AKhE. In the early 1960s, Konstantin Kuz′minsky proposed that Ponizovsky publish his "Korotkie p′esy absurda" abroad ("Short Plays of the Absurd"; Kovalev/Kuz′minskii 1983: 2A, 186). *The Blue Lagoon Anthology of Modern Russian Poetry* mentions a composition by Vladlen Gavril′chik and Konstantin Ivanov centered on a character who is an electrician by trade and outdoes Ionesco's heroes in absurdity (Kovalev/Kuz′minskii 1986: 5B, 247). Ionesco's plays and the theater of the absurd were very popular at the time. The Verpa circle wrote absurdist plays together. The genre was a favorite mainly of Volokhonsky and Khvostenko; Galetsky and Khvostenko also wrote several dramatic fantasies, issued in 1966 by the typescript publisher Pol′za, a samizdat project by Ėrl′. Entin and Khvostenko's play "Botva" ("Beet-tops" or "Bullshit") was published in the same collection. Editions of some of Verpa's plays, published by Pol′za, are preserved in the Vladimir Ėrl′ collection at the FSO Archive in Bremen. Kuz′minsky characterized the works of Khvostenko and Volokhonsky as "the iron fist of the aesthetic absurd" (Kovalev/Kuz′minskii 1983: 2A, 346).

Aesthetically, the Helenucts continued traditions from absurdist literature and the avant-garde. OBERIU is normally considered to have exerted a strong influence on them (Kalomirov 1985 [1979]; Kukulin 1996; Len 1992). They were actually familiar with important OBERIU works and held them in high

esteem: Nikolai Zabolotsky's *Stolbtsy* (*Columns*) and *Torzhestvo zemledeliia* (*The Triumph of Agriculture*); the works of Konstantin Vaginov published during his lifetime, which were available at reasonable prices in used bookstores; typewritten copies of Daniil Kharms's *Sluchai* (*Incidences*) and *Starukha* (*Old Woman*); and several poems by Nikolai Oleinikov (Belkin 1997*; Beliak 1997*; Gavril′chik 1995; Gunitskii 1996*; Zviagin 1998*; Kopylkov 1998*; Kudriashova 1997*; Mironov 1998*; Nemtinov 1997*; Nikolaev 1997*; M. and F. Iakubson 1997*). Their older contemporaries were also enthusiastic about OBERIU writers: Verpa, for example, anticipated to some degree the absurdist poetics developed by the Helenucts. The "discovery" of OBERIU for a broad intelligentsia audience was made possible thanks to the research by Anatoly Aleksandrov, Mikhail Meilakh, Tatiana Nikol′skaya, and Leonid Chertkov that began at the end of the 1960s (Aleksandrov 1967; Meilakh 1967; Ėrl′ 1997l*). Later there were opportunities to communicate with participants in the OBERIU circle like Igor′ Bakhterev, Yakov Druskin, and Vsevolod Petrov, who had also been close to Mikhail Kuzmin. In the 1970s and 80s, Ėrl′, along with Meilakh, was preparing the collected works of Kharms and Vvedensky for publication, and he later played an essential role in the publication of Vaginov's works.

The Helenucts obviously had a sincere interest in nineteenth-century traditions of literary primitivism: Koz′ma Prutkov and the "character" poetry of Captain Lebiadkin or Madame Kurdiukova. In this respect, Ėrl′ and his associates were following in the footsteps of the Futurists. They particularly revered Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh, and Ėrl′ and Mironov had the good fortune to meet Kruchenykh (Mironov 1998*; Ėrl′ 1981; Ėrl′ 1997c*).

In their Prutkov-like nonsense and parodies, the Helenucts took over a literary form that not only provided an opportunity to remain independent of the Soviet literary context, but also created a socio-cultural context where the artists pretended to be intellectually and existentially free. This second aspect is particularly important because literature in its comic-avant-garde representation turns out to be inseparable from behavior. Literature takes on the form of a stage gesture; it stages everyday life, opens a space of freedom in a dull routine. In this regard, Koz′ma Prutkov's comic plays, quite surprisingly given the literary situation of the second half of the 1960s, provided an effective aesthetic language. The genre of the dramagedy, invented by the Helenucts, refers precisely to Prutkov's plays.

Dramagedies and Theatrical Miniatures

There is, however, one additional and secondary source of *dramagedies* that has not yet been considered. Khvostenko's theatrical experiments echo his father's projects. Lev Khvostenko had prepared three volumes of foreign theatrical miniatures for publication but passed away before they were released.[164] They were eventually published in 1961, two years after his death in 1959, as a tribute to this translator and writer. The three volumes were titled *English Theatrical Miniature, American Theatrical Miniature,* and *Irish Theatrical Miniature.*

Lev Khvostenko was not only the compiler of these editions but also translated, for the first collection, a play by Charles Dickens and Marc Lemon, "Mr. Nightingale's Diary" (L. Khvostenko 1961a: 5–40). The English collection did not include experimental or avant-garde works, but it did feature plays written by George Bernard Shaw (ibid.: 74–100) and the authors of *Peter Pan* and *Winnie-the-Pooh,* James Barrie (ibid.: 41–72) and Alan Alexander Milne (ibid.: 163–188), which, for the post-Stalin era, was already something of a bold move.



Fig. 27

164 His father's influence on Aleksei Khvostenko was, by all appearances, significant. In addition to shaping his general outlook, his knowledge of English and English-language literature played an important role. A graduate of the English school where Khvostenko taught recalled his fascinating stories about *Robinson Crusoe, Tom Sawyer, David Copperfield, Robin Hood*, and even *Beowulf*. Inspired by *Beowulf*, the boys organized fights during recess (Glushkov 2006: 99). Lev Khvostenko composed and skillfully performed parody songs (ibid.: 44). This talent was passed on to his son.

Soviet censorship was less restrictive in children's literature. The Irish collection opens with a classic of modernist literature: a play by William Butler Yeats (L. Khvostenko 1961b: 5–20), whose works were rarely translated or published in the USSR.

A few famous translators contributed to these three books, as did Yury Kovalev, a specialist in the history of English literature who taught at Leningrad State University. Kovalev also wrote short articles on the authors whose plays were included in these collections. These volumes were published by *Iskusstvo,* one of the most liberal publishing houses of the Thaw era. Among its editors was art historian Mark Ėtkind, author of the well-known monograph on Alexandre Benois ([Aleksandr Benua]; M. Ėtkind 1965).

English, American, and *Irish Theatrical Miniatures* provided a cultural backdrop for the neo-avant-garde experiments of Verpa and the Helenucts. While the satirical and realist works in these collections did not directly influence Verpa's dramaturgical texts and dramagedies in terms of plot or theme, the Leningrad neo-avant-gardists radicalized the short dramatic form. They transformed the absurdist motifs found in the miniatures into both the subject and the material of their artistic experiments. For example, the diary of illnesses and ailments kept by Mr. Nightingale in Dickens's and Lemon's play, which structures its plot, was reinterpreted in the *dramagedies* as a comic list – such as a series of characters with pun-like names or a sequence of meaningless actions.

These three anthologies were published at the height of the popularity of theatrical miniatures. During the Thaw era, this genre provided an opportunity to break away from the Socialist Realist canon and the constraints of official Soviet theater. The Leningrad Variety and Miniature Theater, made famous by the legendary Soviet comedian Arkady Raikin, was especially beloved by audiences at the time. During the same period, the well-known writer and comedian Mikhail Zhvanetsky – who had not yet achieved fame – began working there.

Eccentricity, topicality, and satire made theatrical miniatures extremely popular in the 1960s. While the miniatures from these three books, as well as the theatrical satire of Raikin and Zhvanetsky, were not direct sources for *dramagedies* or Verpa's plays, they formed part of the broader cultural background against which the neo-avant-garde experiments unfolded. The

neo-avant-gardists distanced themselves from popular culture, inventing something new that either complemented or ran parallel to it.

For example, the Concretists of Lianozovo school developed a concise, laconic artistic form. Its particular brevity and expressive potential were the subject of Vsevolod Nekrasov's reflections. In a note on the poetry of the 1950s and 60s, he wrote:

> Миниатюра — это что-то до того сжатое, что не может не расправляться само. В том и фокус миниатюры, что она, именно своей малостью, наглядно демонстрирует ту самую экзо (если хотите) систему, структуру, большой контекст, который вещь попространнее маскирует, заслоняет собой. Попространней вещь — сама себе контекст.
> (Nekrasov 2019: 34)

> A miniature is something so compressed that it can't help but expand. The trick of the miniature is that, precisely through its smallness, it vividly reveals the very exo (if you like) system, the structure, the larger context that a bigger, more expansive thing will screen from view. The bigger thing makes its own context.

In one form or another, this brevity and concision were characteristic of the work by the Lianozovo poets Igor′ Kholin and Genrikh Sapgir, with whom Vsevolod Nekrasov had a close creative relationship, the neo-avant-garde experiments of Aleksei Khvostenko, whom he influenced (see Chapter 2), and the dramagedies of the Helenucts.

"An Alternative Form of Existence"

The Helenucts' dramaturgical works were not written specifically for the theater. Literary scholar Tatiana Nikol′skaya recalls that these plays were read aloud at parties – a kind of "performative" or "pronunciatory" dramaturgy (analogous to the "pronunciatory poetry" of the 1960s) that did not always imply formal staging. For example, at gatherings at poet Kari Unksova's home, Khvostenko would read his plays "Pervyi grib" ("The First Mushroom") and "Zapasnoi vykhod" ("Emergency Exit"), written together with Anri Volokhonsky, to the delight of the audience (Nikol′skaia 2002: 280). These plays

emerged partly as literary works and partly as performative gestures – records of co-writing sessions or creative experiences. As previously mentioned, both Verpa and the Helenucts produced many texts collaboratively. Collective creativity was important as a shared experience – an alternative to Soviet life and the activities of official cultural institutions. The plays of Verpa and the Helenucts captured these episodes of private artistic life.

Larissa Volokhonsky-Pevear, the sister of Anri Volokhonsky, recalls in her memoir how, in the early 1960s, they engaged in collaborative writing sessions in Khvostenko's room at the communal apartment on Grechesky Avenue:

> Братство, содружество, соавторство — назовем, как захотим. Алеша был гением соавторства. У него был особенный дар: привлекать к себе людей. И не только привлекать, но и вовлекать, и вдохновлять, как бы заражать своей талантливостью. Он создавал вокруг себя особую художественную атмосферу. […] Уже в начале 60-х на Греческом проспекте велась игра. Ставили часы, задавали тему и писали на время: Алеша, Енот <Леонил Ентин>, Славинский, Анри, не помню еще кто. Вокруг него все начинали писать стихи. […] Вспомним, что самые первые песни Алеши тоже были написаны в соавторстве с <Борисом> Дышленко и Ентиным. […] А сколько пьес! С Юрой Галецким, с Леней Ентиным, с Анри […].
> (Pligin 2013: 21)

> Fraternity, commonwealth, co-authorship – call it what you will. Aliosha was a genius of co-authorship. He had a special gift: he could attract people to him. And not only attract, but draw them in and inspire them, as if his talent was contagious. He created a unique artistic atmosphere around him. […] Already in the early 1960s, we were playing a game. They would set a clock, choose a theme, and write against the clock: Aliosha, Enot <Leonid Entin>, Slavinsky, Anri – I don't remember who else. Around him, everyone started writing poetry. […] Remember that Aliosha's very first songs were also co-written with <Boris> Dyshlenko and Entin. […] And how many plays! With Yura Galetsky, with Lenia Entin, with Anri […].

Anri Volokhonsky recalled:

> Мы никогда с ним особенно ни о чем не разговаривали. Просто садились и начинали сочинять. Иногда я писал кусок, и Алеша кусок […] А иногда одну строчку я, одну он. «В полночь я вышел на прогулку / Шел в темноте по переулку / Вдруг вижу, дева гложет булку…» Нет, нет, Анри, причем тут булка. «Вдруг, вижу дева в закоулке…»
> (Ibid.: 22)

> We never really talked about anything in particular. We would just sit down and start composing. Sometimes I wrote a bit, and Aliosha wrote a bit. […] Sometimes I'd write one line, and he'd write the next: "At midnight, I went for a walk / Walked in the dark down the alley / Suddenly, I see a maiden eating a bun…" "No, no, Anri", Aliosha would say, "it's not about the bun". "Suddenly, I see a maiden in the back alley…"

This collaborative approach also gave rise to the song "Orlandina", an ironic retelling of an episode from Jan Potocki's novel *Manouscrit retrouvé à Saragosse* (*The Manuscript Found in Saragossa,* first published in 1847), later adapted into a film by Wojciech Has (1965).

For those who distanced themselves from official social life, collective composition fostered a sense of community within the underground. Living in a self-sufficient creative circle, independent of state institutions, was a form of artistic and personal freedom. This close-knit unity – sustained by constant, intensive communication among nonconformists – is described by artist Vladimir Yankilevsky in his interview with Vadim Alekseev:

> […] очень много энергии выходило в общении. Именно в кухонном общении. Знаменитые посиделки у Эдика Штейнберга на кухне на Пушкинской. У Ильи <Кабакова> часто собирались в мастерской. […] Разговоры были замечательные, начинались с одного, потом переходили в какие-то заоблачные высоты. Часто приходили философы, Пятигорский, например. […] Это просто была та питательная среда, в которой мы жили. Во-первых, из-за дефицита информации. Каждый, кто что-то знал, приходил и делился с другими, это был обменный пункт. Очень жадные уши были, очень хотелось все это знать и слышать.
> (Alekseev 2022: 439)

> […] A lot of energy was spent on communication – specifically, kitchen communication. The famous gatherings in Edik Shteinberg's kitchen on Pushkinskaya Street. We often gathered at Ilya <Kabakov>'s studio. […] The conversations were wonderful: they would start with one topic and then move on to some exorbitant heights. Philosophers often came – <Aleksandr> Piatigorsky, for example. […] It was simply the nourishing environment we lived in. First and foremost, because of the lack of information. Everyone who knew something came and shared it with others – it was an exchange point. We had very greedy ears; we were eager to know and hear it all.

Ilya Kabakov's studio or Aleksei Khvostenko's communal apartment room functioned as informal clubs where nonconformists experienced artistic freedom through creativity and conversation. Art and freedom began in the kitchen, which replaced clubs and salons in Soviet everyday life. While apartments were small, the sphere of private communication was greatly expanded – to the extent that, in the official public space, nonconformists' presence was often reduced almost to zero. In this context, the role of collaborative writing can hardly be overemphasized.

In one way or another, the above accounts highlight the existential foundations of nonconformist creativity. As previously discussed, it was inseparable from life itself and authenticated by lived experience.

Dramagedies were not mere transcripts of specific conversations or actions. Rather, they embodied what took place during such sessions of collective creativity. They were themselves a form of artistic event. Or, to borrow the term introduced by Allan Kaprow, a *Happening*. The emergence of dramagedies was driven not only by an interest in Koz′ma Prutkov or the Russian avant-garde but also by the theatricalized behavior common among nonconformists – something akin to Happenings or performance art. Unlike American and Western European artists, who constructed formal artistic systems to explore new creative spaces, the Soviet underground gained such artistic experiences directly through everyday life. Perhaps the most explicit articulation of this *life-creative* aspect of 1960s nonconformism came from one of its most radical, consistent, and successful figures, Joseph Brodsky. In his programmatic article "On the Side of Cavafy", he wrote: «Искусство есть альтернативная форма существования, хотя ударение здесь на „существования", так как

творческий процесс не побег от реальности, ни сублимация ее» (Brodskii 1978: 146).[165]

The interplay between art and life – and the tension it generates – was a defining feature of the 1960s. Without it, it is difficult to fully grasp the creative biographies and works of Mikhail Grobman, Anatoly Zverev, Anatoly Naiman, Igor′ Kholin, Aleksei Khvostenko, Sergei Chudakov, and the Helenucts. Even Aleksandr Volodin, a Leningrad playwright who was institutionally distant from the underground yet closely aligned with its spirit, echoed these themes. The author of several plays and screenplays significant to the late Soviet era, Volodin reflected on the inseparability of life and art in his autobiographical book *Zapiski p'ianogo cheloveka* ("Notes of a Drunken Man", 1993) – a title that must have resonated with intellectuals who embraced marginality: «Как двойные звезды, жизнь и искусство соединены невидимой тканью» (Volodin 1999: 16).[166]

In her portrait of Mikhail Grobman, one of the key nonconformists of the 1960s, Lola Kantor-Kazovski highlights the existentialist background of nonconformist creativity. The desire for life-creative wholeness permeates the diary kept by Grobman in the 1960s. In 1965, Grobman advocated for "a full life under any conditions" («полную жизнь в любых условиях»; Grobman 2002: 92). To explain Grobman's position, Kantor-Kazovski quotes a letter from Ülo Sooster, whose friendship was cherished by many of the Moscow

165 "Art is an alternative form of existence, although the emphasis here is on 'existence', since the creative process is neither an escape from reality nor a sublimation of it." Brodsky, introduced to Cavafy by his close friend, the translator and literary scholar Gennady Shmakov, became an admirer of Cavafy. Brodsky was particularly interested in prominent figures who had experienced marginalization. With some, he had the opportunity to form friendships. For example, he had a close relationship with Derek Walcott, a major modernist poet who grew up and spent many years in the West Indies. Notably, Brodsky's essay on Cavafy – dedicated to the famous but seemingly distant poet, whose life and work lay entirely outside the Soviet context – had a unique history. Written in English, it was translated by Lev Losev, a close friend of the future Nobel laureate and poet of the Philological school, and published in one of the first issues of the journal *Ėkho*, which was founded by Khvostenko and Maramzin in 1978.

166 "Like double stars, life and art are connected by an invisible fabric." Varlam Shalamov wrote in his diary in 1961: «Искусство — не отражение жизни, оно — сама жизнь» ("Art is not merely a reflection of life – it is life itself"; Shalamov 2004: 274). Shalamov's realism, which served as an alternative to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "camp prose", was an essential part of the "documentary" literature of the 1960s.

underground's heroes in the 1960s. After serving time in a camp and only managing to become a professional artist during the Thaw, Sooster wrote:

> […] ташизм, или информизм есть искусство экзистенциализма — непосредственн<ое> прикосновение к действительности, без помощи рассуждений, понятий. Мы сами являемся кусками действительности и постигать действительность следует не при помощи толкований, а черес самые первичные инстинкты, не черес мышление, а черес бытие. Так что не "Cogito, ergo sum", а "Sum, ergo sum".
> (Iu. Sooster 2007)

> […] tachism, or "informel", is the art of existentialism – a direct engagement with reality, without the aid of reasoning or concepts. We ourselves are pieces of reality, and we should comprehend reality not through interpretations, but through our most primal instincts – not through thinking, but through being. So it is not "Cogito, ergo sum", but "Sum, ergo sum".[167]

"I am, therefore I am", "I exist, therefore I exist" is an expressive and convincing tautology that refutes the Soviet ideological cliché of "being determines consciousness". "Being determines being" – words are not substituted for ideological constructs, and things are not represented through socio-political mythologies. Ülo Sooster's tautology, like Vsevolod Nekrasov's famous tautologies, lays out the existential foundations for both creativity and life. Sooster's "Sum, ergo sum" echoes Nekrasov's "freedom is freedom".

Artistic behavior was a common manifestation of this integral artistic-existential experience, often described in the tautological formulations of Sooster and Nekrasov. Texts about the 1960s frequently recount antics, pranks, and eccentric gestures. These were preceded by the actions of the Philological school, which can now be directly seen in the diary of its organizer, Mikhail Krasil′nikov, published in 2024 (in Krasil′nikov 2024: entries from 1952 to 1956).[168] Both participants and contemporaries often referred to these actions

167 The publishers reproduced the orthography and punctuation from the manuscript.

168 See, for comparison, literary experiments with the epistolary genre by Joseph Brodsky, Dmitry Bobyshev, Ludmila Shtern, Mikhail Petrov, and Anatoly Naiman (Shtern 2001: 95–101).

as a kind of homage to the Russian Futurists, who were known for provoking and presenting themselves as daring Russophiles.[169]

Another example comes from the life of Moscow neo-avant-gardists. The painter Vladimir Nemukhin recalls an eccentric walk in Lianozovo with Yury Vasil′ev-Mon, the addressee of Okudzhava's song "Painters, dip your brushes", discussed in the first chapter:

> Вот яркий довольно случай, «пикник авангардистов». 61-й год, весна, к Оскару <Рабину> в Лианозово приехал Васильев-Мон […]. Сапгир приезжает, я, Лида <Мастеркова>, Вечтомов, Оскар, Валя <Кропивницкая>, Лев <Кропивницкий> — такая компания авангардистов, новых художников. Идем гулять, выпить поллитра-два, какую-то закусь собрали, проходим окраину Лианозово, болота зеленые, вдруг он увидел лягушачью икру.
> — Друзья, икра лягушек! Это прекрасно! — говорит Васильев-Мон.
> — Да, это чудеса, давайте есть, где ложка? — тут же подхватил Сапгир.
> Он был готов целую оду сочинить лягушачьей икре. Все зачерпнули, стали есть эту лягушачью икру. Лидка не стала, я попробовал, рыбой какой-то пахнет. Сели, налили водки, выпили, заговорили о возвышенном — такой вот пикник авангардистов.
> (Alekseev 2022: 79)

> Here is a rather vivid case, a "picnic of avant-gardists".
> In the year 1961, spring, Vasil′ev-Mon came to Oskar <Rabin> in Lianozovo […]. Sapgir arrives, me, Lida <Lydia Masterkova>, <Nikolai> Vechtomov, Oskar, Valia <Valentina Kropivnitskaya>, Lev <Kropivnitski> – such a group of avant-garde, new artists. We go for a walk, drink half a liter or two <of vodka>, have some snacks we brought along, and pass through the green swamps on the outskirts of Lianozovo, when suddenly he spots frog caviar.
> – Friends, frog caviar! It's wonderful! – says Vasil′ev-Mon.
> – Yes, it's wonderful, let's eat, where's the spoon? – Sapgir immediately chimed in.

169 See Losev 2010; Kondratov 2005: 65–79; Krasil′nikov 2024: 10–11, 83–84.

> He was ready to compose a whole ode to frog caviar. Everyone scooped it up and started eating it. Lidka wouldn't eat it, I tried it – it smelled like fish. We sat down, poured vodka, drank, and talked about the sublime – a true picnic of avant-garde artists.

Eccentric antics were often recorded in literary and artistic works, reinterpreted or supplemented by fiction. Artists and writers became characters in their own texts and paintings. The poet Valentin Khromov participated in at least two similar works, which played with prototypes: "Alkogoliki s vysshim obrazovaniem" ("Highly Educated Alcoholics") by Nikolai Vil'iams and "Bratstvo nishchikh sibaritov" ("Brotherhood of Beggars Sybarites") by Yury Gastev:

> Отблески незабываемых дней остались у друзей — у Николая Вильямса в «Алкоголиках с высшим образованием» и у Юрия Гастева в «Братстве нищих сибаритов». Сколько набалагурили эти математики из известных семей, отсидевшие по 58-й в 1945–1951 годах частью в лагере, частью в ссылке. Известен типичный для Юрия Алексеевича кульбит, когда он в «Гомоморфизмах и моделях» (М., 1975) сослался на несуществующую работу Чейна и Стокса в вымышленном журнале за март 1953 года. Тогда в бюллетене о состоянии вождя сообщалось, что у него открылось чейно-стоксовое дыхание, верный признак летального исхода. Без подобных гастевских проказ порой дня не проходило. Жаль, что шалости и балагурства со временем забываются
> (Khromov 2025: 187)

> Reflections of unforgettable days remained with friends – with Nikolai Vil'iams in "Alkogoliki s vysshim obrazovaniem" and with Yury Gastev in "Bratstvo nischikh sibaritov". To what extent were these mathematicians from famous families, who served time under Article 58 between 1945 and 1951 – partly in camps and partly in exile – joking around? Yury Alekseevich's typical trick can be found in *Homomorphisms and Models* (Moscow, 1975), where he referred to a nonexistent paper by Cheyne and Stokes in a fictitious journal for March 1953. At that time, a bulletin on the chief's condition reported that he had developed

> Cheyne–Stokes respiration, a sure sign of impending death. Sometimes, not a day went by without one of Gastev's pranks. It's a pity that pranks and antics are forgotten with time.

The artistic behavior cultivated within the nonconformist community, coupled with similar texts, paved the way for the emergence of dramagedies. The absurdism in the works of Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy and the Zhemchuzhnikov brothers was amplified by neo-avant-garde eccentricity. Together, the Helenucts began composing strange, "incomprehensible homemade doodad". The dramagedies are comic fantasies that resemble surrealist collective games, Happenings, recordings of collaborative writing sessions, the development of new literary and artistic forms, and absurdist sketches. Among the texts and projects created by the group members, the dramagedies stand out as the most radical absurdist gestures. In them, absurdity is elevated to an aesthetic principle.

Typology of Dramagedies

The series of *non-actor works* created under the influence of Andy Warhol, whose work was known to the Helenucts thanks to Entin, stands out in remarkable fashion (Ėrl′ 1997f*). *10 p′es v stile pop-art* (10 Pop-Art Style Plays) by Ėrl′, "Piessa No. 1 'Meditatsiia P R" ("Playe no. 1 'Meditation P R'"), and "Piessa No. 2 'Shkap'" ("Playe no. 2 'The Closet'") by Dm. M. were written in 1966 while the group's leaders were on vacation in Sochi. "Piessa No. 1" demonstrates heeding the "call of nature" and possibly parodies the title of Eugen Gomringer's poem "Meditation P." Works by this representative of Viennese concrete poetry (and concrete poetry, generally) were favorites among the Helenucts and other poets from Malaya Sadovaya (Gaivoronskii 2004; Krivulin 1998; Mironov 1998*; Ėrl′ 1997a*). The letters "P R" in the play's title could be interpreted either as the initials of someone who wanted to remain incognito or as referring to an obscene imitation of the sound of defecation. In "Piessa No. 2" we encounter a fidgety lodger in a closet – an absurd idle character. Ėrl′s miniature "Obed" ("The Dinner") was dedicated entirely to its famished hero's spectacular feast (Ėrl′ 1997f*).

"Stsena iz 'Fausta'" ("Scene from *Faust*"), written by Dm. M. and Ėrl′, can rightfully be called a Pop Art play (Ėrl′ 1993: [63]). Its dramatic action is like-

wise reduced to an insignificant routine episode, like the notorious films of Andy Warhol that record episodes from everyday life.

"Letnii vecher" ("A Summer Evening, 1968") and "Rukoiat′ beneficheskogo rukodeliia" ("The Handle of a Beneficial Handiwork", 1969) fall under the category of *documentary dramagedies and meeting minutes of artistic colloquies*.

The text of "Letnii vecher," a drama in three acts with a prologue and epilogue, is the record of a dialog among VNE, Dm. M., N. F., her friend Larisa Kiseleva, and Ėrl′. The Surrealists practiced documenting their collective artistic actions, but in this case the idea of recording what was happening as it happened could hardly have derived from André Breton's experiments, about which the Helenucts likely had little or no knowledge in the mid-1960s. The Helenucts were fascinated by Zen Buddhism, which may have led to their interest in spontaneous creative self-revelation and its documentation (Krivulin 1997*; Ėrl′ 1997c*). We should also keep in mind that the group was fascinated by the notion of "camp" described in Susan Sontag's essay, which they understood as collaborative artistic activities or artists' get-togethers (Ėrl′ 1997f*). This reception of Sontag's notion greatly distorted her original concept, but precise replication of a source rarely marked the way foreign phenomena were received in Russian culture.

The teleplay "Rukoiat′ beneficheskogo rukodeliia" is a relatively late text. It was written in September 1969 by VNE along with his friends Vladimir Rolich (a specialist in mathematical linguistics), the writer Daniil Norin (Perel′man; the author of a retelling of the Dhammapada), and Ėrl′ (Ėrl′ 1997j*). The text was based on a recorded conversation, fragments of which Ėrl′ set down, introducing corrections and insertions (Ėrl′ 1997h*). The text stands out as an experiment distinct from surrealistic automatic writing, since it documents what took place by selecting the most ordinary episodes and making them absurd through their very insignificance.

Another type of dramagedy is exemplified in *texts reduced to a plan, a plot, or an outline*. These might be considered projects in the sense in which the term was later understood, for example, among conceptualists in the postmodernist era, but they might also be unfinished initiatives that function in the post-Romantic tradition as full-fledged artistic statements.

"Prestuplenie i nakazanie" ("Crime and Punishment"), a free adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel, is something like an ironic sketch based on its motifs. Its text looks like a catalog of characters doubled, tripled, and mixed up with

one another. The mystery play "Golkiper" ("Goalkeeper") is a work content to remain a preliminary plan (Ėrl′ 1993: [22]). We should note that one more text, written by the poet Evgeny Venzel′, who belonged to the Malaya Sadovaya circle and knew the Helenucts well, has a similar "project" quality. Around the same time when "Golkiper" was being written, Venzel′ was writing the table-of-contents-novel *Dzhekki, ili Zhizn′, prozhitaia iz koketstva* ("Jackie, or a Life Lived out of Sheer Coquettishness"; Kovalev/Kuz′misnkii 1983, 4A: 498).

The dramagedies, like the works of the Helenucts as a whole, are permeated with word play. It is possible to distinguish among the Helenucts' works the *"character" dramagedy*, *where the action unfolds primarily in puns on and comic manipulations of characters' names*.

Among the characters of the dramatic farce "Bulka" ("The Bun," 1967), we meet Kozyr′ (Trump Card), Vaflia (Wafer), Predmet (Object), and Shtuk (Thing). It is worth comparing this absurd catalog with the characters in the mystery play by Aleksandr and Vladimir Zhemchuzhnikov, "Srodstvo mirovykh sil" ("The Affinity of World Powers", 1884): Rovnaia dolina (Level valley), Vysokii dub (Tall oak), Zvezda orleanskaia (Star of Orleans), Zvezda nebesnaia (Heavenly star), Duplo (Knothole), Kochka (Hummock), etc. (Prutkov 281–289). Kholst (Canvas) has a place among the characters in Velimir Khlebnikov's play "Markiza Dezes" ("The Marquise D'Ezes"). In his *sverkh-povest′* (super-saga) "Deti vydry" ("The Otter's Children"), the chess pieces Kon′ (Knight), Tret′ia peshka (Third Pawn), and Feriaz (Queen) come to life, but so does Utes (Crag; Khlebnikov 4/1930: 225–239; Khlebnikov 5/2004: 242–279). In AXV's plays "Domkrat" ("Tire Jack"), "Pedant," and "Shtopor" ("Corkscrew"), the characters Diabet (Diabetes), Dieta (Diet), Maiatnik (Pendulum), Seialka (Seeder), Shtopor, and others take part. In Volokhonsky's "historical" drama "Budennyi", Usy (Moustache), Chasy (Clock), and Kon′ Budennogo (Budennyi's Steed) fight to the bitter end (Volokhonsky 2012).

Lucius Gaius Fabricio del Fernando[170] is an example of a comical name concatenation analogous to the visiting Spaniard Sil′va-do-Alonzo-Merzavets in Aleksandr Zhemchuzhnikov's drama "Liubov′ i Silin" or even to Denikin-Kolchak from the play "Budennyi" (Prutkov 1965: 289–306).

170 Ėrl′ invents a character with a similar name in his novel *Vchera, poslezavtra i poslezavtra* ("Yesterday, the Day after Tomorrow, and the Day after Tomorrow"; Viktor R. 2012).

The dramatic actions performed by characters from "Karp" ("Carp") by Dm. M. and Ėrl′ are a kind of pun built on characters' comically consonant single-syllable names: Kon′ (Steed), Kor′ (Measles), Von′ (Stench), and Pen′ (Stump; Ėrl′ 1993: [28]). AXV makes use of the same model in the play "Pedant", where the list of characters is given a comic force: Tesei (Theseus), Fesei (alternate form of Theseus), Evsei (derived from Eusebius), and Seialka (Seeder). The opening setting of "Karp" ("In the bathhouse. It smells. Fine") is similar to the setting for Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy's ballet "Comma" (1838; "Underground. It stinks"; Tolstoi 1964: 518).

The dramatic etude "Pust′!" ("So Be It!") by Dm. M., N. F., and Ėrl′ is yet another example of a dramagedy built on a comic consonance of characters: Chulan v sredu (Lumber-room on Wednesday), Chuma (Plague), Chulok (Stocking), Chelkash (eponymous character from Maxim Gorky's story), and Chai (Tea). The action, unfolding on Lake Selinzher, a name that represents a multi-lingual pun on Lake Seliger and Salinger, consists in shuffling the characters, interspersed with lines from the main character of Gorky's story "Chelkash" (Ėrl′ 1993: [47]).

These parallels give a sufficiently clear idea as to the range of Helenucts' reading interests; they also reveal obvious influence of a series of avant-gardists and their older contemporaries in the neo-avant-garde on their writing.

Absurd scenes and gags were integral to many works by the Helenucts. The comic genre in their creative output became intertwined with the humor of early silent cinema. This influence is not as surprising in the context of the 1960s as it might seem at first. Elements from silent films constitute an important component in films that are intimately associated with the 1960s. Everyone knew Leonid Gaidai's comedies *Pes Barbos i neobychnyi kross* ("The Dog Barbos and the Unusual Cross-country Race") and *Samogonshchiki* ("Bootleggers"), both of which rely on early comic film techniques. Buster Keaton and other classic silent film were favorites of the Helenucts. At least three works by the Helenucts synthesize comic scenarios and the gag. We will call them "dramagedic gags".

Mironov and Ėrl′s poem "Liuksemburg" ("Luxembourg") was written during the group's concluding period, in February 1971 (Ėrl′ 1993: [32–36]). Retrospectively, this text can be considered the Helenucts' last dramagedy. Its characters split in two and three in a way already familiar to us. Luxemburg is played simultaneously by Molodoi (Young Man), Pozhiloi (Middle-Aged

Man), Mertvyi Kitaets (Dead Chinaman), and Luxemburg himself. Lautréamont gets along harmoniously with Isidore Ducasse. Among the play's other characters are Ia (I) and Baron M. – Charles Mingus, one of the founders of free jazz (Ėrl′ 1997e*). An explanation is given in a note on the setting: "the action takes place in our time". "Luxemburg" presents its main characters in an incessant brawl, reminiscent of the scenes in Buster Keaton's films, one of Ėrl′'s favorite actors and directors (Ėrl′ 1997g*). Ėrl′ defined this work as a variation on the theme of the "theater of cruelty", taking this phrase literally and disregarding the meaning Antonin Artaud originally gave it (Ėrl′ 1997k*).

The tragedy "Buffon" ("The Buffoon"; Dm. M. 1970, republished 1986b) is a typical example of a dramagedic gag. Tearing a footstool away from a corpse, dying suddenly and immediately being resurrected, losing one's ears – this is the confounding series of events readers encounter in this play. The characters' disjointed conversations and violent squabbles are contained in a closed composition built on making a metaphorical turn of phrase real: Vasily is literally "stuck" – and sticks out of a wall during the prologue and epilogue. He is called a "buffoon" because his affairs look bad. Vasily diligently fixes the footstool while he sings a perky little song. The play's action unfolds within the space of a game with colloquial expressions, clashes among characters, neurotic outpourings of the soul, and pointless observations.

Dramagedic gag projects can be traced back to one of the group's most striking early works – a project for the dynamic drama "Kotovrashchenie" ("Cat-Rotation)" by Dm. M., written in 1965 (Dm. M. 1965). The author may have borrowed several motifs from Italo Calvino's story "The Cat and the Policeman". The plot of "Kotovrashchenie", like that of Calvino's story, is a chase. A police officer, suffering from a strange and absurd disease, Martianism, tries to drive a marsupial cat he mistakes for a Martian beyond the bounds of his home planet. The cat, quoting Sophocles, saves itself to the best of its ability. At the end of the story, the cat and the police officer speed off into infinity. The cyclical action breaks off on the next spin.

The Helenucts' works, extending avant-garde traditions and pushing off from Verpa's neo-avantgarde experiment, establish a fairly new strategy for the literature of the time: "antiliterary" text-generation. The Helenucts create a series of nonlinear anti-narrative gestures that destroy realist, post-Romantic, and Socialist Realist literary representations. Their subversiveness is close to a Neo-Dada aesthetic, although Dada itself did not have a substantial

influence on them. The Koz′ma Prutkov circle, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Verpa – these constitute the system of coordinates for reading Helenucts' gestures that were rebooting literary tradition on the eve of the postmodern era.

Thus, dramagedies radically absurdized the plots, themes, and techniques of modern literature and dramaturgy. The five varieties of dramagedies represent five directions of neo-avant-garde experiments with absurdity. In these texts, the Helenucts' impossible hero is reduced to mere masks, semblances, and pseudo-characters. These texts do not create a literary space or a literary text proper; they rreproduce what is happening directly at the moment of their creation, existing somewhere between the documentation of artistic action in the spirit of Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists, and the montage of the results of automatic writing. Dramagedies dissolve the artistic statement, reducing the text to a plan, an idea, or an outline. They dissolve literary writing into everyday life and absurd scenes reminiscent of the gags in silent movies. It is the apotheosis of absurdity in its immediate manifestation – a triumph of the art of nonsense. Naked absurdity.

Developing the eccentricity of nonconformist everyday life and following the neo-avant-gardists of the 1950s and early 1960s, the dramagedies were created simultaneously with the eccentric actions of the Helenucts. In this connection, it is necessary to speak separately about the relationship between the Helenucts' works and the art of life.

Aesthetic Behavior

In many respects, the group's artistic behavioral practices resemble traditions of artistic behavior associated, above all, with the Russian avant-garde and, at the earliest, with the Symbolist period. Since the Romantic era, behavior had become part of the artistic experiment, but the most crucial precedents in this case were the Symbolist experiments in life-creation that preceded avant-garde life-building. The Helenucts, as we noted above, saw daily routine as one of their materials and one of the themes of their work – ideas reflected in the group's manifesto. It would be anachronistic to speak of their actions as a late Soviet version of the Happening or performance art. First, information about American and European art of life was minimal in Leningrad during the Thaw. Even later, when the Collective Actions group appeared in Moscow – a city

better informed about contemporary art outside the USSR – local tradition rather than foreign influence most frequently served as the source for artistic actions. Second, there was no need to appeal to Allan Kaprow, because models for imitation, along with aesthetic grounds for rebooting artistic life as a relevant artistic language, could be found within Russian Futurism and among the members of OBERIU. And finally, a typological and genealogical comparison of Neo-Dadaism and the Helenucts could shed light on the emergence of a general pattern in the cultural situation in the 1960s. However, pursuing this comparison would require expanding the focus of this study, which concentrates primarily on the Leningrad group within the context of 1960s nonconformism (see Savitski 2026).

For the Helenucts, their works and behavior were seamlessly connected. The one-liner "Staromodnyi roial′ vozlezhal na koleniakh prekrasnoi Gonzales" ("The old-fashioned piano reclined on lovely Gonzales's lap"), written by Dm. M. and Ėrl′ (Ėrl′ 1993: [61]), was valued in the group's aesthetic hierarchy on a par with artistic gestures. The Helenucts adopted a strategy of a trying-on the graphomaniac poet's mask, which was created by several authors together. As admirers of Koz′ma Prutkov and Captain Lebiadkin, they collected graphomaniac verses and read them at poetic soirees. Here are a few lines of graphomaniac poetry selected by A. Nik from the works of the well-known Soviet poet Evgeny Vinokurov:

> Эмаль лишь скрипнет на зубах…
> Повернись еще вот так вот, боком…
> Попробуй только ляг — и засосут…
> (Ėrl′ 1997c*)

> The enamel just grates on your teeth…
> Turn again like that, sideways…
> Just try to lie down – and they'll suck you in…

Ėrl′ started corresponding with the artillery officer Yury Dubasov, a poet from Vilnius (see Dubasov 1966), presenting himself as the retired colonel Vladimir Gorbunov. With enviable dedication, the leader of the Helenucts kept the group's members abreast of how the exchange was going (Mironov 1998*). The

letters were prepared for publication in the almanac *Moguchaia kuchka*, which never saw the light of day, and were later published in *Mitin zhurnal* (Ėrl′ 1985).

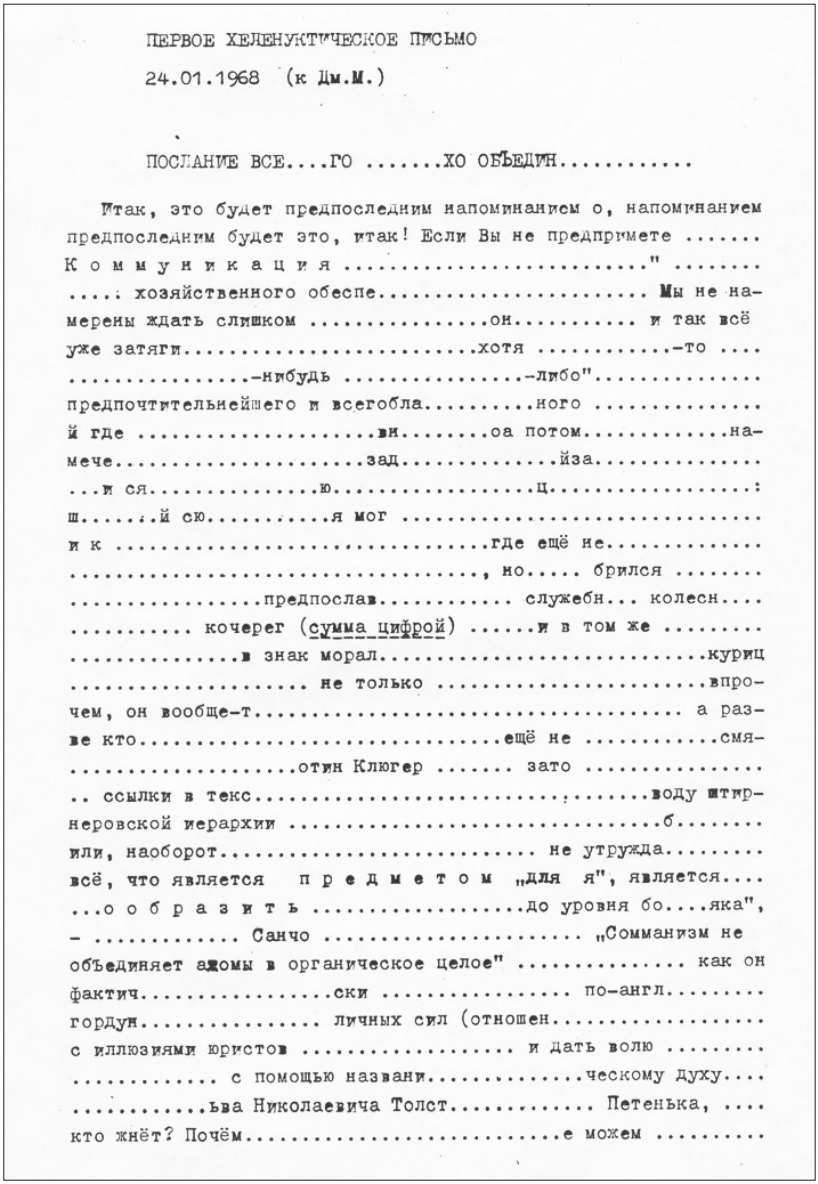
One day, Mironov and Ėrl′ called on the master of Soviet poetry Gleb Pagirev. The guests presented themselves as Moscow poets and read poems by Ėrl′'s classmate Gennady Nesis-Osenny and Joseph Brodsky as though they were their own, pretending to wait for his indulgent encouragement (Zviagin 1998; Ėrl′ 1997d*). Dm. M.'s miniature "Ona stoiala u kalitki" ("She was standing at the gate") was written in imitation of four-line poems by Vladimir Il′in, a communal apartment neighbor of Churilin's and Mikhail Kopylkov's (Ėrl′ 1993: [42]).

Literary life was parodied in mock duels. Leonid Aronzon was defeated by Ėrl′ in a pillow fight. Ėrl′ was the victor once again in a water-pistol skirmish with Dm. M.

The Helenucts organized Helenucts' congresses imitating those organized by the Writers' Union of the USSR or the "congresses" of the Futurist period. Mironov's "Rech′, proiznesennaia na vtorom zasedanii Pervogo Khelenukticheskogo s′′ezda" ("Speech Delivered at the Second Session of the First Helenucts' Congress"), Dm. M.'s "Otkrytoe pis′mo" ("Open Letter") associated with the same event, and Ėrl′'s "Pervoe Helenucticheskoe pis′mo" ("First Helenucts' Letter") testify to the passionate tone of the discussions of the Helenucts' vital problems (Ėrl′ 1997i*). Like Aleksandr Aref′ev's friends and colleagues in the Order of Mendicant Painters, who mixed every imaginable alcoholic beverage in their teapot-shaker, the group cherished a cavernous teapot where they mixed an original Helenuct cocktail (two bottles of lemonade for every bottle of port; Nemtinov 1997).

The Helenucts also stand at the beginnings of Russian mail art. It was customary among the group's members to exchange extravagant greeting cards that baffled postal workers. Dm. M.'s correspondence with Ėrl′ is of particular interest in this regard (Mironov 1998*; Ėrl′ 1997d*).

The most radical Helenucts pranks mimicked everyday Soviet behavior to the greatest possible extent. Group members spread false rumors. Mironov and Ėrl′ worked to persuade the line at a donut shop that every donut was several grams underweight until the customers got so worked up, they started to re-weigh the donuts. Or they told the people in line that grain had disappeared from the stores and that there had been an unprecedented cereal harvest failure,



ПЕРВОЕ ХЕЛЕНУКТИЧЕСКОЕ ПИСЬМО

24.01.1968 (к Дм.М.)

ПОСЛАНИЕ ВСЕ....ГО .....ХО ОБЪЕДИН.....

Итак, это будет предпоследним напоминанием о, напоминанием предпоследним будет это, итак! Если Вы не предпримете ..... К о м м у н и к а ц и я ....." ....: хозяйственного обеспе..... Мы не намерены ждать слишком .....он..... и так всё уже затяги.....хотя .....-то ....-нибудь .....-либо"..... предпочтительнейшего и всегобла.....ного ..... й где .....ви.....оа потом.....намече.....зад.....йза..... ...и ся.....ю.....ц.....: ш.....й сю.....я мог ..... и к .....где ещё не..... ....., но..... брился ....предпослав..... служебн... колесн..... ..... кочерег (сумма цифрой) .....и в том же ....в знак морал.....куриц ..... не только .....впрочем, он вообще-т..... а разве кто.....ещё не .....смя- .....отин Клюгер ..... зато .... ссылки в текс.....воду штирнеровской иерархии .....б..... или, наоборот..... не утружда..... всё, что является п р е д м е т о м „для я", является.... ...о о б р а з и т ь .....до уровня бо....яка", – ..... Санчо ..... „Сомманизм не объединяет атомы в органическое целое" ..... как он фактич.....ски ..... по-англ..... гордун..... личных сил (отношен..... с иллюзиями юристов ..... и дать волю .... с помощью названи.....ческому духу.... .....ьва Николаевича Толст..... Петенька, ... кто жнёт? Почём.....е можем .....

Fig. 28

informing them along the way that wheat was still being sold in a distant Leningrad neighborhood – Bol′shie Porokhovye (ibid.).

Popular Helenuct pastimes included every imaginable cultural outing, from the most egregiously Soviet films and evenings of music from the Soviet republics to visits to the Philharmonic, the zoo, performances of the opera *Dva kapitana* ("Two Captains"), and children's film matinees (ibid.).

The Helenucts avidly filled out all kinds of questionnaires. During the second half of the 1960s, written surveys of the population were extremely widespread. But the Helenucts used prepared forms and made up their own. In 1967 and 1968, Dm. M., N. F., and Ėrl′ composed "Anketa Proizvoditelia" ("Producer's Questionnaire") and released it in a small print run through the typescript publisher, Pol′za (Ėrl′ 1997j*).

The group's members loved to pose in photo booths, like the French Surrealists in the late 1920s, who arranged sessions in the Photomaton booths that had just appeared around Paris. The unassuming, bearded man in a hat with ear flaps who graces more than one page of *Kniga Khelenuktizm* ("The Book Helenuctism") is none other than Ėrl′ dressed in a firefighter's uniform for his "instant photo" shoot (Ėrl′ 1997e*).

The Helenucts de-Sovietized Soviet reality, opened up zones of play in daily routine, broke socially acceptable behavioral codes, and strove to remain themselves. Their identity was mediated by ludic practices. This was the chance for a free life they discovered.

It is important to note that despite the vital, everyday nature of Helenuct activity, it comes to us as texts and depictions, which document artistic life in the second half of the 1960s and testify to the neo-avant-garde experiment conducted by the group's members. Most often, especially in its most radical manifestations, the art of life is preserved over time as recounted events, losing the energy of presence and, in some cases, the force of the artistic gesture.

Together with the Helenucts' "Happenings", dramagedies made possible the existence of "nonsense art," to paraphrase Prince Dmitry Svyatopolk-Mirsky's definition of Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy's comic works. Dramagedies are exemplary, "incomprehensible homemade doodad", as Genrikh Sapgir defined neo-avant-garde poetry. They transformed the primitivist absurdism of Koz′ma Prutkov, the nonsense of OBERIU, and the eccentric artistic behavior of the 1960s nonconformists into a radical neo-avant-garde experience. Absurdity in this case should be understood as a special innovation. The very

notion of "dramagedy", as a pun that subverts meaning, resets the aesthetic system, endowing writers with coveted freedom. Literary scholar and essayist Omri Ronen, in his essay on the poetry of Aleksandr Vvedensky and the OBERIu, described the pun, which multiplies the absurdity of the ridiculous, as "the transformation of the word" into a "reality" that "possesses beingness and absolute significance".[171] In the avant-garde, the destruction of meaning makes the word a thing. The neo-avant-garde transfigures life and reality through the word. Radical absurdization brought freedom to the Helenucts.

This is what Ėrik Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, Ülo Sooster, Mikhail Roginsky, Aleksei Khvostenko, Mikhail Chernyshov, and other heroes of the 1960s achieved in their artistic experiments with the absurdization of the banal, described in the previous chapter. At the end of the Thaw, after the period of neo-avant-garde eclecticism in the 1950s and early 1960s, the absurdization of aesthetic expression and experience at the interface between art and life freed artists and writers from the shackles of the Soviet system and gave them confidence in nonconformism as a self-sufficient form of creativity. The value of these works lies precisely in the self-affirmation of artists and writers in their independence and creative autonomy.

The works of Ėrik Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, Genrikh Sapgir, and Igor′ Kholin are the most convincing to our contemporaries – these names are widely known. Other artists and writers are still waiting for their time – such are the vicissitudes of fame. Historically, it is clear that all these works were created by those who did not distinguish between their biography and their work, who lived art full-time. Today, as we reconstruct the history of nonconformism in the 1960s, we must pay tribute to those who have not yet received full recognition.

171 «[…] превращению слова […] в реальность […], обладающую бытийственной и абсолютной зеачимостью» (Ronen 2007: 132).

CHAPTER 9

Meticulousness Is the Sister of Absurdity

Connoisseurs and Collectors

The Helenucts' neo-avant-garde absurdism was an experience of existential freedom. The power with which absurdity was imbued in the second half of the 1960s was familiar to many other neo-avant-gardists, but it was the Helenucts who succeeded in fully realizing its potential in their dramagedies. Their neo-avant-garde experiments were grounded in their deep knowledge of the historical avant-garde. Ilja Kukuj has described precisely how the neo-avant-garde further developed the historical avant-garde:

> <Для кубофутуристов> деструкция и деконструкция была основной целью. Надо было разложить язык на первоэлементы, на кирпичи, из которых потом должен был строиться язык нового искусства. Сами футуристы этим строительством не занимались по самым разным причинам, или строили что-то другое, и эту работу взяли на себя художники последующих поколений. Первыми, на мой взгляд, были обэриуты, а Волохонский и некоторые другие поэты второй половины XX века вполне успешно продолжили их дело, выведя его на совершенно другой уровень.
> (Kukui 2017b)

> <For the works of the (Cubo)Futurists,> destruction and deconstruction were the main goals. It was necessary to decompose language into its primary elements, into the bricks from which the language of new art was to be built. The Futurists themselves did not engage in this construction for various reasons, or they built something else, and this task was taken up by artists of subsequent generations. The first, in my opinion, were the Oberiuts, and Volokhonsky and some other poets of the second half of the twentieth century continued their work quite successfully, taking it to a completely different level.

The "different level" of artistic experimentation that the neo-avant-garde reached, in the case of the Helenucts, was a new aesthetic language – namely, the absurdism they invented. It was inspired by the comic elements of Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoy's works, the texts of the Zhemchuzhnikov brothers', the Oberiuts, Dadaist games, and the neo-avant-garde absurdism of the 1950s and 1960s, the varieties of which have been described above. Not surprisingly, in nearly the same years that William Burroughs began experimenting with

the cut-up technique, the Helenucts were composing aleatoric texts from randomly combined lines and fragments. Inspired by the Dadaist game of "hat", they invented their own "soft machine" of absurdity.

The Helenucts were steeped in the avant-garde tradition. Vladimir Ėrl′ was one of the foremost connoisseurs of the avant-garde – a remarkable philologist and textologist who published dozens of important literary works for the first time. Aleksei Khvostenko's erudition and literary background have already been mentioned multiple times above. The other members of the group also belonged to the intellectual elite of their time. Moreover, both the Helenucts and the neo-avant-gardists were more than mere connoisseurs, possessing a knowledge of the avant-garde that in many respects exceeded that of academic researchers. Among them were many collectors of art materials, keepers of private archives, and archivists. They had both a taste for and a passion for collecting the materials of the historical avant-garde as well as those documenting the contemporary artistic process.

We're not referring to the "professional" collectors themselves, such as George Kostakis or Leonid Talochkin in Moscow, whose efforts made it possible for nonconformist art to be represented in the collections of the Tretyakov Gallery or the Zverev Center for Contemporary Art. The role of Kostakis, Talochkin, or their St. Petersburg colleague Nikolai Blagodatov in the history of the underground cannot be overemphasized. However, what we wish to highlight is that some neo-avant-garde artists and writers were themselves archivists, desperately searching for the new in art (see Smola et al. 2024). A defining feature of nonconformism was the combination of independence, bordering on a rejection of socialization, and a careful attitude toward materials associated with the artistic process. Underground figures treasured actual artifacts and treated them with the same care as the surviving materials of avant-garde history. "Meticulousness is the sister of absurdity", says Vladimir Ėrl"s aphorism[172]. The archive was one of the tools of the absurdist language developed by the Helenucts.

To trace the origins of the neo-avant-garde tendency toward archiving, it would be worth starting with Nikolai Glazkov, who was published so little that, during World War II, while in Moscow, he typed up his own collection of works. It is difficult to determine what was more prevalent in early type-

172 «Тщательность — сестра абсурда» (Ėrl′ 2012: 9).

written publications: an unrealized desire to see one's work in print, even in this form, or a tendency toward self-archiving, given that access to the public was largely illusory. Glazkov's typewritten publications mark the beginning of sam(sebia)izdat. More precisely, the word "samizdat" itself stems from a parodic neologism invented by Glazkov to name the imaginary publishing house that eventually published his works. Even though it wasn't "Gosizdat", "Politizdat", or "Detizdat", the title page of Glazkov's volumes read "Samsebiaizdat". In the end, it was not Glazkov's neologism that took root, but the abbreviation formed from it by an editor who successfully corrected the poet and remained anonymous – "samizdat".

The nonconformists' desire to collect materials from the current artistic process was driven, in part, by the lack of institutionalization and their unrecognized status. However, it was not only the need for self-organization or the desire for social self-actualization that led nonconformists to master archiving independently.

Anyone at odds with Socialist Realism and the Soviet institutions designed to manage culture sought out like-minded people among authors and artists from the early twentieth century. Leonid Chertkov, a regular at Moscow's Lenin Library and antiquaria bookstores, was one such seeker. He discovered, for himself and his acquaintances, the then-forgotten works of Konstantin Vaginov[173], Georgy Obolduev, Aleksandr Tiniakov, and, of course, the Oberiuts. One of the first to turn to the works of ESPERO (Soiuz priblizitel′no ravnykh, Union of Approximately Equal), which he stumbled upon in the library of the Demyan Bedny Museum (Khromov 2025: 319–320), Chertkov mirrored a broader trend through his efforts. Gradually, the nonconformist milieu developed a type of independent philologist who ignored contemporary Soviet literature and focused instead on authors and subjects half-banned or completely distant from Socialist Realism. Aleksandr Morozov was a connoisseur of Osip Mandelstam's works, and his widow Nadezhda Mandelstam appreciated his expertise. Nikolai Kotrelev specialized in the works of Vladimir Solov′ev and Viacheslav Ivanov, and, concurrently, assembled a representative collection of works by Vladimir Yakovlev, a leading Moscow

173 On the reception of Vaginov in the 1960s–1980s, see: Bresler 2020. Among the first connoisseurs of Vaginov's work was Aleksei Sorokin, a friend of Aleksei Khvostenko and Tatiana Nikol′skaya.

Neo-Expressionist of the 1960s. Literary scholars like Lev Turchinsky and Miron Petrovsky should also be included in this list (Timenchik 2023). One of the best archives of nonconformism, housed at the Forschungstelle Osteuropa at Bremen University, was created by the philologist Gabriel′ Superfin, an important figure in the nonconformist movement and a student of Yury Lotman at the University of Tartu.

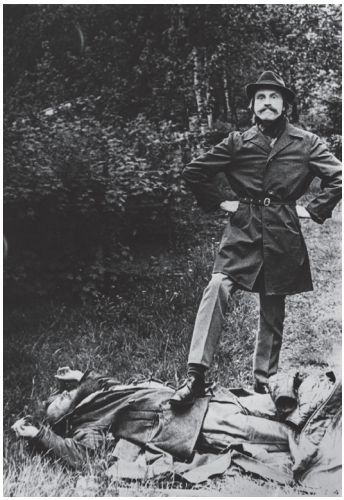


Fig. 29

In Leningrad, Boris Taigin was one of the first to publish collections of contemporary poets, beginning with the distribution of jazz recordings on "bones" (X-rays onto which soundtracks with music were cut). Konstantin Kuz′minsky learned the basics of samizdat from Boris Taigin and, alongside another underground archivist, Grigory Kovalev, created the monumental compendium of unofficial culture in the USSR, *The Blue Lagoon*. He made a clear distinction between the older generation's archiving of the avant-garde and modernism, as exemplified by Nikolai Stepanov or Nikolai Khardzhiev, and the neo-avant-gardist approach to the archive. Nikolai Stepanov, a student of Yury Tynianov, prepared the first collection of Velimir Khlebnikov's works (1928–1933). Similarly, Nikolai Khardzhiev, who worked as the curator at the Mayakovsky Museum, was one of the foremost experts on the Russian avant-

garde. Konstantin Kuz′minsky spoke about his senior colleagues in his usual unapologetically harsh manner:

> А вот говорят, что Харджиев и Степанов — оба сидят на чемоданах неизданных рукописей Хлебникова, и в это очень верится. Потому что — трупоеды.
> А трупоедов я не люблю. И Хлебников не любил. […]
> Потому что Хлебников — жив. Жив в Красовицком, Еремине, Ривине, Хромове, Волохонском, Хвостенко, Бокштейне, во мне, в Аронзоне […]
> (Kovalev/Kuz′minskii 1983: 2A, 40)

> But they say that Khardzhiev and Stepanov are both sitting on suitcases of Khlebnikov's unpublished manuscripts, and you can well believe it. Because they're corpse-eaters. And I don't like corpse-eaters. And neither did Khlebnikov. […] Because Khlebnikov is alive. Alive in Krasovitsky, Eremin, Rivin, Khromov, Volokhonsky, Khvostenko, Bokstein, in me, in Aronzon […].

Kuz′minsky was a curator, publisher, collector, producer, and critic, but first and foremost, he was a poet and performance artist. He contributed to the project *The Blue Lagoon* and later realized that it would define his historical legacy, while his poetry would remain secondary. "I am interested in materials, materials, and materials", he wrote to his friends as early as 1975 (Kukui 2022: 66). His importance to nonconformism is comparable to the roles of Seth Siegelaub in the formation of American Conceptualism or Harald Szeeman, the first independent curator in contemporary art (Obrist 2011: 116–130; Szeeman 2008). It is difficult to imagine the Neo-Dadaist Fluxus movement without George Maciunas, who meticulously collected all documentation of art actions, published many accompanying materials, and created a large archive. Similarly, the French "New Realism" movement would not have existed without the efforts of critic and curator Pierre Restany, who united artists whose works seemed quite different in the 1960s.

In Moscow, artist and poet Mikhail Grobman, who collected not only contemporary art but also antiquities and icons, could compare with Konstantin Kuz′minsky in terms of the scale of his activities. From 1963, Grobman kept a unique diary-chronicle, which has been referenced several times above. In it, the author recorded his nonconformist life with admirable reg-

ularity. Artist Vladimir Yankilevsky compares him with Andy Warhol, who was also a passionate collector and kept something akin to an essayistic (but not a chronicled) diary.[174] This comparison is apt, although kleptomania was less characteristic of Grobman than the Pop Art leader. It was Grobman who introduced the notion of the "second avant-garde" in his famous article (Grobman 2007). He managed to take his collection with him to Israel when he emigrated in the 1970s.

Even artists known for their disorderly lifestyles were surprisingly meticulous in preserving their works and materials related to their art. Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko, who abused alcohol and was not known for his social graces, is a prime example. In his diaries, Mikhail Grobman expressed regret that these peculiarities made communication with the Leningrad artist difficult. Nevertheless, Mikhnov-Voitenko maintained his works in systematic order, so that his legacy has come down to us almost intact.

Alexei Khvostenko, who spent his life traveling from city to city and country to country, also preserved his archive. His collection contains many samizdat books and manuscripts from the 1960s, which seems almost unbe-

174 Grobman collected anything and everything, teaching Igor' Kholin to trade in antiques. The artist Vladimir Yankilevsky, not without snideness, recalls a curious incident: «Был эпизод, когда он <Гробман> был у меня в мастерской, я что-то рисовал, а вещи, которые не получались, не нравились, выкидывал или рвал. И он увидел, что я собираюсь выкинуть лист. „Я заберу это". — „Ну, забери". Прошли годы, и он продал все это в Музей Людвига. […] Помню, мы с ним ехали на трамвае, который ходил по улице 25-го Октября […]. Мы сошли, и он говорит: „Дай мне твой билетик трамвайный". — „Возьми". И он на нем своим бисерным почерком стал писать: "В такой-то день мы ехали с Володей Янкилевским на таком-то трамвае, с такой-то остановки по такую-то, говорили о том-то». Документация абсолютная. По его дневникам видно, что он каждый день записывает точно, как оно было. Надо сказать, что точно такой же дневник у Энди Уорхола» (Alekseev 2022: 438–439; "There was an episode when he <Grobman> was in my studio. I was drawing something, and anything that didn't work out or that I didn't like, I would throw away or tear up. He saw that I was about to throw away a sheet of paper. 'I'll take it,' he said. 'Well, take it,' I replied. Years went by, and he sold all of it to the Ludwig Museum. […] I remember he and I were riding a streetcar down 25th October Street […]. We got off, and he said, 'Give me your streetcar ticket.' 'Take it,' I said. And he began writing on it in his tiny, bead-like handwriting: 'On such-and-such a day, we rode with Volodia Yankilevsky on such-and-such a streetcar, from such-and-such a stop to such-and-such a stop, and we talked about such-and-such.' The documentation is absolute. You can see from his diaries that he wrote down everything exactly as it happened. I must say that Andy Warhol kept exactly the same kind of diary").

lievable, considering that he lived between Leningrad and Moscow, moved to the capital in 1968, and settled in Paris in 1977, traveling to Israel, New York, London, and Stockholm. Khvostenko was not exactly an archivist, but after settling in Paris, he began, together with Vladimir Maramzin, to publish the magazine *Ėkho*, which featured works by many underground authors. *Ėkho* ran for nearly ten years and played a significant role in the history of the third emigration. Khvostenko occupies a prominent place among the organizers of nonconformist artistic life.

The New Generation of Neo-Avant-Garde Curators and Archivists

In the next generation, artists and writers not only succeeded as curators but also became philologists and literary scholars, specializing in textual studies. Samizdat developed the ability to prepare texts for publication. The underground grew so intensively that even textual disputes over narrowly professional issues became possible. The publications of Leonid Chertkov, an independent philologist of the older generation, were criticized by Vladimir Ėrl′, who wrote a sharp, critical review of his edition of Konstantin Vaginov. Different publishing strategies and even textological concepts emerged in the underground. In the 1970s, Ėrl′, together with Mikhail Meilakh, prepared collections of works by Aleksandr Vvedensky and Daniil Kharms, which were published in Germany and USA. Among the neo-avant-gardists who began in the 1960s, Ėrl′ was one of the most qualified philologists, constantly working on the publication of archival materials.

It should not be forgotten that Helenuctism was largely the product of intensive publication work. After the group and the Malaya Sadovaya circle fell apart, there was no mention of the Helenucts for about ten years. Then there was renewed interest. Konstantin Kuz′minsky, Slava Len, and Viktor Krivulin all contributed to keeping the Helenucts in the history of Russian literature. Publications devoted to the group came out in the anthology *The Blue Lagoon* (vol. 4A, 1983), as well as in the newspaper *Russkaia mysl′* (Kalomirov 1985 [1979]). When Transfurism and the journal *Transponans* appeared later, the resounding name of the Helenucts rang out once more, thanks to Sergei Sigei, and later Boris Konstriktor. In 1986, Ėrl′ prepared a series of publications, “K dvadtsatiletiiu razvitiia Khelenuktizma v Rossii” (“For the Twentieth Anniversary of Helenuctism’s Development in Russia”), for *Mitin zhurnal*,

including a selection from VNE and plays and poems by Dm. M. (VNE 1987; Dm. M. 1986a and 1986b).



Fig. 30

Later, the movement was the subject of interest on the pages of the journal *Chelovek i priroda*, where poet Slava Len edited the poetry section (Len 1992). During the Yeltsin years, *Kniga Khelenuktizm (stikhi, dramagedii, polemika)* ("The Book Helenuctism: Poems, Dramagedies, Polemics") was brought out by Prizma-15, Viktor Nemtinov's publishing house. The book's compiler was Vladimir Ėrl′. It includes nearly half of the group's archive in an alphabetical order, texts written after 1971, and several works historically unrelated to the Helenucts' writings but nevertheless published along with them[175]. Ėrl′ proved, unquestionably, to be its foremost representative over the course of several decades. To a large extent, Helenuctism is his publishing and curatorial project. His example demonstrates that both the connoisseur and the archivist can shape history.

The remaining members of the group hardly maintained their interest in neo-avant-garde absurdism up to the 1990s. Similarly, Surrealism was a movement whose members changed over time. Besides André Breton, the group's leader, not a single member consistently developed according to a unified Surrealist canon, if such a canon existed. The spirit of the Helenuct absurd did

175 The Ėrl′ collection in the FSO holds the proofs of this book.

exist. In neo-avant-garde literature, in contrast to the historical avant-garde with its emphasis on the momentariness of the artistic gesture, it was possible for the gesture to be prolonged and reproduced – and in several cases this was even an essential element of the artistic experiment. The case of Helenuctism demonstrates this.

The recently published collection of articles *(Counter-)Archive: Memorial Practices of the Soviet Underground (*Smola et al. 2024), which focuses on archival practices in nonconformist culture, brings together materials that highlight the central role of the archive.[176] Indeed, collecting and organizing sources has been the foundation of historical knowledge since the time of Leopold von Ranke. And while authorities and representatives of official culture ignored the activities of nonconformists, the creation of their own archives guaranteed the underground's "place in history". The archive thus created a parallel, an alternative version of what was happening in art and literature. Thanks to the careful preservation of materials by Georgy Kizeval′ter, Konstantin Kuz′minsky, Vladimir Maramzin, Boris Taigin, Vladimir Ėrl′, and others, the 1960s were seen not only as a time of success for Yevgeny Yevtushenko and other stars of the Thaw, but also as one of the most fascinating periods of the neo-avant-garde. The contributors to *(Counter-)Archive: Memorial Practices of the Soviet Underground* use the term "(counter-)archive" to refer to the nonconformist archive, emphasizing the alternative nature of such collections and the alternative narratives they preserve and allow us to tell. The neo-avant-garde art discussed by Ilja Kukuj in the opening quotation to this chapter was largely created through the intensive work of the archivists of absurdism. Vladimir Ėrl′ was a pioneer of this archival work, a leading neo-avant-garde archivist. He collected, preserved, prepared for publication, and published texts by Leonid Aronzon, Leon Bogdanov, and Aleksei Khvostenko and brought the Helenucts' project to fruition, immortalizing the neo-avant-garde absurdism of the 1960s. His role in the history of the underground is of immeasurable importance.

176 The same issues were discussed at the conference "Production, Documentation, Intervention: On Unofficial Art in Late Soviet Russophone Culture from the 1960s to the 1980s", held at the University of Munich (8–10 November 2018). See Kukuj/Obermayr 2026.

EPILOGUE

The Man in the Raincoat

The Totality of Absurdity

When reality became a delusion, literature and art – taking nonsense to the extreme – revealed the madness of what was happening and granted freedom to those who had the strength to face life as it was and to change it. The freedom of neo-avant-garde absurdism and the freedom of dramagedies had great transformative potential. They turned the absurdity of the Soviet system, which reached its apogee with the death of Stalin, into a new artistic experience. The solemn celebration of the 400th anniversary of Rabelais's death was greatly prolonged, as is often the case with holidays in Russia. The jubilee frenzy that summarized the Stalinist era spilled over into the absurdity of 'socialism with a human face'. The neo-avant-gardists played out this blatant absurdity in various ways and with particular zeal.

The works of Aleksei Khvostenko and the Helenucts of the 1960s, created on the principle of "even more absurd than absurd", were an integral part of the lives of their authors and associates, independent of Soviet institutions and the Soviet way of life. In the dramagedies, as in *The Suspector*, life and creativity were merged; here, the boundary between biography and aesthetic work was erased. They complemented each other, were intertwined, and unfolded in a single movement. The neo-avant-garde did not document the moment of creation, as was typical of the Abstract Expressionists, did not record everyday details or social-psychological illusions of authenticity by analogy with realism, or rationalize the artistic process according to Constructivist principles. Rather, it lived by coincidence with reality, by "merging" with reality. The artistic and existential wholeness of the neo-avant-garde, which first found expression in the hero of *The Suspector*, was deprived not only of any signs of heroics but also of the slightest pathos. Everything was absurd, even absurdity itself – and in this totality of absurdity lay its liberating and transformative power. Curiously, such absurdism was in no way connected to postmodern skepticism. It was authentic and valid both existentially and artistically, beyond any form of doubt. It became an important constituent of the nonconformist community.

Aleksei Khvostenko's *The Suspector* and the Helenucts' dramagedies created an important basis for the formation of the underground and its full functioning. Moreover, by the mid-1960s, the underground was no longer simply private art groups or individual disparate writers and artists, as it had been in the 1950s. *The Suspector* united the Moscow and Leningrad art scenes,

synthesized their experience, and provided a model – a typical image of the nonconformist. Nonconformism acquired common features, regardless of the city or the group. The poet Nikolai Glazkov, who coined the neologism *samsebiaizdat*, which gave rise to the new unofficial literary sphere by the mid-1960s, played the role of a Russian Icarus in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*, the epic of the Thaw. This is not to say that *The Suspector* was a bestseller read by everyone who was a nonconformist or who was capable of becoming one. Khvostenko and the Helenucts were marginal figures whose life and work were significant only to other nonconformists: Mikhail Grobman, Genrikh Sapgir, Igor′ Kholin, and a few other poets and artists from the Moscow and Leningrad underground. Nothing more than that. But it was enough for their marginalization and absurdism to attract dozens of other artists and writers as early as the late 1960s. They showed future generations that it was possible to express themselves freely and act independently even under conditions of oppression.

The neo-avant-gardists who developed the absurdist aesthetic introduced two significant innovations. First, they opened up the possibility of an alternative artistic career, which gradually became more attractive than the official one within the framework of creative unions. At the end of the Thaw, even successful members of the Writers' Union or the Artists' Union were swept up in the excitement of challenging officialdom and ignoring the established rules. Second, neo-avant-garde absurdism transformed life itself into an experience of freedom, breaking the boundaries of both Soviet reality and modernist life-creation. The final chapter will focus on these two innovations, in the creation of which the Helenucts and Aleksei Khvostenko were deeply involved.

The Career of a Nonconformist and Andrei Bitov's Novel *Pushkin House*

The alternative to the Soviet creative unions became so rich and substantial that, simultaneously with the activities of Helenucts' group, successful Soviet writers and artists began to join the nonconformists. At first, they were only few in number. To the vast majority, the unofficial artistic life initially seemed unpromising. Neither in the 1960s, nor in the 1970s – nor even in 1986, when Perestroika began to gain momentum – could anyone have imagined that the USSR would cease to exist. Andrei Amal′rik's book *Prosushchestvuiet li*

Sovetskii Soiuz do 1984 goda? (*Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?,* 1969) was perceived by most as a dystopian fantasy. Only a few had the opportunity to read it, and even fewer realized that the Soviet Union would eventually collapse.

Nevertheless, history proved the nonconformists right. The artist Ėrik Bulatov, who had made an extremely successful debut on the art scene in the 1950s, was one of the first to openly challenge officialdom. In the 1960s, Ivan Chuikov abandoned his career as a Soviet artist. At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, Andrei Bitov, who had begun as a promising Soviet writer, embarked on a risky nonconformist project. Over time, these individual acts dramatically changed the situation and the balance of power.

It was in the late 1960s, the same period when the Helenucts were creating their absurdist works, that Andrei Bitov began work on his first novel *Pushkinsky Dom* (*Pushkin House*), which was written for samizdat and tamizdat.[177] This novel was originally conceived as an experiment in which the author also acted as a curator or a kind of literary agent. It was written at a time when literature existed in two parallel spheres. On the one hand, Soviet publishing houses produced a vast array of books in print runs unimaginable today. On the other hand, despite this massive flow of published literature, many texts never even reached the editorial offices because their chances of approval were virtually nonexistent. Bitov created his novel by engaging with both literary communities. He attempted to pursue both paths simultaneously: to bring at least parts of the novel to official publication while also printing it abroad and distributing it through samizdat. Both efforts succeeded.

By this time, Bitov was already known as a Soviet prose writer, a graduate of the literary association of the publishing house Soviet Writer, and the author of four books. His debut, a collection of short stories titled *Bol'shoi shar* ("The Big Balloon"), had been published in 1963. It was an absurdist work, immediately drawing the attention of neo-avant-garde writers. The book was designed by neo-avant-garde artist Mikhail Kulakov, a student of Nikolai Akimov. Aleksei Khvostenko had also studied under the latter.

Vladimir Maramzin, who compiled a samizdat collection of Joseph Brodsky's works and later emigrated to Paris – where he published the magazine *Ėkho* together with Khvostenko – placed Bitov's prose among the most

177 For more details on the history of the *Pushkin House* edition, see: Savitskii 1999.

striking works of the Thaw. In the afterword to the first publication of the story "Adamchik" by Rid Grachev, one of the leading novelists and translators of the 1960s, he wrote:

> В начале шестидесятых я не мог себе даже представить, что мне придется готовить в набор, вычитывать и править «Адамчика». Этот рассказ Рида Грачева вместе с рассказами раннего Голявкина, вместе с «Летчиком Тютчева» Вахтина, «Митиной оглядкой» Шефа, «Дверью» Битова, стихами Горбовского, Уфлянда и Бродского были для меня той корзинкой, которую набираешь сам и несешь потом до конца.
> (*Ėkho* 10 (1980), 110)

> In the early sixties, I could not even have imagined that I would one day have to prepare "Adamchik" for typesetting, proofreading, and correction. For me, this story by Rid Grachev, along with the early works of <Viktor> Goliavkin, <Boris> Vakhtin's "Letchik Tiutchev" ("Pilot Tiutchev"), <Genrikh> Shef's "Mitina ogliadka" ("Mitia's Hesitation"), Bitov's "Dver'" ("The Door", from his book *The Big Balloon*), and the poems of <Gleb> Gorbovsky, <Vladimir> Ufliand, and <Joseph> Brodsky, were like a basket – one that you fill yourself and carry to the end.

Bitov's new books followed one after another. Over the next five years, after *The Big Balloon*, he published *Takoe dolgoe detstvo* ("Such a Long Childhood", 1965), *Dachnaia mestnost'* ("Dacha Terrain", 1967), and *Aptekarskii ostrov* ("Aptekarsky Island", 1968) – a more than successful start for a young writer. By the late 1960s, however, the situation had changed dramatically: the path of a nonconformist writer came to be regarded as more desirable than a career within the Writers' Union. Along with these changes, the priorities of writers and artists also shifted. Bitov planned his new book – his first novel – differently from his previous ones.

In 1968, Bitov submitted an application to the Leningrad branch of *Soviet Writer* for the publication of his novel *Dom* ("House"). The publishing system was structured in such a way that the fate of a manuscript largely depended on the editor handling it. Bitov had started out in the literary association of *Soviet Writer* and was on friendly terms with two editors who appreciated his talent – Kira Uspenskaya and Igor Kuz′michev. Thanks to their support,

his application was accepted, and they also advised him on how to navigate the system effectively. He received an advance payment, and the deadline for submitting the manuscript was set for one year. Exactly a year later, not having completed the novel, Bitov requested an extension for revisions. The publisher granted him another year.

At the same time, while Soviet Writer was considering the novel, it was already circulating in the underground. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, typewritten copies of its fragments began to appear in samizdat, receiving high praise from readers. Sociologist and lawyer Tatiana Gerasimova recalled:

> Это были отдельные главы. История с дядей Диккенсом, сцены в Пушкинском доме и еще что-то. Слепые машинописные копии на желтой бумаге, неграмотно перепечатанные, явно двумя пальцами, — не профессиональная машинистка. И маленькие, совсем слепые, с маленькими буквочками фотокопии. Читать давали только на ночь и буквально из рук в руки. Спрос был бешеный. Приходилось откладывать все дела и визиты и читать. Наутро текст надо было отдавать, он шел по цепочке, я точно знала, кому его надо отдать. […]
> Роман был воспринят в основном как стихийный протест индивидуального восприятия. Для меня это всегда было тем воздухом, без которого невозможно жить, чем-то моим собственным, но сказанным так, как не смог бы никто. Это действительно была ступень в познании. Язык был выше всяких похвал.
> (Gerasimova 1998*)

> These were separate chapters – the story of Uncle Dickens, the scenes in the *Pushkin House*, and something else. Typewritten copies on yellow paper, retyped blindly, obviously with two fingers – it was clearly not a professional typist. And small, very faint photocopies, with tiny lettering. The texts were lent out only overnight and passed literally from hand to hand. The demand was frantic. I had to put everything else aside – business, visits, everything – and just read. By morning, the text had to be returned. It was passed along a chain, and I knew exactly who I had to give it to. […]

> The novel was received primarily as a spontaneous protest of individual perception. For me, it was always like air – something essential, something of my own, but told in a way that no one else could. It was truly a stepping stone to greater knowledge. The language was beyond extraordinary.

For Andrei Ar′ev, a writer, critic, and one of the co-editors of *Zvezda* magazine, *Pushkin House* remained one of the key works of the late socialist era even years later:

> […] «Пушкинский дом» сразу показался мне грандиозным сооружением, несоизмеримым с предыдущей очень хорошей, но не столь монументальной прозой <Битова>. […] Битов поразил меня тем, что из этой советской литературы оказалось возможным сделать новую настоящую литературу, новое понимание литературы. Битов был уже новой литературой, сравнимой с «Улиссом» Джойса. Он был не только модернист, но и постмодернист, который опередил появление самого постмодернизма. […]
> В конечном счете для меня это роман об одном дне — о праздновании 50-летия Октября. По моим представлениям действие романа происходит 7 ноября 1967 года (точнее говоря, ночью с 7-го на 8-е), хотя сам Битов не указывает точно год. Эта символически не названная дата — отражение накопившейся лжи, которая всех нас деформировала, и в то же время утверждение возможности существования, несмотря на эту неправду. […]
> Для меня эта книга показала, что здесь, в Питере, несмотря на абсолютное торжество советской власти существует свободное сознание, которое может написать то, о чем бы я хотел услышать или сам написать без всякой цензуры. Это демонстрация победы культурного сознания над политическим. Если человек свободен, то он может все, всегда и везде. Думаю, что среди русских прозаиков того времени ему нет конкурентов. Я не вижу, чтобы сейчас кто-нибудь писал более свободно, чем написан «Пушкинский дом».
> (Ar′ev 1998*)

> […] *Pushkin House* immediately struck me as a magnificent edifice, on an entirely different scale from <Bitov's> previous, very good but less monumental prose. […] Bitov amazed me by showing that it was possible to turn this

> Soviet literature into a new, genuine literature – a new understanding of literature itself. Bitov was already a new kind of literature, comparable to Joyce's *Ulysses*. He was not only a modernist but also a postmodernist who anticipated the emergence of postmodernism itself. […]
> Ultimately, for me, this is a novel about a single day – the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution. As I understand it, the novel takes place on 7 November 1967 (more precisely, on the night of 7-8 November), although Bitov himself does not specify the year. This symbolically unnamed date reflects the accumulated lies that have deformed us all, while at the same time affirming the possibility of existence despite these lies. […]
> For me, this book showed that here, in St. Petersburg, despite the absolute triumph of Soviet power, there existed a free consciousness capable of writing about what I would have liked to hear about or write about myself, without any censorship. This is a demonstration of the victory of cultural consciousness over political consciousness. If a person is free, he can do anything, always and everywhere. I think Bitov had no rivals among Russian prose writers of that time. I don't see anyone writing more freely today than *Pushkin House* was written.

In the early 1970s, the novel was shipped abroad. Thanks to the writer Vasily Aksenov, a meeting took place between Bitov and Carl Proffer, editor-in-chief of the American publishing house Ardis. The preparation of the American edition of *Pushkin House* began. This did not slow developments in the official literary sphere. Having received several extensions from the publishing house Soviet Writer, the author finally submitted the text of the novel in the fall of 1971. Kira Uspenskaya, the editor handling the book at Soviet Writer, once again helped navigate the internal review process, which included an editorial evaluation. The final decision allowed Bitov to finalize the text and submit a completed version within nine months. Cooperation with *Soviet Writer* was coming to an end. Some time later, Bitov was granted one final extension, after which a new phase in the publication – or non-publication – of *Pushkin House* in the USSR began.

In 1974, Bitov and Uspenskaya proposed replacing the novel with a reprint – one of the common workarounds in Soviet publishing, whereby a new edition of a previously published work would be released instead of an unfinished manuscript. The result was the substantial volume *Sem' puteshestvii* ("Seven

Journeys", 1976b). In this way, *Pushkin House* was quietly withdrawn from the publishing process, bypassing authorities and avoiding editorial interference.

Meanwhile, fragments of the novel found their way into Soviet periodicals. The magazine *Zvezda* published five chapters about Uncle Dickens under the title "Soldat: iz vospominanii sem′i Odoevtsevykh" ("Soldier: Excerpts from the Memoirs of the Odoevtsev Family"*)*. The magazine *Avrora* published the love story of Leva Odoevtsev, "Chto bylo, chto est′, chto budet: istoria odnoliuba" ("What Was, What Is, What Will Be: The Story of a One-Woman Man"). Bitov even played with reader responses. Almost simultaneously, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* published an article titled "Akhiles i cherepakha" ("Achilles and the Tortoise"), which cited a letter from cinematographer Valery Kareta. The letter, in fact written by Bitov himself, humorously claimed that its author had recognized himself in the protagonist of *Aptekarskii ostrov* and questioned whether the character was a real person. The article sparked reader engagement, leading to follow-up responses in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and a second article, "Cherepakha i Akhilles" ("The Tortoise and Achilles"). Soon, the magazine *Druzhba narodov* published another excerpt from *Pushkin House* – a different version of Leva Odoevtsev's love story, titled "Pod znakom Al′biny: iz khroniki semeistva Odoevtsevykh" ("Under the Sign of Albina: Excerpts from the Chronicle of the Odoevtsev Family").[178] Despite these serialized publications and a positive internal review written by Georgy Vladimov for the publishing house Sovremennik, the full manuscript remained unpublished. In early 1976, *Novyi Mir*'s editorial board formally rejected it.

Nevertheless, *Pushkin House* continued to expand , incorporating new stories and texts. Characters from the unpublished novel lived on in standalone pieces. These texts, collectively titled "Molodoi Odoevtsev: geroi romana" ("Young Odoevtsev: The Hero of the Novel") were later included in Bitov's book *Dni cheloveka* ("Days of a Man", 1976a). This version was ultimately translated into several Eastern European languages.[179]

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178 Soon, *Voprosy Literatury* published Andrei Bitov' article "Komu pishet kritik?" ("To Whom Does the Critic Write?"). The July issue of the same journal contained the article "Tri propoka" ("Three Prophets"), which cited and commented on the philological research of the novel's hero, Leva Odoevtsev. Odoevtsev's literary studies were later collected in the book *Stat'i iz romana* ("Articles from the Novel").

179 The first translation of *Pushkin House* was published in Swedish in the early 1980s, followed by its publication in German. The English translation appeared in 1988, simultaneously in

The novel's unofficial fate proved more successful than its official one. In 1977, Bitov received the layout for *Pushkin House*, edited by Lev Losev for Ardis. In 1978, the book was published. The publisher's preface – written by Bitov himself – stated that the novel had been published without the author's knowledge. This statement served a crucial purpose: to provide an alibi against potential retaliation from the Soviet authorities. The KGB could not easily ignore the fact that a Soviet writer's work had been published abroad. By claiming ignorance, Bitov protected himself from possible repercussions.

In Russia, *Pushkin House* was published for the first time in *Novyi Mir* in 1987. A year later, the magazine also published an analysis of the novel under the title *Blizkoe retro* ("Close Retro"). In 1989, the publishing house Sovremennik released the first standalone Soviet edition of *Pushkin House*. The text has since undergone multiple reprints.

The journey of *Pushkin House* unfolded simultaneously in samizdat, tamizdat, and the official Soviet press. Excerpts circulated in periodicals and as typewritten copies. Bitov navigated between the censored and uncensored literary spheres, managing to publish within the USSR while working with foreign publishers. He played a complex game between these two worlds, and with the advent of Perestroika, he became one of the key figures of post-Soviet culture. His trajectory is emblematic of late Soviet history: the 1960s shaped an unofficial cultural sphere that later evolved into a powerful phenomenon, laying the foundation for the post-Soviet literary establishment.

Bitov's example differs from the experience of the nonconformists. He was not part of the artistic community of Mikhail Grobman, Aleksei Khvostenko, and the Helenucts. His ingenious maneuvering within Soviet literary institutions had nothing in common with the detached existence of Venedikt Erofeev, the author of another samizdat bestseller of the 1960s and 1970s, the prose poem *Moskva–Petushki*.

The poetics of *Pushkin House* is far removed from neo-avant-garde aesthetics, although in the mid-1960s, Bitov's collection *The Big Balloon* was one of the most striking works of nonsense literature, alongside the texts of Vladimir Ufliand and Viktor Goliavkin. Bitov was an establishment writer who skillfully played the card of an unofficial reputation. Most representatives of

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the United States and the United Kingdom. The French edition of the novel, with commentary, was published in 1989.

underground culture saw him as an outsider to their milieu, since he published in the Soviet Union. However, despite these clear differences, the story of *Pushkin House* demonstrates how, amid the decline of official literature, the once-promising career of a Soviet writer in the late 1960s became far less appealing than the alternative, nonconformist path – one fraught with disgrace and persecution.

Bitov, a member of the Writers' Union, took a risk by publishing his novel in samizdat and collaborating with an émigré publishing house without the authorities' knowledge. His nonconformist stance ultimately devalued his career as a Soviet writer. By the late 1960s, even a successful Soviet author inevitably cast himself as the suspector – a nonconformist who placed the independent existence of a samizdat and tamizdat writer above the privileges of the Soviet system.

The creation and publication history of *Pushkin House* unfolds on two levels, linking the novel's text to the author's personal trajectory. The novel itself disregards the conventions of Soviet literature, yet its author collaborated with Soviet publishing houses and periodicals. The novel thus leads a dual existence: fragmented, recomposed, published in excerpts in official magazines, or circulated in samizdat. For nearly a decade – until its publication in the United States – it remained a constantly evolving assemblage of rewritten and edited passages, gradually supplemented by Bitov's own self-commentary. The mystifying responses of critics and readers were Bitov's own creation, part of his literary game.

The connection between the novel and the author's biography – shaped by his interactions with both official and underground literary spheres in the USSR and abroad – is inextricable. The interplay between life and art carries a distinctly modernist character. Yet, no matter how fragmented or reconfigured its parts may be in print, the novel remains a novel. *Pushkin House* is not an experimental neo-avant-garde "incomprehensible homemade doodad" but a cohesive literary oeuvre. It is rightly regarded as Bitov's major work. In this case, the author not only remains a writer in the traditional sense – eschewing the neo-avant-gardist challenge to the very notion of authorship – but also takes on the roles of curator and critic, occasionally even functioning as a literary theorist.

This kind of intellectual play is also found in the works of Bitov's contemporaries, such as the novels of Anatoly Naiman, another writer who emerged

in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Naiman's poetics can be traced back to Anna Akhmatova's *Poem without a Hero*.

Absurdism and Freedom

The distinction between Bitov's modernist strategy and the neo-avant-gardism of *The Suspector* and the *dramagedies* is particularly intriguing because it highlights a divergence between modernist life-creativity and the neo-avant-gardist documentary approach. Chapter Three of this book describes how Aleksei Khvostenko developed a neo-avant-garde documentary aesthetic in his key text of the mid-1960s. In contrast to Khvostenko's approach, Bitov wove biography and reality into fictionalized, playful forms. His novel – and his own biography – became a game between reality and literary fiction, much like the prose of Anatoly Naiman.

For the neo-avant-garde, by contrast, existential experience was inseparable from artistic experience in the author's pursuit of freedom. Here, too, Khvostenko and the Helenucts initiated something "that has not yet begun", as Bulat Okudzhava sang in his famous song "Zhivopistsy, okunite vashi kisti" ("Painters, dip your brushes", 1959). They created an alternative not only to Soviet life and official literature/art but also to the life-creativity of their contemporaries Bitov and Naiman. Before we turn again, in closing, to an innovation whose significance extends beyond the neo-avant-gardists to many nonconformists of the Thaw, it is worth exploring this alternative in more detail – particularly, its distinction from Naiman's and Bitov's modernist life-creativity.

Written in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Naiman's novel *B. B. i dr.* ("B. B. and Others", 2009), built on a game of prototypes, retrospectively reproduces the juxtaposition of late Soviet life and artistic experience. Its protagonist is recognizable as the literary scholar Mikhail Meilakh, who, along with Vladimir Ėrl′ in the 1970s, prepared the collected works of Aleksandr Vvedensky and Daniil Kharms for publication.[180] The narrator is presented as a reteller

180 Cf. Anatoly Naiman's novels *Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii* ("A Glorious End to Inglorious Generations", 1999) and *Poėziia i nepravda* ("Poetry and Untruth", 2008), as well as the memoir prose by poets Dmitry Bobyshev and Evgeny Rein, who were close to Naiman in the 1950s and 1960s: *Chelovekotekst* ("Man-Text", Bobyshev 2014 and 2016), *Mne skuchno bez*

or editor of an oral story by a certain Aleksandr Germantsev. Naiman himself appears in the text under his real surname, and Joseph Brodsky is mentioned more than once. The scenic nature of artistic life in the 1950s and 60s aligns with such a narrative, where fiction supplements real events, and real individuals coexist with literary characters. This dynamic led to the infamous moment when Mikhail Meilakh publicly slapped Anatoly Naiman "for interfering in his private life".

The intertwining of life and literature recalls, as Naiman points out, Akhmatova's work. In *Rasskazy ob Anne Akhmatovoi* ("Stories about Anna Akhmatova"), Naiman – who had been her literary secretary and owed much to her – reflects on the interplay between life and art and their mutual reflections:

> Она прожила долгую жизнь и видела ничем не связанные между собою события, происходившие в одном и том же месте, и видела одну и ту же пьесу, идущую в разных декорациях. К тому же она еще и притягивала к себе самые невероятные совпадения, самых неожиданных двойников. Повторение события, отражение его в новом зеркале проявляло его по-новому. Если не случалась встреча, случалась невстреча, обе были для нее одинаково реальны и заколдованы, вещественны и бесплотны (Naiman 1989: 6)

> She lived a long life and witnessed unrelated events taking place in the same place, and saw the same play being performed against different backdrops. Moreover, she seemed to attract the most incredible coincidences, the most unexpected doppelgängers. Repetition of the event, its reflection in a new mirror, revealed it in a new way. If there was no meeting, there was non-meeting – both were, for her, equally real and enchanted, material and incorporeal.

Naiman speaks of how creative and biographical experiences double or multiply the author's experiences and the meanings they contain. Similarly, the characters of *Poėma bez geroia* are linked to real people, existing in the

Dovlatova ("I Am Bored without Dovlatov", Rein 1997), *Zametki marafontsa* ("Marathoner's Notes", Rein 2005).

text alongside figures bearing the names of historical individuals. Roman Timenchik observes:

> Смущающая и поныне читателя «двойственность» связана с вопросом о неполном и непрямом отождествлении героев Поэмы с поэтами блоковской эпохи. Ибо все без исключения герои Поэмы входят в отношения двойничества, а те исторические лица, которые даже почти прямо названы Автором (например, В. Г. Князев), могут выступать в роли других (менее известных и менее очевидных) современников Ахматовой. Не является исключением и соотношение «Демона» и Блока. […] Персонажи Поэмы, включая и Демона-Блока и даже самого Автора, имеют своими прототипами не самих исторических лиц, а их «образы», их инобытие и сплетение в сознании современников, порой заведомо искаженное или упрощенное
> (Timenchik 1989: 10–11)

> The "duality" that has confused – and continues to confuse – readers is tied to the question of the incomplete and indirect identification of the poem's heroes with the poets of <Aleksandr> Blok's era. For, without exception, all the poem's heroes enter into relationships of doubling, while those historical figures who are named almost directly by the Author (such as V. G. Knyazev) may also stand for other, lesser-known and less obvious contemporaries of Akhmatova. The relationship between the Demon and Blok is no exception. […] The characters of the poem, including Demon-Blok and even the Author himself, have as their prototypes not the historical figures themselves, but their "images" – their existence in another form and their intertwining in the consciousness of their contemporaries, sometimes deliberately distorted or simplified.

Naiman and Bitov inherited from the great modernists the experience of life and literature interpenetrating one another.[181]

181 Cf. the mocumentary memoir "Moi drug M. G." ("My Friend M. G.") by the Conceptualist artist Viktor Pivovarov. In it, Pivovarov describes how, as a student, he was allegedly friends with Mikhail Gorbachev, who dreamed of becoming an artist from a young age. In a documentary style, with a certain touch that befits a story about a friend, Pivovarov recounts the tale of the friendship between two young painters who had been interested in modern art since the early Thaw. They even joined an unofficial art group and participated in noncon-

The neo-avant-gardists, however, conceived of the relationship between reality and creativity differently. For them, transforming the everyday and pushing experience to its ultimate, existential tension – beyond what is possible – took precedence. They opposed duality, mutual reflection, and flickering to explicitness, documentaryism, and presence. Their belief in creativity as the transformation of sociocultural experience in its entirety – from its most unassuming and banal manifestations to its highest spheres – is particularly telling in this regard.

Ilya Kabakov, who played a key role in shaping absurdism in the mid-1960s, was convinced that neo-avant-garde artistic intent could transform the experience of civilization in all its diversity. Reflecting on the 1960s two decades later, Kabakov described the legacy of the Thaw through a stark, naturalistic metaphor: a gigantic urban dump, an endless variety of archaeological materials in which neo-avant-garde absurdism could emerge:

> […] весь объем результатов <искусства 1960-х гг.> мне представляется в виду какого-то необозримого поля, какой-то огромной свалки — неисчерпаемой, разнообразной, но именно свалки мусора. Образ мусорной кучи как визуального результата […] никак не уходит из моего воображения […] Это […] как бы сама жизнь, и эта жизнь продолжала ту живую, шевелящуюся и чрезвычайно наполненную какими-то вспышками мусорную кучу 60-х годов […] Сама свалка состоит именно из человеческих вещей […], и потому ты присутствуешь как бы при шуме толпы, где каждый кричит о самом себе, как на стадионе, в кинотеатре или, я думаю, в лагерях смерти было это ощущение слипшейся, смешавшейся толпы […] Вот этот образ совместного, слипшегося состояния, бесконечно нервозного, полного энергии, становления и в то же время обреченного на какую-то непонятную отброшенность, […] мне чрезвычайно хочется приложить, напялить на все содеянное в 60-е годы.
> (Kabakov 2008: 308–310)

formist exhibitions. The author of this memoir became a painter and emigrated to Czechoslovakia, while his friend pursued a career in the Communist party and succeeded, without losing his interest in contemporary painting. Nurtured by the artistic freedom of the Thaw, in the mid-1980s, he spearheaded the Perestroika reforms that transformed the country and Eastern Europe beyond recognition (Pivovarov 2018). Into this fiction, Pivovarov weaves events involving real people that actually happened in reality.

> […] the entire body of work produced by <the art of the 1960s> appears to me as some immense field, some enormous dump – inexhaustible, diverse, but unmistakably a garbage heap. The image of the garbage heap as a visual result […] never leaves my imagination… It […] is […] like life itself, and this life continued that living, teeming, intensely vibrant garbage heap of the 1960s, alive with sudden flashes. […] The garbage heap itself consists precisely of human things […], and so you find yourself, as it were, amidst the noise of a crowd, where everyone is shouting about themselves, as in a stadium, a movie theater, or, I imagine, even in the death camps, where there was this sense of a crowd all stuck together, merging into one another […]. This image of a collective, fused state – endlessly nervous, full of energy, in the process of becoming, yet at the same time doomed to some incomprehensible state of being cast aside […] – is one I very much want to apply, impose, on everything that was created in the 1960s.

The absurdist artworks Kabakov produced in the mid-1960s were, by all appearances, a product of this neo-avant-garde understanding. Marginalization, eclecticism, excessiveness, intense dynamism, and vitality are the defining terms through which the neo-avant-garde of the Thaw is often described. Few artists have captured this artistic experience as clearly, as naturalistically, and as pathetically as Kabakov.

It is telling that Boris Koshelokhov, a Leningrad nonconformist artist, introduces both the filmmakers documenting his work and their viewers to the secrets of underground art from within a city dump. Like Kabakov, Koshelokhov began his artistic journey in the 1960s, though unlike Kabakov, he entered the art world with no formal training. He was not affiliated with any official institution, yet he was a regular at what was known as the Klub intellektual′nykh podonkov ("Club of Intellectual Scum"), the Saigon Café, located in the center of Leningrad, on the corner of Nevsky and Vladimirsky Avenues. Joseph Brodsky, Aleksei Khvostenko, Anri Volokhonsky, the Helenucts and other figures in this book also frequented this café. Koshelokhov was a "fine dilettante", a representative of neo-avant-garde primitivism, the founder of the *Letopis′* ("Annals") group, and one of the key figures of the

Russian Transavantgarde. His students Nick Teplov and Aleksandr Markov made the 2008 documentary *Two Highways* about him.[182]

One of the film's most striking scenes beginning at minute 11 is Koshelokhov's monologue on art's capacity to encompass life in its entirety, delivered while standing in the middle of a vast garbage dump. It is a mesmerizing sight: surrounded by heaps of refuse, he – echoing Baudelaire's description of carrion ("Une Charogne", *Les Fleurs du Mal*) – speaks of art's all-conquering power, which draws its strength from life, no matter how unassuming or repulsive its forms. Ilya Kabakov himself could have signed these words. Koshelokhov and Kabakov, like Khvostenko and the Helenucts, were convinced that art is filled with life in all its manifestations, including its most grotesque and repellent ones.



Fig. 31

For Khvostenko and the Helenucts, the existential dimension was paramount. In contrast, the play with prototypes and the mutual reflections of biography and literary work – so central to Akhmatova's and Naiman's writing – held little interest to them in the 1960s and beyond. Genrikh Sapgir captured the essence of the neo-avant-garde transformation of life and creativity when he

182 http://boriskoshelokhov.com/two-highways-film (17.02.2026).

described absurdism as "incomprehensible homemade doodad" – a term that encapsulates its divergence from modernist life-creation. Unlike modernism, which sought an aestheticized synthesis of life and art, neo-avant-garde absurdism was defined by anti-aestheticism and the radical absurdization of both creativity and artistic labor.

This shift made the duality and mutual reflection of modernist artistic experience and life irrelevant. The documentaryism developed by Khvostenko in *The Suspector* and by the Helenucts in their *dramagedies* did not distinguish between art and life, between the creative act and biographical experience. The boundary between the two simply did not exist.

In this sense, the neo-avant-garde was not a wavering between life and art, not a play on their boundaries, nor their mutual reflection – but rather their indistinction, their fusion. Neo-avant-garde creativity was, above all, about the full presence of the author within the text – understood as a personal event, an existential act lived in the present tense, a deeply private experience.

It is striking that the idea of the vitality of art was also significant to Joseph Brodsky, who, in the 1960s, was not only one of "Akhmatova's orphans" but also a friend of Khvostenko's. The poet reflects on this source of poetry in a conversation with his friend, the poet Evgeny Rein. Of course, Brodsky's works, even in the 1960s, were very different from those of Khvostenko and the Helenucts. Brodsky was not at all sympathetic to the neo-avant-garde and was indifferent to the Concretism and Conceptualism that emerged from it. His poetics and artistic taste were entirely distinct. And yet, in this conversation with a close friend, to whom he considered himself indebted for many things, he formulates the similar existential foundations of creativity that were important to him and his inner circle.

> Мы не литераторы, потому что, когда ты начинаешь определять себя в рамках литературы, в рамках любой структуры — это конец. […] Роберт Фрост говорит: «Сказать о себе, что ты — поэт, так же нескромно, как если сказать о себе, что ты хороший человек». И уже хотя бы поэтому, но и без Фроста это ясно, ты просто проживаешь свою жизнь. […]
> Во всяком случае, все эти наши с тобой разговоры — они колоссально важны в одном отношении. Потому что, когда я говорю сейчас, я себя чувствую самим собой, поскольку во всех остальных случаях — никому ничего не объяснишь. Кому это можно объяснить? Кто это поймет?

> […] Ты понимаешь, что ты, в общем, «из всех детей ничтожных света ты всех ничтожней»… Примерно это. Это и всегда было так ясно. И при всем том ты оригинальная фигура, запятая в какой-то огромной книге… То есть — никто…
> Е. Р. Человек в плаще…
> И. Б. Человек в плаще, да…
> Е. Р. Значит, как говорила Ахматова, частная жизнь важнее всего?
> И. Б. Конечно. То есть не в том смысле, что частная жизнь — это личная жизнь, а просто: повезет — напишется стихотворение. Доживаешь, до всего доживаешь — до морщин, до седых волос… — и доживаешь не за счет изящной словесности, а просто доживаешь.
> (Brodskii 1996)

> We are not littérateurs, because when you start defining yourself within literature, within any kind of structure, that's the end. […] Robert Frost says, "To say of yourself that you are a poet is as immodest as saying that you are a good person". And for that reason alone – but even without Frost – it is clear: you simply live your life. […]
> Anyway, all these conversations we're having are enormously important in one respect. Because when I speak now, I feel like myself, since in all other circumstances you can't explain anything to anyone. Who can you explain this to? Who will understand it?
> […] You realize that you are, in a sense, "of all the humble children in the world, you are the humblest"… Something like that. It has always been so clear. And yet you are an original figure, a comma in some enormous book… I mean – nobody…
> E.R.: The man in the raincoat…
> J.B.: The man in the raincoat, yes…
> E.R.: So, as Akhmatova said, private life is more important than anything else?
> J.B.: Of course. Not in the sense that private life means one's personal life, but simply this: if you're lucky, a poem will be written. You live on, you live through everything – to wrinkles, to gray hair… – and you don't get through it by means of elegant writing; you simply live on.

Brodsky gave several hundred interviews. Often, he entertained himself in these not-always-interesting conversations by mystifying or by playing pranks on his

interlocutors. However, in this conversation with a close friend and colleague Evgeny Rein, he touched upon a subject of fundamental importance for non-conformism and neo-avant-garde absurdism. Even if it is only one statement among many from a world-renowned public intellectual, the emphasis on the private nature of an artist's life also shapes the opening to his Nobel lecture:

> For someone rather private, for someone who all his life has preferred his private condition to any role of social significance, and who went in this preference rather far – far from his motherland to say the least, for it is better to be a total failure in democracy than a martyr or the crème de la crème in tyranny – for such a person to find himself all of a sudden on this rostrum is a somewhat uncomfortable and trying experience.
> (Brodsky 1987)

In that lecture, he expresses gratitude to his friends who remained in the USSR and, perhaps above all, insists on private existence as a value – a value that shaped the creative biographies of Aleksei Khvostenko, the Helenucts, and other representatives of the underground. At the peak of his recognition, basking in world fame, Brodsky insists that he is a private man, "a man in a raincoat". A portrait of any of the figures in this book could be painted in the image of "a man in a raincoat" – a freethinker living outside state or social systems, embracing life and art in all their absurdity.

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Parts of this book have been published (or accepted for publication) as articles:

« Le chapeau et l'absurde : le néo-dadaïsme dans le contexte de la néo-avant-garde soviétique », *Histoire(s) des néo-dadaïsmes en Europe et aux Etats-Unis*, Paris : Editions L'Echappée (expected 2026).

"Portrait of the Samizdat Author-Reader: Marginalization as Nonconformist Strategy", in: *Voci libere in URSS: La Vicende dei testi tra Samizdat Censura e Tamizdat*. Pisa: Pisa University Press (expected 2026).

"'Podozritel' Alekseia Khvostenko: formirovanie novogo geroia'" ["'The Suspector' by Aleksei Khvostenko: Formation of New Hero"], in: Kukui 2024: 234–246.

"Helenucts and Unofficial Culture", in: Lipovetsky et al. 2024: 720–726.

"Identichnost' podozritelia i emigrantskii opyt Alekseia Khvostenko" ["The Identity of the Suspector and the Emigrant Experience of Aleksei Khvostenko"], in: *Zbornik Matice srpske za slavistiku* 106 (2024), 155–180.

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Illustrations

On the cover: Valentin Gerasimenko. *Untitled*. Mid-1960s. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy of Pavel Gerasimenko.

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