

A COMMUNITY OF BABBLERS:
FAILURES OF COMMUNICATION
IN THE RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH NOVEL, 1902-1925

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Abstract

A Community of Babblers: Failures of Communication in the British and English Novel 1902-1925 is a comparative study of Russian Symbolism and English modernisms that investigates how the novels of these traditions address breakdowns in the communicative efficacy of language at the beginning of the twentieth century. I connect these literary modernist approaches to languages to Anglo-American ordinary language philosophy and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism. Through philosophical and theoretical evaluations of Symbolism and English modernism I argue that these novels explore the possibilities for how different forms of communication can restructure the ethical relations between characters and inform their respective aesthetic projects. In each chapter I examine the philosophical implications of the representational structures of dialogue and interpersonal contact in a particular novel. In Fedor Sologub's *The Petty Demon*, written in 1902, I analyze how gossip and puns function in the text as essentially performative speech-acts, linking Symbolist aesthetic creation to J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterances. Similarly, I analyze the significance of the promise as a form of a Symbolist performative-speech act in Andrei Bely's 1916/1922 novel *Petersburg*, elucidating the ethical implications of Symbolist language creation. Representing the English tradition, I look to the work of Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf, two writers whose interest in Russian literature motivate a point of comparison. I examine how *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad's 1911 novel of Russian political intrigue, represents coercive dialogic relations, and I analyze Virginia Woolf's 1925 *Mrs. Dalloway* through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of empathy to explore how the novel offers a reconciliatory vision of interpersonal understanding. Collectively I show how these writers attempt to locate possibilities for community amid the disorientation and fragmentation of modern experience.

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Introduction

In 1919 Virginia Woolf published the article “Modern Novels” in the *Times Literary Supplement*, praising Russian literature for its profound understanding of the soul. Subsequently expanded into her seminal essay “Modern Fiction,” published in 1925, the revised text with its oft-quoted line that “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end,” has served as a paradigmatic encapsulation of Woolf’s aesthetic project, but also to typify a significant characteristic of literary modernism generally (Woolf “Modern Fiction” 150).¹ Woolf asserted that the modern writer should attend to the spiritual, and that her task is the conveyance of life by making visible that semi-transparent envelope. It is to the Russians, Woolf wrote, that the spiritually-inclined English writer can turn for guidance because,

In every great Russian writer we seem to discern the features of a saint, if sympathy for the sufferings of others, love towards them, endeavor to reach some goal worth of the most exacting demands of the spirit constitute saintliness. (153)

Woolf’s reference point for Russian literature were the nineteenth century novelists of Russia’s Golden Age; Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Chekhov are her saints. Woolf is hardly alone among her contemporaries in citing the influence of Russia. As Rebecca Beasley has recently shown in *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881-1922*, British literary modernism was profoundly shaped by Russia, albeit in far more complicated ways than direct stylistic

¹ Pericles Lewis cites it as an example of modernism’s central concern for depicting uncertainty, and indicative of the influence of impressionism on literary modernism (Lewis 61); Anthony Cascardi quotes the passage to consider modernist writers’ efforts to represent the experience of consciousness (Cascardi 30); Megan Quigley uses the essay to position Woolf’s embrace of the vagueness of language in opposition to Henry James’s desire for ideal clarity (Quigley 63-89).

influence.² It is rather striking to consider that Woolf's apparent lodestar for guiding the direction of modern fiction is a realist novelistic tradition of the previous century, especially given that Russia's own contemporary literary movements at the turn of the century broke sharply from their predecessors.

Russian Symbolism, which Avril Pyman dates from 1892, inaugurated by Dmitri Merezhkovsky's lecture detailing the "major elements of the new art" opposing the materialism of the nineteenth century and Valery Bryusov's publication of *Russkie simvolisty* (*Russian symbolists*) in 1894 until its gradual dissolution starting in 1910, is generally considered the beginning of Russian modernism (Pyman *A History of Russian Symbolism*, xiii; Merezhkovsky 21).³ Leonid Livak, in a rich *Begriffsgeschichte* of Russian modernism, observes that while the interchangeability of modernism and Symbolism is owed to the Russian literary movements' self-conscious labeling of themselves as the trailblazers of the modern, just as frequently, those factional movements found it useful to distinguish themselves against the label of 'modernist' that they derisively ascribed to competing trends, whether Decadence, Acmeism, or Futurism (Livak 11-77).⁴

Woolf's characterization of the focus of modern fiction as essentially spiritual, and her contention that an art based on "feeling and not upon convention" brings us into contact with an enlarged conception of life, was in effect already anticipated by the Symbolists in the decades prior.

² There are numerous studies on the direct influence of Russian culture for British literary modernism, however. Beasley's edited book cf. *Russia in Britain* as well as *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture* for diverse accounts of the presence of Russian culture in the British imaginary (Beasley and Bullock), (Cross). As I review in detail in chapter 4, there are excellent studies on the direct stylistic or thematic influences of Russian literature on British writers; cf. (Rubenstein) in particular on Woolf's indebtedness to Dostoevsky.

³ e.g. "...Symbolism, the movement (1890's-1910's) that launched modernism in Russia" (Paperno and Grossman 1); "Russian Symbolism[...]resides as the starting point of modernism in Russia" (Stone 7). Stone adds that Decadence and Symbolism were interchangeable in the 1890s. Also Pyman, "...Russian Decadence, Symbolism, or Modernism (the terms were used successively and often interchangeably)" (Pyman *A History of Russian Symbolism* 4).

⁴ The shifting valorization of the label 'modernist' in its successive identification and repudiation among Russian intra-Modernist factions resonates with Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz's observation that the ever expanding modernisms of modernist studies make visible the relativity and contextuality of "badness"; that, e.g. modernist oppositionality to dominant cultural or aesthetic norms can, in the next analysis represent the problematic institutionalization and exclusion of other voices (Mao and Walkowitz 9).

A few years before Woolf's essay appeared in the *TLS*, the symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov wrote that the purpose of symbolism is to convince the reader (listener) "of the existence of a hidden life where his reason did not suspect any life at all" (Ivanov "Thoughts on Symbolism (1912)" 325). Anticipating Woolf's dissatisfaction with "materialist" writers from whom life always seemed to escape, the Symbolists criticized the "extreme materialism" of scientific knowledge, which they alleged sought to demarcate reality as that which is perceivable, and consequently walled off the spiritual realm as inaccessible to experience (Merezhkovsky 3-4). Rejecting that paradigm, the Symbolists endeavored to access the mystical realm in order to reconnect the spiritual with the phenomenal.

However, the Symbolists' understanding of the spiritual, and its relation to "life" bears little resemblance to Woolf's belief that for the Russians the demands of the spirit made claims on one's "sympathy for the suffering of others." Implicit to the Symbolists' claim that symbolist art is generated from within the depths of the artist's soul is their belief that the external social world has lost its connection to "life." In their eyes, scientific rationalism and the banality of everyday existence thoroughly permeated the fabric of contemporary society—even and especially affecting its language. The symbolist writer and theorist Andrei Bely linked cultural degeneracy to the death of what he calls "living speech" (*zhivaia rech*); "The common prosaic word," he wrote, "is a fetid, decomposing corpse" (Bely "The Magic of Words" 100). For Bely, the worlds of the prosaic words of the everyday and of the abstract concepts of scientific and philosophical knowledge are "not real worlds" (103). Accordingly, for Bely and the Symbolists, the principal task of Symbolism was the creation of living words. The spiritual is therefore not expressed in care or sympathy for the other, as deadened prosaic language offers no means of relating authentically to another person; rather, the spiritual realm informs the creation of poetic speech, which by virtue of the fact that it does "not actually prove or demonstrate anything with words" is purely "imaginal," creating new images that can "infuse

people's souls with their glittering splendor" (97).

Symbolism's logocentrism does not just point toward an aestheticization of language, but also of life as such. Thomas Seifrid explains that the Symbolists are concerned with the "ontological efficacy of language," that is, language's ability to change reality (Seifrid 63). By supplanting a reality deadened by abstract concepts and prosaic speech with living poetic speech the Symbolists aspire to reimagine a world constituted exclusively by aesthetic value. Within this worldview, the extent to which the presence of the other is relevant for the Symbolists is in the role of audience, affirming the affective force of the art object—as Ivanov wrote, "Symbolism is tied to the integrity of the personality, both that of the artist himself and that of the person experiencing the artistic revelation" (Ivanov "Thoughts on Symbolism (1912)" 326). So, amid this revelatory account of *l'art pour l'art* is the implication that the concerns of social and political justice, or indeed the ethical claims of the suffering of others are merely epiphenomenal to the primary work of creating the living word.

That Russian Symbolism's mystical-aesthetic attitude toward the soul does not enter into Virginia Woolf's account of Russian literature is of little surprise. Despite the pervasive influence of nineteenth century Russian culture in Woolf's Britain, the reach of Russia's contemporary cultural output fell short of its shores. As Beasley concedes in her study, "British modernists had relatively little knowledge of Russian modernism—particularly Russian literary modernism[...] When British readers did encounter contemporary, experimental Russian literature, it was almost always as an isolated example, detached from context and chronology" (Beasley 32-3). Eric Metz and Anthony Cross have both written on the limited exposure of the British to Russian Modernism, most notably by the Symbolist poet Konstantin Bal'mont, who visited Oxford in 1897 to give a series of lectures on Russian poetry. Metz comments that although in Bal'mont's lectures, the poet discusses "la manière lyrico-psychologique de l'individualisme artistique," squarely situating him among the Symbolists, Bal'mont only uses the term 'Symbolist' once and makes no mention of Decadence

(Metz 81-83).⁵

Within the study of European modernism—and of Russian modernism—the notion that modernist art endeavors to grapple with the disorienting experience of modern life is fundamental. Modernist innovations in narrative form—the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art, the representation of consciousness—as much signify the individual’s inability to relate coherently to the modern world, attempting a retreat into the privacy of the self, as they are an attempt to represent a more expansive depiction of life.⁶ It is within this paradigm that *A Community of Babblers: Failures of Communication in the Russian and English Novel 1902-1925* contributes a new perspective. This dissertation does not claim direct influence of Russian Symbolism on British literary modernism, but rather it seizes upon missed connections between the two traditions.

The utility of the label ‘modernism’ in this study, if not emptied of signifying force, does at least enable the situating in juxtaposition of two literary traditions that pursue nebulously similar projects, but whose divergent philosophical and aesthetic commitments generate a stereoscopic understanding of what I’ll provisionally call the problem of communication. Not exactly a project of transnational modernisms, I think through how Russian symbolist and English modernist novelists represent the problem of relating to the other, expressed respectively as a problem of language and intersubjective alienation. This work bears some affinity to recent projects like Toril Moi’s *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (2017) and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé’s *A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature after Wittgenstein* (2020).

⁵ Cross writes that Professor W.R. Morfill was “responsible for engaging two of the foremost Russian Symbolists, Konstantin Bal’mont and Valery Bryusov, to contribute annual reviews of contemporary literature, which he translated for publication in the journal in the years 1898-1906 (Cross 16). Virginia Woolf actually reviewed a collection of stories by Briusov in 1918 in the *TLS*, which I discuss in a fn. in chapter 4. But, as Beasley qualified, such contact was at best de-contextualized.

⁶ Such arguments underpin Michael Levenson’s *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, as e.g., “If character can no longer be defined through a disjunction between inside and outside, if what is most distant is also most intimate, if what occurs on the fringes of human community resides in every mind, then there can be no discontinuity between the condition of others and the condition of the self” (Levenson 12). (Levenson)

Both Moi, who is rather more committed to arguing for the relevance of ordinary language philosophy as a prescient and relevant mode of literary criticism, and Zumhagen-Yekplé, who finds ethical and aesthetic affinities between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* and literary modernist works, draw attention to the ways in which ordinary language philosophy can enliven how literature represents the difficulty of constituting a common reality.

Russian Symbolism's logocentrism might seem to have much more of an affinity with *die Sprachkrise*, Austrian modernism's crisis of language encapsulated in Hugo von Hofmanstahl's Lord Chandos bemoaning that he "lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently" (von Hofmansthal 133).⁷ Indeed, as I show in the first half of the dissertation, German philosophy was very much in the vogue for the Russian Symbolists, with Nietzsche and the contemporary Neo-Kantian school bearing pronounced influence on Symbolist thought. Central to my argument however is that where *die Sprachkrise* at issue was the perceived deficiency of language as such to adequately represent reality, Symbolism's concern with remaking language is essentially *communicative*. That is, the creation of the Symbolist's "living word" is not principally an isolated act of creative expression, but rather is manifest in the process of dialogue, and depends fundamentally on the relation between speaker and listener. Ivanov's formulation cited above expresses the Symbolist's understanding of art as "collective creation," but curiously situates that interpersonal communication outside of the sphere of everyday existence and ordinary language; as Pyman writes, "the unique Symbolist atmosphere of 'collective creation' when thoughts, dreams and images slipped from mind to mind, almost, it seemed, without having to be formulated in words" (Pyman *A History of Russian Symbolism* 180). By reading the Symbolists through the lens of the

⁷ cf. Nethersole glosses the language crisis as a recognition that language is essentially metaphoric and as such grounds no essential connection between language and the world (Nethersole 656). Also Richard Sheppard offers the useful observation that the crisis of language in modernism that emerges from Chandos is fundamentally pessimistic, as for Chandos the only response to the perceived deficiencies of language is silence (Sheppard 324).

ordinary language philosophical tradition of J.L. Austin and Stanley Cavell, I argue that viewing Symbolism's logocentric project as essentially the valorization of poetic speech and the creativity of the individual artist belies its vision of language as essentially active and contextual. I show that Symbolism's logocentrism is in fact fundamentally tied to a *contextual* rather than *essentialist* view of language, and that viewing Symbolism as elucidating a theory of communication reveals the ethical commitments enmeshed in Symbolism's theory of creation.

In this study's first chapter, "The Crisis of Language in the Symbolist Novel: The Persistence of the Everyday in *The Petty Demon*" I introduce the Symbolist movement and frame the terms of its logocentric project. Because the Symbolists elevate the value of poetic speech over and against everyday language, I consider the implications symbolist aesthetics has for the novel, and consequently whether the very notion of a symbolist novel is even a coherent idea. Although the symbolists privilege the internal experience of the artist, in preference to say, depictions of contemporary social or political realities, I insist that the process in which the artist conjures the symbolic in order to re-enchant the world is necessarily interpersonal. As Jonathan Stone demonstrated in his study of the institutional history of Russian Symbolism, the development of Symbolism's aesthetics was tied to the cultivation of its readership (Stone 15-18). The social aspect of Symbolism's material production is not incidental to its aesthetics, I maintain, but reflects something fundamental about symbolism's orientation to the everyday. I suggest that the creation of what Andrei Bely calls the "living word" is not merely an idiosyncratic poetic invention, but rather is an enstrangement of everyday speech. Part and parcel to that process, moreover, is the retention of the communicative structure of everyday speech. I demonstrate this claim through an analysis of Fedor Sologub's novel *The Petty Demon* (1902/1907). I argue that the symbolic generative force in the novel is not in the poetic aestheticization of speech, but in the prosaic and essentially ordinary. Reading the functions of gossip and punning in the text through the philosophical lens of J.L.

Austin's concept of the performative utterance, I show that these apparently banal speech genres wield creative force when viewed in their dialogic context. The novel demonstrates the generative instability inherent to ordinary language, depicting a vision of language in which even the most banal utterance can potentially re-enchant the everyday.

If symbolic creation in the novel provides an account of interpersonal communicative exchange within social reality, then symbolist creativity would be enmeshed with the ethical implications of intersubjective contact. In "A Terrible Promise? Symbolist Speech-Acts in *Petersburg*" I pursue the implications of this insight to argue that the ethical commitments inherent to ordinary language are constitutive of the interpersonal relations necessary for experiencing the symbolic. Divided into two parts, the chapter begins with an analysis of Andrei Bely's theory of symbolism, where I draw attention to the significance of communal participation for the creation of the symbolic. Then, turning to his magnum opus, *Petersburg* (1916/1922), which has been called the "first modernist city novel," I examine the seemingly anomalous significance of a promise in the novel, given that the prosaic ethical considerations of promising seem to have little to do with the arbitrary play of a creative consciousness that has been the focus of the standard account of the novel (Barta 19). The promise, I argue, in fact functions as a particularly efficacious invocation of Bely's "living speech." I insist that symbolic creation cannot be made in the isolated creative consciousness, but instead in the activity of its speaking in the world. I show how the promise creates ethical relations between its participants, suggesting a communicative model of symbolist language in which the speech-act places two speakers in a dynamic, active relation to one another.

Russian Symbolism confronts the problem of relating to the other by—to obliquely invoke Viktor Shklovsky—en-strangeing language: in my reconstructive reading of Symbolism I show that "living speech" shifts the basis of language from ideal abstract concepts and habituated utilitarian usage to its creative (performative) and ethical functions. This fundamental restructuring of language

generates a communally shared linguistic wellspring of creativity and creation. My critical intervention with ordinary language philosophy makes visible how the Symbolist project uncovers the communicative capacity inherent to ordinary language itself, drawing speakers into “the existence of a hidden life” that unites them through language in a common world.

By contrast, English modernist writers like Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf view the problem of communication as a problem not of the limits of ordinary language in itself, but of ordinary life. In his study of dialogic relations in Conrad’s work, *Coercion to Speak* (1985), Aaron Fogel develops the concept of “forced speech” arguing that the idea of communication in Conrad between equal participants is illusory, but instead always consists in an asymmetrical relation of power. The problem of dialogue then is not owed to a deficiency in language itself, but to inequities in the social and political world that interfere with the potential to communicate with a common other. Joseph Conrad, born to a family of Polish nationalists in what was then the Russian Empire, harbored an animosity for the tsarist autocracy that extended to his view of Russian literature, as Beasley powerfully portrays his attitude: “The Russian novel, [which,] according to Conrad, has been at best an unwitting product of, and at worst complicit in, autocracy’s work, peddling an empty mysticism that leaves autocracy in place” (Beasley 205). It would appear that for Conrad a mystical estrangement of language could not—nor should even attempt to—overcome the ways in which political and social relations render impossible equitable communal relations between individuals.

It would be difficult to argue that Virginia Woolf’s aesthetic project is *not* concerned with producing in literature an alternative language. Her work is paradigmatic of what H el ene Cixous called *l’ criture f eminine*; as Jane Marcus wrote, “Woolf’s project was ‘untying the Mother Tongue,’ in her search to free language from patriarchal patterns to write the ‘feminine sentence’ (Marcus 14). Megan Quigley, in *Modern Fiction and Vagueness* (2015), situates Virginia Woolf’s vision of language as a repudiation of Bertrand Russell’s critique of vagueness. While Russell’s logical

positivist approach to language sought to correct the problematic imprecision of language by turning to the clarity of logical propositions, Quigley shows that Woolf explicitly embraces the vagaries of language as providing a truer representation of life. Imprecision, incompleteness, and loss are characteristics as authentic to language as they are true to the experience of life. Where societal convention and patriarchal rationalism would paper over disconnection and failure to project an idealist vision of a coherent world, Woolf's aesthetics strips away that artifice. But what Woolf makes visible in her representation, as with Conrad, is that the rifts of *intersubjectivity* cannot be repaired through literary invention; they are only made more apparent. For Conrad and Woolf the failure of communication is the estrangement of individuals from one another, that it is the condition of modernity that we are all strangers.

The second half of this dissertation that examines Conrad and Woolf is structured markedly differently than my analysis of Russian Symbolism, as the section breaks in the Table of Contents already suggest. Motivating my inclusion of Conrad and Woolf in this study as representatives of 'English literary modernism'—an inelegant retroactively applied label that should in no way suggest a consciously unified aesthetic project like that of the Symbolists—stems from their respective relationships with Russian literature. Accordingly, while an analysis of symbolist theory productively orients the common concerns of symbolism for my readings of Sologub and Bely's respective novels, no analogous theoretical account of modernism would coherently frame any shared aesthetic project of Woolf and Conrad. So, unintentionally representing the individual vs. collective opposition endemic to Russian-Western comparative narratives in the formal organization of this dissertation, chapters 3 and 4 consider the respective author's individual relations to Russian literature that, I suggest, help to orient some commonalities. For both Conrad and Woolf the failure of communication is the loss of community, and their literary practices investigate the complexity and possibility of reinscribing interpersonal connection. For the Russian Symbolists the critical lens of

ordinary language philosophy made visible the ethical relations inherent to a model of language that is performative and intersubjective. Continuing this thread into the second half of the dissertation, I read Conrad and Woolf alongside Mikhail Bakhtin, a philosopher in his own right of the ethics of dialogism. Using Bakhtin I draw attention to questions of acknowledgement and recognition that animate interpersonal relations, and center the presence of the other as the principal ethical question that both authors pose.

In “‘something resembling sympathy’ Confidence, Silence, and anti-Dialogism in *Under Western Eyes*” I examine Conrad’s 1911 novel that begins in St. Petersburg at the brink of the 1905 Revolution. I explore the “solitary individuality” of the novel’s protagonist, Kirylo Razumov. I argue that Razumov embodies the conflicting cultural mythologies of the western autonomy of the self and of Russian communality. Razumov’s affiliation with these identities works to structure distinct modes of social relations between Razumov and other characters in the novel. In sharp contrast from the Symbolists Conrad does not find in ordinary speech recourse to interpersonal reconciliation. At every turn the potential for sympathetic connection with another is undermined by either coercive transgressions of an individual’s autonomy or illusory communal identity. Ultimately, I suggest that Conrad leaves open the possibility of sympathy as an unrealized potential mode of intimacy.

In the dissertation’s final chapter, “Woolf’s polyphonic consummation; or the delimiting of empathy in *Mrs. Dalloway*,” I view Woolf as embodying something of a synthesis of Symbolism’s transformative power of ordinary speech and Conrad’s concern for the integrity of the individual. I argue that Woolf’s project pursues a concept of communication that mediates between the aesthetic autonomy of the novel and the problem of acknowledgment. Central to my argument in this chapter is a recuperative reading of the concept of consummation (*zavershenie*) in Bakhtin’s early writing. Although Bakhtin construes the term as a negative transgression of the other’s freedom in his later work, I suggest that in *Mrs. Dalloway* we can understand authorial consummation as an empathic

ethical relation to the other.

Across these four chapters I find these writers struggling with the task of bridging the gap between the self and the other. In each novel I identify modes of communication that frustratingly sputter and babble in their efforts to connect. Within this dialogue between Russian Symbolism and these major figures of English modernism emerges an account of modernist language and its relation to the possibility of creating community.

I: The Crisis of Language in the Symbolist Novel: The Persistence of the Everyday in *The Petty Demon*

At the turn of the twentieth century the time of the great Russian novel was over. With its greatest practitioners gone (Dostoevsky and Turgenev had died in 1881 and 1883; Tolstoy penned his final novel *Resurrection* in 1899), the Golden Age of Russian literature had ended. Though hardly a monolith, the toppling of the novel embodied the old giving way to the new, and at the beginning of the young century literary movements armed with new aesthetic theories sprung up, eager to claim the mantle of successor. That the socio-political landscape of Russia was in the midst of massive transformations, including the emergence of a new reading public and intelligentsia, and material developments in modes of cultural production facilitated the dissemination of diverse literary forms,⁸ and the influence of recent scientific discoveries and philosophical movements on artists' perception of reality—not to mention a general fin de siècle anxiety producing a sense of crisis and urgency for renewal⁹—all certainly contribute to disinterest in the novel, and the development of a so-called modernist sensibility. But what many critics have pointed to as an essential aspect of the Russian modernists, an acute self-awareness of their place within Russia's cultural history,¹⁰ offers a compelling explanation for the deliberate theorizing of an aesthetics opposed to the prosaics of the novel tradition. Indeed, the label of the “Silver Age” that has come to define the literary period of

⁸ Jonathan Stone has recently offered a rich study of the material and institutional history that shaped the Russian Symbolist movement. The significance of the literary journal with the proliferation of the Symbolist publishing house, and the deliberate production of heterogeneous artistic forms under a unified aesthetic identity are significant factors in his narrative (Stone).

⁹ Sara Pankenier Weld's study of primitivism and what she calls the infantile aesthetic of the avant-garde encapsulates the pervasive allure of new beginnings.

¹⁰ In addition to Stone, Galina Rylkova, Boris Gasparov, et al. have written about how Russian modernists understood themselves to be heirs of the previous cultural era, and consciously presented themselves as the next aesthetic epoch (Rylkova 3-10; Gasparov).

fin de siècle Russia was coined by the writers of the time (Gasparov 10). Stanley Cavell offers a definition of “the modern” that seems quite appropriate to the attitude of the Russian modernists:

a moment in which history and its conventions can no longer be taken for granted; the time in which music and painting and poetry (like nations) have to define themselves against their pasts; the beginning of the moment in which each of the arts becomes its own subject, as if its immediate artistic task is to establish its own existence. (Cavell *Must We Mean What We Say?* xxxiv)

Of those emergent literary movements that staked out their existence in opposition to their cultural precedents, the relatively short-lived coterie of writers who called themselves Symbolists exemplified Cavell’s idea of the modern.

Lending support to those scholars that have *criticized* the idea that modernism should be defined as anti-realism,¹¹ the Symbolists sought to re-connect to a reality that they thought was occluded by stagnant values that governed a society perceived as culturally decrepit and mired in the banalities of everyday existence. In other words, they sought an alternative realism, one that recovered the spiritual within the experience of the everyday. The Symbolist project rested on two aims: a revitalization of communal values through aesthetic justification, and the creation of a new mode of expression, a new poetic language. Central to their project, the Symbolists sought to overcome the expressive medium of everyday—ordinary, ‘normal’ language—by unveiling new forms of artistic language that were to restore the spiritual aspect of the world. While these premises appear coherent, this chapter will investigate the extent to which there is a necessary correspondence in Symbolism between art’s spiritual regenerative objective and the emphasis on privileging poetic

¹¹ Leonid Livak recently addressed the misguided obsession with realism in Russian modernist studies (Livak 79-112). Toril Moi has notably argued that the birth of European modernism should not be seen as a rejection of realism, but of aesthetic idealism. (Moi *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* 3-5).

expression as a distinct entity from ordinary language. An immediate complication to this conception of Symbolism lies in determining the place of the novel within its tradition, as Anna Balakian suggested, “a symbolist novel would be a contradiction in terms since symbolists sought to evoke mood and feelings, not to tell stories” (Greene qtd. in 112). If it is indeed implicit that Symbolism is premised on the transformative power of poetic language in particular, novelistic discourse, the language of the everyday, would be devalued in turn. In the first half of the chapter I will consider the implications that the creation of a Symbolist poetic language has for the novel and the status of prosaic speech within the symbolist project. I suggest that although Russian Symbolists valorize poetry’s capacity to portray the emotional rather than rational experience of reality, at the same time Symbolism is essentially directed toward refashioning communication and developing new means of expression between symbolist speakers and symbolist listeners. In the second half of the chapter I examine Fedor Sologub’s 1907 novel *The Petty Demon*, a major work associated with the symbolist and decadent movements, but whose depiction of the banality of everyday provincial life seems misaligned with the Symbolist project. I focus on the novel’s approach to puns and gossip to argue that Sologub pursues the symbolic not through a wholesale rejection of everyday speech, but to the contrary, in it. Reading Sologub alongside the speech-act theory of ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin, I offer a reevaluation of the relation of ordinary speech to symbolist communication.

The Creation of the Living Word

The legacies of decadence and symbolism in Western European art and literature are well established, though the extent to which these movements are entangled is often confused.¹² In his important 1893 essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” Arthur Symons characterized Decadence as an overly-aestheticized style, originating in France, marked by “spiritual and moral perversity,” a reaction to the end of a great era (Symons 859). He defined Symbolism as one of the two main branches of the overarching Decadent movement, which “would flash upon you the ‘soul’ of that which can be apprehended only by the soul” (ibid). Although influenced by the introduction of French Symbolist poetry, Russia’s own decadent/symbolist movement formed as a reaction to the discontents of its own national context. At the end of the nineteenth century, Russian society was in flux, a liberal populism was changing the political landscape, alongside burgeoning revolutionary sentiments. The country was industrializing, and scientific rationalism had caught up to the rest of Western Europe.¹³ The literature of the intervening years prioritized utilitarian function over formal innovation, focusing on representing the social conditions of the changing Russian life and its political demands.

In 1892, responding to this perceived decadence in Russian culture, Dmitri Merezhkovsky issued a pair of lectures, “On the Causes of the Decline and on the New Trends of Contemporary Literature,” the seminal statement of the Symbolists’ aims.¹⁴ Merezhkovsky bemoaned the prevalence of “artistic materialism” and its “suffocating, deadly positivism” as privileging scientific knowledge and the conditions of contemporary life over an artistic idealism (Merezhkovsky 18-19).

¹² Vincent Sherry, for example, has recently sought to reinforce the centrality of decadence in the foundation of the British modernist tradition alongside symbolism in (Sherry *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*).

¹³ This account is hardly sufficient; the importance of the crisis of faith in the Orthodox Church, for example, should not be ignored, but it falls outside the purview of this study.

¹⁴ For an excellent gloss on Merezhkovsky and the origins of Symbolism, see (Rosenthal *Dmitri Sergeevich Merezhkovsky and the Silver Age: The Development of a Revolutionary Mentality 37-56*).

On one hand, Merezhkovsky saw the tendency toward scientific rationalism as having “erected an indestructible barrier which...divided the concrete earth accessible to people from the boundless and dark ocean lying beyond the bounds of our consciousness,” and thus threatened to make inaccessible the mystical aspect of the world (Merezhkovsky 3). Art has been complicit in this demystification; for Merezhkovsky the subordination of artistic content to politics, and the accordant emphasis on realist representations of social conditions has as a consequence stripped art of its capacity to interrogate the spiritual aspect of mankind’s existence. In the face of this crisis in Russian culture, the artist must offer a re-articulated sensibility, and take as his or her task the communication of symbolic images which open up the mystical, unobservable aspects of reality.¹⁵

The role of the Symbolist artist is therefore not to subject his or her art to political dogma, nor to represent the conditions of everyday life, but instead to offer an “impression” of the depths of consciousness: “Symbols should naturally and unintentionally pour from the depths of reality” (Merezhkovsky 20). If philosophical concepts or utilitarian language, as intentionally descriptive modes of speech, “only define, delimit a thought,” then, “symbols express the limitless side of thought” (21). Symbolism adopts a certain skepticism or suspicion toward conceptual and utilitarian language, which in its logico-positivistic nature has no claim on the ineffable. Their oft-quoted slogan was from Fedor Tyutchev’s poem “Silentium”: “a thought once uttered is a lie.” Symbols are not particular ‘poetic’ words per se, but become symbolic only to the extent that they can communicate ambiguous hints or echoes of an artist’s inexpressible inner feeling. The discernment of symbolic images, through which art recovers man’s lost spirituality and strives for the hidden reaches of the soul, is counterposed to degraded forms of expression, “dead allegories,” philosophic concepts, and

¹⁵ Although the confluence of religious, political, and cultural crises inform Pyman’s understanding of the origin of Symbolism, the reality of ‘crisis’ may be somewhat performatively overstated (Pyman *A History of Russian Symbolism* 2-4). Livak suggests that the “crisis sensibility” may be a fictional construct consistent with Symbolists’ self-conscious situating at a pivotal moment in the cultural and historical milieu (Livak 10).

ordinary, utilitarian language, that are restricted to nothing more than describing the observable world. The task of Symbolism could be seen then as producing an artistic expression that overcomes the limitations of language.

Sure enough, the Symbolists who emerged in the following years identified the resources of the Symbolist artist as specifically poetic, a turning away from social language toward a means of expression that mediates between the artist's soul and a mystical reality.¹⁶ For the Symbolists, true poetic speech has its roots in a primeval, natural, mythological mode of language that has been lost in contemporary society—sacrificed for utilitarian means of communication. The degraded modern state of language is not capable of communicating the 'true reality,' and as such, language only describes the world as it appears directly to perception. The poet cannot content himself with ordinary speech, but must uncover the inner mythopoetic form of the word, and re-enchant the world with this "symbolic energy."¹⁷ For example, the Symbolist poet and critic Vyacheslav Ivanov distinguishes between the "discourse of logic[...]discourse about empirical objects and [mythological speech], a discourse of things and relationships of another order, revealed in internal experience" (Ivanov "The Precepts of Symbolism (1910)" 310). The discourse of logic and empiricism cannot penetrate the metaphysical concerns of poetry: "our living language is a mirror of eternal empiric cognition," and when uttered, "the listener does not receive life in his soul but the dead covers of a life that has flown away" (305). Mythological speech, by contrast, would express the inaccessible internal phenomena. However, this supposedly revitalized mode of expression is not manifest as a different language: "there is no such language; there are only hints...that can inculcate the listener with an experience similar to something that cannot be expressed with words" (308). Thus the 'poetic

¹⁶ cf. (Pyman *A History of Russian Symbolism 10-16*)

¹⁷ This view of language can be traced to the philosophies of Alexander Potebnia, Wilhelm von Humboldt (through Potebnia), see e.g., (Seifrid 31-52), and Friedrich Nietzsche. Viktor Shklovsky and the Formalist school will later sharply rebuke Potebnia's (and Humboldt's) theory of the word's inner form, and the symbolists' reliance thereon.

language' conceived by Ivanov does not communicate its meaning directly, but generates a feeling in the listener "of this existence of a hidden life" (Ivanov "Thoughts on Symbolism (1912)" 325).

The language of Symbolism is therefore not merely a different lexicon or grammar, but is produced in the expression of the individual artist. Ivanov further distinguishes the symbolic element of a work from any formal poetic indicators or aesthetic qualifications. Thus, symbolic content cannot be discerned within a stable network of words or concepts. Instead, symbolic language is actualized only in the intersubjective resonance of the artwork between creator and perceiver. Precisely because the symbolic does not exist in abstract principles, Ivanov suggests it is only produced in the shared relation of writer and reader: "Symbolists do not exist—if there are no Symbolists listening" (Ivanov "Thoughts on Symbolism (1912)" 328). Ivanov hosted a popular Symbolist salon in his apartment, called "the Tower," creating a communicative sphere in everyday life for Symbolists to listen. We could say that the symbolic only effects if, to abuse a concept of J.L. Austin's, it is 'fortuitous,' that is, not in the poetic utterance itself, but if it successfully resonates in the context of the reader's experience. Symbolism, it would seem, exists not fixed in the written page, but as an active communication in the relation between symbolist writer and symbolist reader. As Jonathan Stone puts it explaining the symbiotic relationship between Symbolist publishing houses and their audience, "The Symbolist poet was always seeking out a proper reader, namely another Symbolist" (Stone 12). This would moreover indicate that a particular work or expression is not essentially or universally symbolic, but rather that the particularity of the symbolic expression—the external image in which the symbolic content is contained—operates in some relation to the context of its utterance.

For the Symbolist Andrei Bely, the symbolic word has exactly this transient temporal condition. Refining the schema we have already seen, Bely marks a distinction between the "living, imaginal speech" (*zhivaia rech*) and the "abstract concept," but unlike Ivanov, Bely argues that the

two are continua of a single process (Bely "The Magic of Words" 97). Drawing overtly, though perhaps too liberally, from the ideas of Alexander Potebnia,¹⁸ Bely conceives of the word through the metaphor of a seed: the "inner form" of the word describes the originary creative impulse of sound and image: it is "the seed that germinates in the souls of men"; whereas the "dry-casing" of the exterior shell is its conceptual meaning, the logical correlation between object-in-the-world and the imaginal word (97). For Bely, cognition itself is both dependent on and temporally subsequent to the creative instinct to produce words. This means that language undergoes a processual change from its original creative utterance as "living speech...an eternally flowing, creating activity" to the point where it is conceptualized and thus is "emptied of all content," "ossifies," "crystalizes," and "decomposes" (97-99). Then, from the dried-out shell of the abstract concept, the inner form regenerates anew, "bursts its dry casing...sending forth a new shoot" (ibid). Bely repeatedly evokes the metaphor of a rebirth of the living word from the dead speech of contemporary society.

Thus, the cognitive artistic process itself becomes the site of language creation. This shift reorients the emphasis of art from its content to the creative act itself. Bely asserts that word-creation governs mankind's relation to existence. In the creation of the 'living word' the subject connects his internal consciousness with the external phenomenal world; mediating this connection, "the word creates a new, third world: a world of sound symbols" that interpenetrates the subjective soul and the surrounding world (95). The creation of this 'third world' grounds mankind's existence. As he writes, "living speech is the very condition of existence of mankind itself" (95). Only in the creation of the word is speech alive; everyday language is the usage of dead or decaying words.

This clearly prefigures the concerns of Russian Futurism, but also becomes the model for literary criticism under Formalism. Echoing the aims of the Symbolists, Viktor Shklovsky

¹⁸ See, (Seifrid 53-66) for an excellent and thorough analysis of the relation between Bely and Potebnia's philosophies of language.

reinforces the distinction between conceptual thinking as the automatization of everyday experience, and the vitality of artistic thinking as coextensive with a qualitative difference between modes of language. Shklovsky's "Resurrection of the Word" functions as a bridge between Symbolism and his later seminal essay "Art as Device." He links the fossilization of the word, the loss of its inner form, to our perception of reality in the everyday. As words become familiarized in their usage, we become desensitized to them. When the word is "used in everyday speech[...]we do not sense the familiar, we do not see it, but recognise it" (Shklovsky 41-42). Shklovsky envisions the task of poetry, with the creation of new forms of the word, as the recovery of the sensation which the familiarity of the everyday has deadened.¹⁹

Regarding this theme of the death of the word, Bely goes even further. Part and parcel of the living word's essential connection to 'the world,' the decomposition of the word into abstract concept has more dire consequences for Bely than mere automatization. The decay of our relationship to language disintegrates our connection to life: "we decompose living speech into concept in order to tear concepts away from life[...]This is the point where life in all its vitality, deprived of living words, becomes madness and chaos for us" (Magic of Words 99). Depriving mankind of a spiritually inflected speech leads to "a period of degeneracy" (ibid). This notion of degeneration (*vyrozhdenie*), with clear echoes of Max Nordau's *Entartung (Degeneration)*,²⁰ evokes a more pronounced notion of decadence than we have in Merezhkovsky. Avril Pyman notes that "the 'decline' (*upadok*) [Merezhkovsky] speaks of...is not Nordau's 'degeneracy' or *fin-de-siècle* decadence (*dekadenstvo*),

¹⁹ The obvious difference from Bely, of course, is that where Bely attributes the loss of the spiritual connection with the living word to the act of cognition, Shklovsky has no pretensions to such mystical interests, so that the problem with the "loss of the inner form" instead leads to the absence of sensation and thought. The prosaic use of language for Shklovsky abrogates the active responsibility for thinking, and thus the resurrection of the poetic word "can restore to man sensation of the world, can resurrect things" (Shklovsky 46). Interestingly in her monograph on Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism Ewa Thompson actually situates Bely's theories of symbolism as seminal texts for Russian Formalism, annexes Bely to their ranks (Thompson 12-17 et passim)

²⁰ Written in 1892, Nordau's conservative screed against what he saw as degenerative art: symbolism, and decadence among them—was influential among the Russian intelligentsia, as detailed in (Pyman *A History of Russian Symbolism 45-51*).

but, on the contrary, the decline in artistic standards brought about by preaching the ‘useful prejudice’ of morality as though it were sacred truth” (Pyman 9). However, the crisis of the dead word, and its resultant period of degeneracy does not, in Bely’s eyes, simply entail a tendency toward cultural philistinism. The cultural decline here produces outright “barbarians of the everyday world” (Magic of Words 100). Bely’s account of degeneration suggests an erosion of the soul, and a restoration of the living word becomes a moral imperative. If Symbolism began in Merezhkovsky as a question of art’s role in contemporary society, the development of the Symbolist conception of language further complicates the relationship between art and society. Symbolism claims that society suffers from a sickness in its language, a sickness that society itself caused. Symbolists offer the poetic word then as a rejoinder not only to societal speech, but to its values as well.

Therefore, Bely’s account of the living word is not merely a historical description of the origin and nature of language, but is also a prescriptive model for mankind’s response to modernity’s barbarism. He thus positions the creation of the living word as the condition of life: “Mankind’s purpose is in the living creation of life” (96). The life of mankind, Bely qualifies, “presupposes a form of communication among individuals” (ibid). Communication then is understood not merely as the exchange of concepts but in a sharing of this intersubjective symbolic world: “Every act of communication is a living, creative process, where souls exchange secret images that depict and create the mysteries of life” (ibid). The invocation of communication (*obshchenie*) here would seem to suggest that the consequences of word-creation go beyond the practical exigencies of intersubjective interaction, and in fact strike at the conditions of human society (*obshchestvo*) itself. As in English, the two words share the same root, *obshchii* “common,” and Bely’s transition from subjective expressive speech (*rechi*) to communication (*obshchenie*) connects the task of the living word to the constitutive activity of communication in creating a shared world.

This formulation actually seems a bit contradictory to the precepts of Symbolism that Bely

has articulated. On one hand, he asserts that “the poetic image can be created by anyone[...]. Every man becomes something of an artist in hearing a living word” (Magic of Words 97). He adopts a kind of democratic attitude toward poetic receptivity that suggests that the creation of the living word has a revolutionary potential that can generate a rebirth in all of mankind. This is in one sense consistent with his claim concerning what Thomas Seifrid elegantly calls “the ontological efficacy of language...its ability not only to represent reality but also to change it” (Seifrid 63). If the ‘magic of words’ can condition our perception of the world in naming it, then surely the shared experience of these word-images can alter culture on a large scale. But functionally, the idea of socially extant living speech stands in direct contradiction to the inevitable fate of the ‘living word’ in its process of crystallization. Words do not lose their inner form because the communities that use them are always already culturally degenerate, rather the death of the word leads to the degeneration of the community. The dead, abstract concept is the necessary result of cognitive activity. This is reflected exactly in Nietzsche—to whom Bely and many Symbolists were devoted—where the erroneous formation of concepts, understood as the universalizing of discrete individuals, became the condition of our sense of truth, and thus for the possibility of human existence itself.²¹ It would stand to reason then that the living word would be absolutely antithetical to the space of everyday social discourse. While two or three Symbolists may revel in the incantatory power of living speech, it is not at all

²¹ cf. “Jeder Begriff entsteht durch Gleichsetzen des Nicht-gleichen[...].so gewiss ist der Begriff[...].durch beliebiges Fallenlassen dieser individuellen Verschiedenheiten” (“Every concept forms through making similar what is not the same...so certain is the concept...through the dropping of individual differences”) (Nietzsche 880, my translation). And what then is the purpose of these errors in concept-formation? Nietzsche, we must note, conceives of the metaphor of the empty shell, “leeren Hülsen” in a different spirit than Bely (878). The possible recognition of the arbitrariness of one’s concepts, of mere forms that stick only to the surface of reality, drives man to ascribe a principle of truth to the ground of knowledge. Truth fills up the shell, so to speak, and allows man to forget that his creative instinct was the sole cause of its creation: “...nur dadurch, dass der Mensch sich als Subjekt und zwar als künstlerisch schaffendes Subjekt vergisst, lebt er mit Ruhe, Sicherheit und Konsequenz” (883).

Rosenthal gives a thorough account of Nietzsche’s influence on the symbolists in (Rosenthal *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism 31-50*), though admittedly her focus is primarily on Nietzsche’s aesthetic justification for the world as religious critique, rather than his philosophy of language.

clear how this language can depart the isolated occupation of the aesthete and rupture the degenerate discourse of everyday life. Communication understood as the shared language of a community would seem limited to the ordinary language of the everyday.

So what could Bely possibly mean by insisting on the possibility of enacting living speech for mankind at large? Such a sentiment stands in stark contrast to the obscure esotericism of an artistic class that the Symbolists cultivated. It would be one thing, perhaps, if the communication of the inner mythical content of the word were to be restricted only to the domain of aesthetics. But if on the other hand, the development of some future aesthetic model could be one that sought out the symbolic content within art, and then the value of art could be cultivated en masse, alongside the banal concerns of everyday existence. The ideal cultural position of Symbolism would no longer be in opposition to the everyday, but in the creation of living words, invest the everyday with meaning. This is actually close to the position espoused by Tolstoy in *What is Art?*. It is worth juxtaposing the following passage at length against the implications that Bely invites:

The art of the future[...]will be that art alone which realizes the highest religious consciousness of the people of our time. Those works alone will be considered works of art which convey feelings drawing people towards brotherly union, or such all-human feelings as will be able to unite all people[...]All the rest of art, which conveys feelings accessible only to some people, will be considered unimportant, and will be neither condemned nor approved[...]And the artists who produce art will no longer be, as now, only rare people from the wealthy classes[...]but all the gifted representatives of the whole people who show a capacity for and an inclination towards artistic activity. Artistic activity will then be accessible to all people. It will become accessible to every simple person because, first, the art of the future will not require that complex technique which

disfigures the works of art of our time[...]but, on the contrary, will require clarity, simplicity, and brevity—conditions acquired not by mechanical exercises but by the education of taste. Secondly, artistic activity will become accessible to all members of the people, because...in the people's primary schools everyone will study music and painting (singing and drawing), together with reading and writing... (Tolstoy *What Is Art?* 151-152)

In principle, Tolstoy's prescriptions for the 'art of the future' do not stand at odds with the goals of Symbolism. The idea of art serving to unify a collective spirit echoes the notion of the living word's communicative potential. Additionally, Symbolism distances itself from a technical consideration of art; the success of the Symbolic on the listener is achieved likewise through immediacy of feeling rather than artifice. The critical differences are in Tolstoy's assumption of a universal aesthetic that could transmit itself to all people, and one that could be cultivated through education in the arts. Symbolism does not explicitly exclude any particular class of people, but it does insist on the contingency of its effect on the individual.

Representing a possible logical consequence of the initial Symbolist project, Vyacheslav Ivanov and Georgii Chulkov's 'mystic anarchism' represented a position far more sympathetic to this Tolstoyan populism than Bely's did. Their view was that a religious-mystical content inhered in art that could galvanize the masses. 'Mystic anarchism' paired a fetishization of Nietzsche-inflected anti-individualist Dionysian ecstasy with the revolutionary sentiments of post-1905 Russia, and saw the sentiments of their art as the substance of a new artistic-religious consciousness for society. This proved terribly divisive among the Symbolists, with 'mystic anarchism' rebuffed sternly by Bely, Valery Bryusov, and others. Of Bely's criticisms most notably was his assertion that the mystic anarchists conflated the theory and practical content of art; while Symbolism in principle is quite sympathetic to the idea of art's aim to access a spiritual realm, the notion that artistic practice could

already contain determinate religious content would be to “submit Symbolist theory to religious dogmatism” (Bely "Symbolism and Contemporary Russian Art" 106). The theory of symbolism, as a theory of a future aesthetics, must, in Bely’s opinion, disavow any specific content of its contemporary form.

Moreover, the source of the symbol—the depths of reality as Merezhkovsky put it—tacitly demands an attunement of consciousness not to forms of art, but to reality itself. This is why Bely, in speculating on the nature of a “future aesthetics” of Symbolism again insists on the primacy of creative process over and above any determinate form of art or dogmatic program that informs it (Bely "Symbolism and Contemporary Russian Art" 99-102). A theory of Symbolism is only oriented toward the future; at present, emptied of all determinate content, can only valorize the creative instinct. It endorses poetic expression as a structural opposition to prosaic speech; the form of poetry is not inherently Symbolic. And unlike prosaic speech, the non-discursiveness of poetic speech resists subjugation into the ordinary, utilitarian usage that Bely characterizes as dead words.

Bely’s understanding of symbolism poses a difficult challenge to the potential function for symbolic within a social reality.²² If Symbolism ought not cloister itself in the monastery of aesthetics, as Bely seems to demand, but instead insert itself in the relation between the subject and reality, it is yet unclear in what sense a form of community could consolidate around the symbolic word.²³ If a symbolism that privileges poetry structurally restricts its audience to a cult of aesthetes in Ivanov’s salon, its transformative power is less the aestheticization of the everyday, than it is the aestheticization of the artist’s life. Perhaps a model of symbolism that reconnects with the prosaic is necessary to posit a spiritual value within the broader societal realm.

²² I explore how Bely addresses this question in the following chapter.

²³ Peter Bürger offers a similar diagnosis of Aestheticism, where, as the self-reflective stage of bourgeois art, with art itself becoming the content of art, it is detached from the “praxis of life” and lacks any political character and social impact (Bürger 22-27).

The apparent paradox of symbolism that we have explored thus far, that symbolism at once views art as a medium to reconnect society with a sense of the spiritual in reality that had been lost amid a utilitarian ethos, but at the same demands turning away from the realm of everyday existence—thereby spurning social reality—is in part a problem of competing Symbolisms. About twenty years after Merezhkovsky had framed symbolism as a critical response to cultural degeneration in the 1890s, sharing a close affiliation to the decadent movement, a younger generation of Symbolists like Bely and Ivanov pursued a broader utopian vision of the symbolic aestheticization of life.²⁴ As the realm of the everyday became increasingly anathema to symbolism, the prosaic became less viable as a literary form. However, there were symbolist novels, to be sure. Bely's magnum opus *Petersburg* is considered a modernist masterpiece and will be examined in the following chapter. But Fedor Sologub's novel, *Melkii bes (The Petty Demon)* is ideally situated to offer some rapprochement between the diverging visions of Symbolism. Sologub contributed poetry to the first symbolist literary journal, *Severnyi Vestnik*, and his novel straddles the so-called two generations of Symbolism.²⁵ He wrote *The Petty Demon* between 1892 and 1902, but only published it (first serially in *Voprosy Zhizni*, and subsequently in book form by *Shipovnik*) in 1907. Recognized as one of the major works of the Symbolist movement, (and yet curiously under-examined), Sologub's novel offers a strongly illustrative example of the early decadent/symbolist nexus merged with the later symbolist vision of the mystical impinging upon, and even displacing everyday reality.

The Petty Demon is a portrait of the *poshlost'* in provincial life. Vladimir Nabokov notably defined the concept, loosely translated as 'the banal', as "not only the obviously trashy but also the

²⁴ On the "new generation" of Symbolists see (Pyman *A History of Russian Symbolism* 181-225).

²⁵ Diana Greene actually casts doubt on whether the novel should be considered a "symbolist novel," and concludes it cannot be called either a symbolist or decadent novel (Greene 112-3).

falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive” (Nabokov 70).²⁶ The novel’s characters epitomize the idea, all vulgar, petty, and altogether morally corrupt. The novel’s protagonist, Peredonov, is a *ginnaziia* instructor whose sole ambition is to gain promotion to the higher rank of inspector. The bulk of the plot follows his banal endeavors, as he attempts at once to ingratiate himself with the town’s civic leaders while guarding against a paranoid conviction that others are attempting to slander him, sabotage his efforts, or even kill him. He sadistically persecutes his students, taking pleasure in beating them, and otherwise indulges in acts of sexual depravity. In short, critics have routinely described his character as demonic or evil, while also recognizing that his character is the most extreme representation of a decadent subject among the other inhabitants of the town. The other characters engage in a sliding scale of degeneracy, a community unified perhaps only in the shared exchange of gossip, which one critic has described as, “the life blood of the town” (Hutchings 114).

The plot then would seem to provide a social-critical context of stagnant *byt* against which the Symbolist concerns of the novel could be articulated. The Symbolist objective could be seen as reclaiming the value of life (*zhizn'*), from the *poshlost'* (banality) to which the everyday existence (*byt*) is subject. Anglophone critics have generally considered the positive symbolist elements in the novel restricted to three domains: Of primary interest is the menacing mystical aura of the world that surrounds Peredonov and is perhaps projected by him; this would obviously include the *nedotykomka*, the mysterious spirit that antagonizes Peredonov as his paranoia becomes more conspicuous.²⁷ Additionally, Liudmila, the woman who seduces Sasha, a young schoolboy, has been

²⁶ Svetlana Boym has an excellent overview of the history of *poshlost'*, and the development of the concept in Russian culture and literature from Pushkin to Chekhov (Boym 41-48).

²⁷ cf. Within Linda Ivanits’ monograph on the novel, she does an extended analysis of the *nedotykomka*, arguing that it cannot be seen as just a product of Peredonov’s psychosis, but a spiritual part of the novel’s cosmos (Ivanits 311-323). Greene refers to the novel’s “dualistic symbolist metaphysics” and Peredonov’s attempt to transcend the sphere of his grotesque reality and access a higher realm (Greene 111).

described as a decadent aesthete, (in which their shared play of eroticism is a creative escape from the vulgar world).²⁸ Finally, critics have discussed the Nietzschean demonic energy that propels the novel to its carnivalesque, Dionysiac charade of the final scenes.²⁹

Between Peredonov's existential paranoia and Liudmila's aestheticism, the dominant reading of the Symbolist element of *Melkii bes* focuses on the way in which these characters undermine the idle banality of everyday existence. A closer analysis will reveal that central to our thematic interest in these two characters is in fact their relation to the language of their provincial community, to 'idle talk' and gossip. The remainder of this chapter will examine how Sologub transforms ordinary language, as the essential expression of the *poshlost'* of everydayness, into the ground of regenerative possibility.

²⁸ cf. Milton Ehre writes that the Liudmila-Sasha relationship is "a characteristic effort of decadence to endow the present with absolute value (Ehre 167).

²⁹ cf. (Kalbouss)

How to do things with puns

Immediately after the publication of *The Petty Demon*, the term Peredonovism emerged in the critical lexicon to describe a social type and a metaphysical attitude typified by the novel's protagonist. This characterization was considered consistent with the condition of the provincial Russian and even taken up as a universal truth of humanity (Barker 307). Sologub himself, in the foreword to the novel's second edition, speaks favorably of the critical interpretation of Peredonovism as a universal condition, writing, "Others[...]think that the Peredonovism described in the novel is a rather widespread phenomenon. Several people even think that by peering closely into ourselves, each of us will find the unmistakable characteristics of Peredonov inside" (Sologub *The Petty Demon* 27).³⁰ Accordingly much time has been spent by critics attempting to define or schematize Peredonovism by either deducing its definition from Peredonov's character itself, or seeking to locate it as the structuring theme of the entire novel,³¹ and by extension, weighing the ancillary characters' varying degrees of removal from or affinity with Peredonovism.³² Some difficulties arise, however, when attempting to derive Peredonovism from the character of Peredonov himself, because rather than articulate a coherent worldview, Peredonov's behavior

³⁰ "Drugie...dumayut, chto izobrazhennaya v romane peredonovschina—yavlenie dovol'no rasprostranennoe. Nekotorye dumayut dazhe, chto kazhdyi iz nas, vinimatel'no v sebe nesomnennye cherty Peredonova" (Sologub *Melkii Bes; Shabby Demon* 31) Unless otherwise noted, all cited Russian quotations in this chapter are from *Melkii Bes/Shabby Demon*. Following convention shorter quotations will be presented with the translation in the text body with the transliterated Russian in footnote. Block quotes will be given with the original followed by the English translation.

³¹ Diana Greene makes a compelling claim that "the events in *The Petty Demon* are organized by a pattern of escalating intensity..." governed by "the result of the operation within the novel of a single diabolical principle: the creation of misery for oneself through cruelty to others" (Greene 72). She defines this logic itself as Peredonovism, explaining that "in Peredonov, the petty demon himself, we see both [the principle's] most extreme form and its logical culmination in madness...Peredonov himself generates the novel's crescendo pattern" (72).

³² Stanley Rabinowitz, for instance, offers a definition of *peredonovshchina* as the "constant slippage of all phenomena into an intensified state of corruption and decay—[which] represents the major component of Sologub's philosophical vision in *Melkii bes*," in order to weigh that condition against Sasha and Liudmila's actions (Rabinowitz 514). The possible correspondence of the Sasha-Liudmila episodes to Peredonovism has in particular been a point of contention in the book's thematic unity, as Stephen Hutchings relates (Hutchings fn. 4, 253). Similarly, Harriet Hustis sees the critical effort to assimilate Liudmila into the spectrum of Peredonovism as an attempt to "rationalize and control the text, most often formulated in terms of comparative dichotomies" (Hustis 632).

consists of an over-determined reaction to the given world around him. Critics tend to discount Peredonov as a rational agent, citing his failure to parse meaning from the world, and instead refer to instances of his sadistic cruelty or banally motivated plots of self-advancement as the primary attributes of his character. As a result, most readings have described Peredonovism as essentially a descriptive pathology of despicable actions.

As such, the characterization of Peredonov progresses in the manner of an accretive diagnosis; what Greene calls the “escalating intensity” of Peredonov’s evil builds as his paranoia increasingly compels a schism from reality. Peredonov himself is the cause of this rupture. He suffers from a kind of aphasia, having “an inability to distinguish among thoughts, words, and the things they symbolize,” which leads to his failure to “distinguish between words and objective truth” (Greene 74). The novel would seemingly support an interpretative method that isolates his psyche from the objective world. The narrator’s descriptions of Peredonov’s character play a dual function in emphasizing the disjuncture between him and the world: they explicitly describe his disorders, but also—as we will see—perform their effect, by which I mean that the narrator’s interpolated explanations of his disorders disrupt the continuity of the realist narrative, as for instance: “Peredonov thought for a while and suddenly burst into laughter. He never reacted immediately to what seemed amusing to him. His faculties were dull and slow” (Sologub *The Petty Demon* 38).³³ Unlike say, Virginia Woolf’s utilization of free indirect discourse to represent a character’s stream of consciousness and the continuity between external action and interior states of mind, Sologub’s narrator disrupts the flow of the narrated action, and in the disjointed narration Peredonov’s laughter is uncannily detached from its putative cause, whereby the narratorial delays literally perform Peredonov’s slow reaction.

³³ “Peredonov podumal i vdruḡ zakhokhotal. On vseḡda ne srazy otzyvalsya na to, chto kazalos’ emu smeshnym,—medlenny i tupy byli ego vospriyatiya” (46)

That said, such a view of the relation between Peredonov and the world of the novel belies an essential aspect of the narrative. Namely, Peredonov's paranoia is the source of the plot itself. To go further, it can be said that the bulk of the reality of the novel is constituted by Peredonov's interpretation of the world. Therefore, to insist on a division between Peredonov's paranoid consciousness and reality is a difficult argument to maintain. Greene writes that Peredonov "lacks the intelligence, humor, and aesthetic sense to distinguish between figurative and literal levels of language," and in turn he construes all speech as some form of threat (Greene 75). Indeed we see examples of this throughout the novel: "They were both laughing. Peredonov kept giving them suspicious looks. When people were laughing in his presence and he didn't know about what, he always supposed that they were laughing about him";³⁴ "Peredonov didn't like to spend time reflecting. He always believed straightaway what people told him"³⁵ (Sologub *The Petty Demon* 40, 49). As a result, Peredonov's paranoia is manifest as an immediate reaction to what he perceives. His hermeneutics of suspicion, as it were, are strictly surface-level; he thinks that everything is about him, assimilating all figurative uses of speech or completely unrelated discourse into one unified literal conspiracy against him.

So, if *The Petty Demon* is a "symbolist novel" we would expect that its representation of the world is one that does not lie on a stable pre-given plane of reality, wherein language produces *indeterminacy* rather than certainty. Thus, the language that is indicative of the very stagnancy of existence must become the ground and cipher for the unveiling of its truth. The narrative jokingly hints at where we are to find the activity of Symbolism in the novel:

Надежде Васильевне казалось, что самый приятный и удобный разговор для

³⁴ "Oba oni smeyalis'. Peredonov podozritel'no posmatrival na nikh. Kogda pri nem smeyalils' i on ne znal, o chem, on vseгда predpolagal, chto eto nad nim smeyutsya" (49).

³⁵ "Peredonov ne lyubil razmyshlyat'. V pervuyu minutu on vseгда veril tomu, chto emu skazhut"(62)

учителя русского языка разговор о состоянии учебного дела, о реформе гимназий, о воспитании детей, о литературе, о символизме, о русских журналах. Всех этих тем она коснулась, но не получала в ответ ничего, кроме озадачивших ее отповедей, обнаруживших, что ее гостям эти вопросы не любопытны. Она увидела, что возможен только один разговор – городские сплетни[...]Надежда Васильевна легонько вздохнула и – делать нечего – принялась пустословить и сплетничать, как умела. (106-108)

Nadezhda Vasilyevna thought that the most pleasant and comfortable conversation for a teacher of the Russian language [Peredonov] would be a conversation about the state of pedagogy, about the reform of the gymnasia, about the raising of children, about literature, about Symbolism[...]but received nothing in response other than perplexing rebuffs which revealed that her guests were not interested in those questions. She saw that only one conversation was possible: town gossip[...]since there was no other choice, she started to indulge in idle talk and gossip as best she knew. (76-77)

If the task of the Symbolist novel is to unveil the hidden symbolism of its world, it cannot disclose this content with explicit didacticism. It must, by contrast, emerge from the language of the novel's world. Nadezhda's disappointment in the light of her desire to discuss Symbolism ironically veils the hidden source of the symbolic in the novel: as I will argue later in this chapter, it is precisely the town gossip that Nadezhda devalues as worthless that destabilizes the coherence of *byt* and restructures relations between characters.

In fact, Stephen Hutchings argues that gossip is the constituent ground of the novel's anti-narrative structure. Hutchings conceives of the novel as “characterized by a veritable *proliferation* of

plots,” provoked by the effect of the townspeople’s gossip (Hutchings 112-115). He argues that the proliferation of imagined or “phantom plots” in the novel is a byproduct of Peredonov’s “creativity,” whereby the rather meager master plot of the novel—Peredonov’s pursuit of an inspectorship—is amplified by his paranoiac attribution of meaning to the most idly disseminated speech, or even to inanimate objects. In this reading, the plot’s action is in itself inessential to determining the meaning of the narrative. Or rather, the thematics of delusion and banality already anticipate the plot, as they constitute its very formation.³⁶ Thinking along similar lines, Greene argues that narrative is organized by an emotional principle (escalating intensity) rather than the progression of a dramatic sequence. The conventional formal characteristics of plot bear less significance on the generation of symbolic content as does the capacity to generate affect. Such a view is consistent with one of Valery Bryusov’s categorization of the Symbolist work as those “which have been given the form of a complete story or even drama, but in which separate scenes have a significance not so much for the development of the action as for a certain impression on the reader or viewer” (Bryusov 23).

Now, if the tenets of symbolism do in fact necessitate a devaluation of the everyday and with it its attendant everyday speech, in favor of a poetic concern for language, the power of gossip, as a genre of everyday language in *Melkii bes* would seem contradictory. That it could compel Peredonov to create these ‘phantom plots’ in particular speaks to an apparent generative power of such a speech genre. Linda Ivanits puts it quite well that in the novel, “Words tend to lose their value as a means of exchanging ideas, and they often acquire a magical significance” (Ivanits 312). That is to say that words do not have the power to actualize magical phenomena, but the comprehension of apparently rational speech exceeds its logical limits to the point that its only significance transcends the bounds

³⁶ Hutchings argues that the novel features a “metatextual” rejection of narrative convention. Peredonov’s metaphysical attitude of melancholy “is superimposed[...]onto the level of the actions designed to articulate that sense” (124).

of realism.

An exchange between Peredonov and his friend Rutilov is especially illustrative of the magical capacity of words:

-- Ты, Ардальон Борисыч, и не будешь никогда быком, потому что ты --
форменная свинья.

-- Врешь! -- угрюмо сказал Передонов.

-- Нет, не вру, и могу доказать, -- злорадно сказал Рutilов.

-- Докажи, -- потребовал Передонов.

-- погоди, докажу, -- с тем же злорадством в голосе ответил Рutilов.

Оба замолчали. Передонов пугливо ждал, и томила его злость на Рutilова. Вдруг Рutilов спросил:

-- Ардальон Борисыч, а у тебя есть пяточок?

-- Есть, да тебе не дам, -- злобно ответил Передонов.

Рutilов захохотал.

-- Коли у тебя есть пяточок, так как же ты не свинья! -- крикнул он радостно.

Передонов в ужасе хватился за нос.

-- Врешь, какой у меня пяточок, у меня человечья харя, -- бормотал он. (207)

"You, Ardal'on Borisych, you will never be a bull, because you are a downright swine."

"You lie!" Peredonov said gloomily.

"No, I'm not lying, and I can prove it," Rutilov said spitefully.

"Prove it," Peredonov demanded.

"Wait, I'll prove it," Rutilov answered with the same spitefulness in his voice.

They both were silent. Peredonov waited fearfully and his anger at Rutilov tormented him.

Suddenly Rutilov asked,

“Ardal’on Borisych, do you have a *pyatachok*?”

“I do, and I won’t give it to you,” answered Peredonov bitterly.

Rutilov roared with laughter.

“If you have a *pyatachok*, then how are you not a swine!” he shouted gladly.

Peredonov clutched his nose in horror.

“You’re lying, what sort of *pyatachok* do I have, I have a human noggin,” he muttered. (My translation)

When Rutilov insultingly calls Peredonov a swine, Peredonov responds by calling Rutilov a liar. Initially it would be sensible to understand that Peredonov is contesting the insult to his personality implicitly conveyed in the metaphor of a “downright swine,” wherein Peredonov’s meaning by “you lie” is: ‘You are incorrect. I am not an indecent person.’ To which Rutilov’s response, “No, I’m not lying and I can prove it,” while perhaps anticipating an account of Peredonov’s indecency, strikes us as an oddly formulated response, this notion of proof (*dokazat*). Indeed, Rutilov’s ‘proof’ is formulated in the question: “Do you have a *pyatachok*,” a word that can mean both a five-kopeck piece and a pig’s snout. The double entendre logic of the pun’s punchline functions as the conclusive evidence: that if one has a *pyatachok*, he must be a swine. What is unexpected here is the *perlocutionary* force of the pun; “Peredonov clutched his nose in horror. ‘You’re lying.’” The ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin defines the perlocutionary force of a performative speech act as that which, “produces certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience” (Austin 101). Peredonov’s accusation that Rutilov is lying targets the non-metaphoric assertion that Peredonov has a pig’s snout. But because Peredonov met the conditions of having a five-kopeck piece, it appears, the unintended consequences of the pun *convinced* Peredonov of this magical transformation! It is important to recognize that the magical power of *pyatachok* is not

asserted by the narrator, but actively occurs in the process of communication between the two characters.

Following the line of this thought, Austin's seminal work, *How To Do Things with Words*, helps us elucidate an essential point here. In developing the concept of the "speech-act" and the categories of performative utterances, Austin observes that meaning does not solely depend on the syntactic correspondence of the parts of a sentence or on the truth value of a given proposition. Rather, there are a host of uses of language in which words are used to *do* something in the world—e.g. warn, scare, marry, name, or promise. And it is through these so-called performatives that we appreciate that to understand their meaning demands considering "the total situation in which the utterance is issued—the total speech-act" (52). The meaning of a given utterance, and its efficacy to do some thing hangs on so many conditions of the circumstances in which it is said. In short, it is in the act of the utterance and the context of the situation that a performative has creative power. In the scene with Peredonov and Rutilov, the pun itself that generates this magical force does not register as poetically evocative, and yet, it makes strange the ordinary. Because of Peredonov's resolutely literal understanding of figurative speech, he is deeply shaken by his experience of this apparent violation of the law of non-contradiction: he somehow both has a *pyatachok* and does not have a *pyatachok*. The scene is a stunning restaging of Ivanov's claim that "Symbolists do not exist—if there are no Symbolists listening." If Ivanov was referring to emotional exchange expressed in the relation between the symbolist poet and his ideal reader, this supposed privilege function of poetic language occurs here in ordinary speech.

In fact, nearly all overtly metaphoric or poeticized speech produced by the characters—excepting perhaps Liudmila—is excessively poor, exemplifying Bely's claim about "dead allegories." When Peredonov actually attempts to pun it just seems idly purposeless: He catches Marta sleeping, and calls her a pine tree, punning *so sna* (being half-asleep/emerging from dreams) with *sosna*

(pinetree), a remark so ineffectual and slight that “Marta didn’t understand his pun, but smiled, guessing from the smile on Vershina’s lips that something had been said that was supposed to be humorous” (196). Nonetheless the magical transformations of language occur at the site of ‘dead metaphors’ or ‘puns.’ Peredonov’s receptive attitude toward speech is a hyperliteralization of language that processes metaphoric speech as actual, making the figurative real. Peredonov’s comprehension of an utterance dispossesses the speaker of his intended meaning, elevating simple communication to metaphoric magic, while at the same time rendering the reciprocal function of shared dialogue defective.

Though Peredonov elicits the polyvalent implications of speech through his literal-mindedness, that same inflexibility leads him to mistrust the revealed instability of meanings. Sasha, by contrast, provides a model of someone who can tolerate this linguistic instability. He playfully indulges in Liudmila’s punning despite recognizing the artifice, saying to her: “They’re different things but you’re saying words that sound the same. Only you won’t fool me” (141).³⁷ As Peredonov reveals these linguistic instabilities he develops a suspicion that the authentic meaning of a phenomenon or utterance is hidden behind its appearance: “all around everything seemed suspicious and strange[...]All things were strangely and surprisingly concealed behind the darkness as though a different nocturnal life, that was incomprehensible and hostile to man, had awakened in them” (174). This instance of Peredonov’s suspicion is not inconsistent with the earlier description that Peredonov does not “spend time reflecting,” but where in the first analysis his suspicion arose from reacting immediately and not seeking to understand the other, in this moment it appears that his tendency to perceive the world immediately without reflection is incapacitated by something

³⁷ “Ved” eto—raznoe, a vy te zhe slova govorite. Tol’ko menya vy ne poddenete” (207).

Sasha recognizes what Hutchings regards as “the connection between aesthetics and mendacity,” wherein Liudmila’s “art, is in its metaphoric essence, all about lying: presenting as equivalent things which are not” (Hutchings 131).

obscuring access to direct experience.

Peredonov's fear of a meaning concealed behind appearance—of the possibility of secrets—motivates a warped hermeneutics by which his suspicion does not lead him to interrogate an interlocutor about his or her unsaid intentions, but rather to abstract or extract a discrete meaning from an otherwise coherent utterance. In this sense, Peredonov's interpretative methodology causes a rupture in the communicative function of ordinary speech. When the narrator notes that Peredonov believes immediately whatever one says to him, this does not mean that he believes the speaker as a rational agent who communicates intended meanings, but rather that he believes without reflection and generates a meaning solely intelligible to himself. His suspicion therefore places him at a distance from what Austin would call the context of the “total speech act in the total speech situation” or what Bakhtin conceives of as the extraverbal context of the utterance. (Austin 52; Bakhtin "The Problem of Speech Genres" 74-5). He isolates given speech from its utterance.

When Peredonov encounters Rubovsky, a police officer, he promptly initiates an exercise in discrediting purported gossip about him, and spreads gossip about his accuser in turn. Rubovsky, meanwhile, who is described as a man who “loved to listen to gossip but was himself modest and silent as the grave and never caused anyone any unnecessary trouble,” attempts to assuage Peredonov's fears, having apparently no interest in gossip as a mode of accusation (79).³⁸ He attempts to deflect Peredonov's insinuation that Natasha was trying to steal something from Rubovsky, by assuring him with the benign idiom, “I don't keep the plans to the fortress in my house” (79).³⁹ But instead of assuaging his fears as it was intended, the invocation of *krepost'* gets activated as a threat: “It seemed to him that Rubovsky was alluding to the fact that he could imprison Peredonov in a

³⁸ любил слушать сплетни, но сам был скромн и молчалив, как могила, и никому не делал ненужных неприятностей. (110)

³⁹ Пожалуйста, не беспокойтесь об этом, — сухо возразил подполковник, — у меня планы крепостей не хранятся. (111)

fortress (*krepost*)” (79).⁴⁰ The word rather than the utterance instigates in Peredonov’s imagination a conviction about imprisonment.⁴¹ His suspicious interpretation, though creatively generating this ‘phantom’ fortress from nothing but ordinary words comes at the expense of the functioning of that language in its dialogic orientation.

A question remains however, about Peredonov’s role in the generative malformations of everyday language. What influence does Peredonov’s character as ‘demonic’ have in the creative process? Indeed, other characters pun, but the result does not always provoke existential unrest. For instance Tishkov, a merchant who arrives at the end of Peredonov’s meeting with the mayor, a man who “spoke all kinds of nonsense in rhymes” his language games are utterly ineffectual (Sologub *The Petty Demon 95*). In a comic continuation to the scene after our protagonist departs, these two minor characters, the mayor and Tishkov carry out a conversation about Peredonov, where the mayor reflects upon Peredonov as Tishkov senselessly and mechanistically parrots his words in rhymed epithets. The purpose of the scene is borne out in the narrator’s commentary:

Но Тишкову было все равно, слушают его или нет; он не мог не схватывать чужих слов для рифмачества и действовал с неуклонностью хитро придуманной машинки-докучалки...можно было подумать, что это не живой человек, что он уже умер, или и не жил никогда, и ничего не видит в живом мире и не слышит ничего, кроме звенящих мертво слов. (140)

...it made no difference to Tishkov whether people listened to him or not. He couldn’t help seizing on other people’s words for the sake of rhyme and he operated with the

⁴⁰ Упоминание о крепостях озадачило Передонова. Ему казалось, что Рубовский намекает на то, что может посадить Передонова в крепость. (ibid)

⁴¹ Perhaps alternatively, Peredonov processes the word *krepost*’ as the entirety of the utterance.

steadiness of a cunningly devised mechanical bore...one might have thought that this was no living person, that he had already died or never been alive, and could see nothing in the living world and could hear nothing other than the deadly ring of his own words. (96)

Tishkov's mechanization points to a sickly poetics of sorts. Though imitating poetic form in everyday discourse, it produces no vital energy. The narrator discredits Tishkov's efforts as thoroughly banal; the mayor does not acknowledge them as a form of dialogue, and thus ignores his utterances. The difference between Tishkov and Peredonov appears to hang on the emphasis on Peredonov's individualist motivations, which provoke feelings of either suspicion or desire for affirmation onto his interlocutor's speech, while by contrast, Tishkov strips the mayor's language of any communicative quality and reduces it to rhyming phonemes.

Although Peredonov's suspicious interpretations of others' utterances cause misfires in the total speech situation, Tishkov's language-games destroy the entire communicative function of ordinary language. Recalling Bely's "Magic of Words," Tishkov's poetics fail to generate the living word, because it rejects wholesale an effort to communicate. By contrast, Peredonov's creative agency results not from his demonic character but from his compromised—but still engaged—communicative capacity. In this sense, Peredonov's name evokes its etymological connection to *peredat'*, to convey, transmit, or communicate. Though still essentially antisocial in his suspicion of others, Peredonov effects a communicative effort nonetheless. His endeavors highlight the capacity for ordinary language to produce a force in excess of its everyday meaning—and yet one that is essentially bound to the interpersonal context of its utterance.

Indeed, the novel demonstrates a logic toward ordinary language that emphasizes its creative force without the prerequisite of Peredonov's mis- or over-interpretations. Varvara's farce with the forged letter from the Princess deconstructs the processes of ordinary language, isolating its creative

force from its syntactical meaning. Peredonov refuses to marry his cousin until they receive a letter from the Princess in St. Petersburg approving his inspectorship. Varvara, anxious to marry, is encouraged by her friend Grushina to forge a series of letters from the Princess that grant Peredonov his desired position. The decisive element in the entire farce lies not the believability of the letter's contents, nor the faithfulness of the forgery's voice or handwriting to the Princess's, but merely in the fact that the letter's envelope bears postage from St. Petersburg. Sologub anticipates J.L. Austin's concept of the locutionary speech act in distilling within language its force to communicate effect. Buoyed by the authority provided by the stamp, in verifying the forgery's supposed provenance, the letter functions as an illocutionary act: the narrative describes the immediacy in which the opening of the letter is attended by the consequence that Peredonov announces "Now, it's decided, Varvara. We're getting married" (194).⁴² Seifrid mischaracterizes Bely's "ontological efficacy of language" as *perlocutionary*, but in principle, this is an example of the act of speech "changing reality" as Bely theorizes. An even better example in the novel might be Peredonov's comportment toward "spells"; to protect himself against the influences of Rutilov at one point and Volodin another, he issues an incantation of "*chur, chur, chur,*" where the act of the invocation itself safeguards him from any magical threats (Sologub *Melkii Bes; Shabby Demon* 89).⁴³

It seems then that the creative mutability of ordinary language is voiced *in spite of* Peredonov's degenerate paranoia, not because of it. The narrator suggests that the melancholic mood that Peredonov's existential attitude projects onto the world actually blinds him to the fact of his soul's correspondence to nature:

Передонов чувствовал в природе отражения своей тоски, своего страха под

⁴² Ну, теперь решено, Варвара, — венчаемся. (289)

⁴³ The spell anticipates the "transrational poetry" *zaim* of Russian Futurists like Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh. As Livak writes, the Futurists were in many cases students of the Symbolists (Livak 58).

личиною ее враждебности к нему, — той же внутренней и недоступной
внешним определениям жизни во всей природе, жизни, которая одна только
и создает истинные отношения, глубокие и несомненные, между человеком и
природою, этой жизни он не чувствовал. Потому-то вся природа казалась ему
проникнутою мелкими человеческими чувствами. Ослепленный
обольщениями личности и отдельного бытия, он не понимал дионисических,
стихийных восторгов, ликующих и вопиющих в природе. Он был слеп и
жалок, как многие из нас. (311)

Peredonov sensed the reflection of his melancholy and fear in the guise of nature's hostility
towards him. But that interior life in nature that defied exterior definition, that life which
alone could create generate relations, profound and manifest, between man and nature—
no, he had no sense whatsoever of that kind of life. For that reason, all of nature seemed to
him to be replete with petty human emotions. Blinded by the delusions of the individual
and of separate being, he did not comprehend the Dionysian elemental ecstasies that were
exultant and rampant in nature. He was blind and pitiful, like many of us. (208)

We must remember that the narrator endorses the idea that Peredonov represents not an
extraordinary demonic figure, but merely the most dramatic representation of man's attitude toward
the world, i.e. "he is like many of us." The symbolic potency of the word that opens up the "elemental
ecstasies" of nature is not recognized by Peredonov. Only in the context of language's
misinterpretation—between his consciousness and another's—where we understand that the
conflicting two meanings are held simultaneously, is this nature revealed.

So what then of Liudmila? Does she, as many critics have argued, represent a proper aesthetic

attitude toward reality? Harriet Hustis, for instance, provocatively situates Liudmila as a producer of speech and narrative contra Peredonov, who “is both unable to recognize his own fictions as such and subsumes the fictions of others within his own narrative of persecution” (Hustis 642). In one of their few direct encounters, Liudmila presents herself to Peredonov alongside her two sisters during a sort of banal re-staging of the Judgement of Paris. While one sister professes her virtue of cooking the tastiest *bliny*, and another coquettishly insinuates her sexual aptitude, Liudmila tells him, “And every morning I’ll go around the town and gather up all the gossip and then tell you. It’ll be very amusing” (Sologub *The Petty Demon* 63).⁴⁴ Hustis reads Liudmila’s “story-telling abilities” (*rasskazyvat*) rather than the act of gathering gossip (*vse spletni sobirat*) as her virtue, and thus asserts that Liudmila is “the source of linguistic power” in the novel (Hustis 642). While it is certainly fair to recognize Liudmila’s rhetorical capabilities, we ought to stop short of granting her a virtuous authority over the power of the word. Moreover, any hierarchical relation between Peredonov and Liudmila here elides the significance of the invocation of gossip in this passage. Both characters definitely demonstrate a hypersensitivity to the potency of everyday speech, but despite Liudmila’s facility with it, her attitude toward language is not indicative of a Symbolist model. Even if Liudmila is able to mobilize ordinary speech through her creative wordplay more willfully than Peredonov, her treatment of language suffers from its Parnassian aesthetics.

As Sologub’s own theoretical writings demonstrate, the lyric attitude toward the world is one that bases itself on the “oblivion of the given world” (Sologub “Poets’ Demons” 346-7). On one hand, the result of this perspective is that it elevates the ordinary mundanity of everyday life into the realm of the “eternal image” (*ibid*). The lyric poet has no use for the world as it is given in “crude experience.” And yet, Sologub refuses to “depart into the land of the lyrical No,” the lyrical rejection

⁴⁴ “A ya kazhdoe utro budu po gorodu khodit’, vse spletni sobirat’, a potom vam rasskazyvat’. Preveselo” (85)

of everyday experience (348). The lyric suppresses the ugly phenomena of the everyday ineffectually, behind “bright, external, colorfully painted masks [that] have long been familiar to every schoolchild” (ibid).

This is precisely the disposition of Liudmila. And Sasha, perhaps unwittingly, performs the role of the schoolchild, unveiling the masks of her wordplay. Immediately after meeting Sasha, Liudmila already nurtures ecstatic erotic dreams in which he is whipped by other naked boys. The logic of her attraction to Sasha is a desexualized, disinterested aesthetic fascination with his adolescence. Milton Ehre has convincingly argued that the Sasha-Liudmila relationship revels in the liminal space of pubescence. Sasha represents the presentiment of sexuality “without the capacity for penetration and orgasm, hence a limited capacity for aggression” (Ehre 165). As a result, Liudmila’s seduction does not aim at sexual consummation, but rather strives to suspend that teleological momentum. She strives to restrict eroticism to the realm of the aesthetic, fomenting an “eternal state of erotic arousal,” while arresting Sasha’s biological development toward sexual maturity (164). Were she to allow Sasha to reach mature masculinity, he would become a Peredonov, who subordinates the aesthetics of erotic beauty to the demands of sexual desire.

Liudmila’s seductive technique therefore utilizes the potency of creative language, and poetic form to evade direct interrogation. This is the stuff of flirtation, to deflect and dodge the sexual fact that is its object. Even in their first encounter, Sasha is sensitive to Liudmila’s proclivity for verbal gymnastics. After Sasha confesses that he likes to “cuddle” or “caress” (*laskat’sia*), initiating an unprovoked erotic register of affection, Liudmila slips its direct insinuations with a playful pun about his bathing habits, while simultaneously modulating the erotic dynamic to one conceptually more elusive—where in doing so, she (re-)claims the role of the erotic aggressor. She asks him, “So you like to cuddle. And do you like to puddle [*polaskat’sia*] about as well?” (Sologub *The Petty Demon*

141).⁴⁵

Accordingly, Liudmila's aesthetic attraction necessitates suppressing the social and biological characteristics of Sasha's identity. Before their second meeting, she brings him a bottle of her perfume, a rather trite symbol for aesthetic artifice. But the meaning of this gesture is quite pointed: "She had thought of taking the perfume with her earlier—to perfume the gymnasium student so that he wouldn't smell of his repulsive Latin, ink, and boyishness" (155).⁴⁶ She wishes to suppress the reality of his boyishness beneath the delightful fragrances of artificial nature. This seemingly metaphoric aggression becomes actually violent through the unintentional disclosure of a pun. She asks Sasha if he would like to be perfumed, using the verb *dushit'*, meaning to perfume, but also to choke or strangle.⁴⁷ Sasha, immediately attuned to the threatening implication of the verb, lays bare the double entendre, affixing a prefix *za* that centers the violence latent in the wordplay.⁴⁸ Liudmila's response simultaneously clarifies the innocence of her intention, while also reasserting the double valence of the original utterance. She says in rhyming playfulness, "Ya ne rukami vas dushit' xochu, a dukhami" (Sologub *Melkii Bes; Shabby Demon* 230). She qualifies her meaning by altering not the offending verb, but the instrumental modifier: it is a usage of zeugma, in which the verb, *dushit'* applies to her hands *rukami* and to the scent *dukhami*, in such a way that the verb functions ambiguously, either in its two discrete meanings, or preserving the violent intonation inside the erotic gesture. So, the non-poetic rendering would be: 'I don't want to strangle you with my hands, but perfume you with my scent,' while the literal sense, also reflecting the rhymed pun of the indirect objects, is something like 'I don't want to smother you with my arms but with my aroma!' Liudmila's reappropriation of the violent undertone of her eroticism reflects her initial intentions to smother

⁴⁵ "laskat'sya lyubish'. A poloskat'sya lyubite?"(207)

⁴⁶ "Dukhi vzyat' s soboyu ona pridumala esheche ran'she,—nadushit' gimnazista, shtoby on ne pakhnul svoeyu protivnoyu latyn'yu, chernilami da mal'chishestvom" (228)

⁴⁷ "Khotite ya vas dushit' budu?—zhivo sprosila Lyudmila,—khotite?" (230)

⁴⁸ "Vot vy kakaya! —skazal Sasha,—uzh srazu i zadushit' Za chto takaya zhestokost'?" (ibid)

the traces of Sasha's masculinity, whether in its biological development or its intellectual cultivation. Sure enough, she further endeavors to supplant his intellectual development with her eroticism when she instructs him to create a funnel for the perfume by "tearing [a piece of paper] out of a school book, from [his] Latin Grammar" (Sologub *The Petty Demon* 157).⁴⁹

As Ehre observes, repeatedly in the interactions between Liudmila and Sasha, the erotic linguistic play is entwined with such sadism (Ehre 162). He points to Liudmila's pun on *rozy/rozochki*, where *rozochki* can mean both little roses, whipping rods, or nipples, as yet another instance where through a turn of linguistic play, "the erogenous parts of the body have become instruments for inflicting pain" (162).⁵⁰ Consistently Liudmila's violence against Sasha is clearly motivated by her effort to impose aesthetic interest onto an object (Sasha) that would otherwise be featureless, or at least androgynously indeterminate in his pubescence. In a foreshadowing of Sasha's final transformation into a geisha, Liudmila rouges his cheeks. She remarks how beautiful he is, to which Sasha in his typical deferential innocence unveils the hidden significance of Liudmila's meaning. He accuses her of "just inventing"—the compliment, and/or her category of the beautiful: "Lyudmila pinched Sasha's cheek. Sasha smiled. The cheek turned red at the spot. It was [beautiful]" (Sologub *The Petty Demon* 168).⁵¹ Sasha's 'beautiful' pinched cheek is a visual echo of Sologub's disdain for the "colorfully painted masks" that the lyric poet deploys to conceal the ugliness of experience. We read "beauty" here sarcastically, as Liudmila focus on rosy color obscures the reality of the violence of the pinch that produced it.

Like Hustis, Hutchings acknowledges that unlike Peredonov, Liudmila "asserts control over the process [of linguistic play]" (Hutchings 130). And yet her aestheticization of Sasha through

⁴⁹ "khot' iz knizhki rvite, iz latinskoi grammatiki" (231)

⁵⁰ "Glupyi, rozochki lyubish', da posech' nekomu,—voskliknula ona" (245)

⁵¹ "— A uzh i krasiv ty, Sasha./ Sasha pokrasnel, zasmeyalsya. —Tozhe pridumaete!—skazal on./ Liudmila shchipnula Sashinu shcheku. Sasha ulybnulsya. Sheka pokrasnela pyatnom. Eto bylo krasivo" (247)

language attempts to reject the factual truth in favor of the aestheticized myth. Sasha's unmasking at the masquerade cements the failure of Liudmila's attempts to suppress reality through art. Indeed, rather than retreat into artifice, Sologub advocates approaching "the phenomena of life submissively, to say Yes to it all, to accept and confirm everything that is phenomenal to the end" (Sologub "Poets' Demons" 348).⁵² If Liudmila's artistic devices—her facility with punning—generated a meaning that was not immanent to its ordinary usage (making the same in language what is not the same in reality), by contrast, the ordinary world for Sologub speaks a language always already polyvocal and polysemantic. To remove the mask of artifice "reveals behind the covers and the masks that is eternally dual, eternally contradictory, always and forever distorted" (348). Clearly Sologub is channeling Nietzsche here in affirming the world as it is, and by seeing authentic reality as existing in a state of "Eternal Contradiction." But the effect that gossip itself generates in its doubled implications evokes Sologub's conception of a symbolic reality more immediately than any aesthetic or philosophical justification.

Gossip as a speech genre seems ideally suited to Sologub's aspiration to submit to the phenomena of life and say Yes. Gossip fits what Bakhtin characterizes as one of the 'low' popular speech genres that anticipate "the birth and formation of novelistic language," marked by the plane of "contemporary life, in an everyday environment, in the low language of contemporaneity" (Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* 20-21). Bakhtin's idea that such speech genres can bring the "subject of serious literary representation[...]in a zone of direct and even crude contact" suggests that the language of contemporaneity brings us into intimate contact with that which otherwise would be hidden from view (23). His sentiment echoes Merezhkovsky's assertion that

⁵² cf. fn. on Bürger, above; following Aestheticism's rejection of the rationalism of bourgeois thought that defines bourgeois life praxis, Bürger claims the avant-gardist project "attempts to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art" (Bürger 49). It would seem that Sologub's Peredonov runs counter to this formulation; rather than simply reject tout court the "means-end rationalism" (ibid) of bourgeois discourse, the affirmation of the world as it is indicates an aesthetic receptivity to the praxis of the bourgeois everyday.

“Symbols should arise naturally and involuntarily from the depths of reality” in the sense that the new literary value emerges from the present moment.⁵³

In Peredonov’s relation to language, his comic misreading of another’s intended utterances deconstructs language into a vital instability. The suspicion of an intended meaning hiding below the surface of words actually brings out the possible plurality of meanings to be had at the surface of language. If Decadence aestheticized the degeneration of contemporary society, gossip is an ideal subject to seize on the malformation of supposed norms. Though characterized morally by the incessant recriminations and proliferation of suspicion, we have seen how those impulses are essentially creative. By no means a universalizing conceptual discourse, gossip holds its participants together only by positioning them against each other. But it is precisely in the degeneration of ordinary speech that agonistic suspicion of gossip reveals the instability of supposedly unitary meaning, issuing the rebirth of Bely’s “living word.” That Peredonov may misinterpret an intended meaning does not destroy the integrity of gossip, because gossip prioritizes the spreading of intrigue over fidelity. Is the implication then that gossip as a particular degenerate form of speech is more commensurate with the deconstruction of its meaning because it relies on the immediacy of petty emotional transactions? Perhaps. But the inner instability of the word that Sologub substantiates would supply any seemingly dead discourse with an emotive resonance.

While obviously not a model, or even counter-model of a Symbolist artist, Peredonov does function as something of a Symbolist *listener* in the mold of Ivanov and Bely. Every type of speech resonates in his soul, and though his depraved inner consciousness then projects out feelings of melancholy and persecution, it is the unchained play of language that reconstitutes meaning in the

⁵³ There is an important difference worth noting: Bakhtin’s argument here is about the way in which low comic genres collapses critical distance, yielding as he says, “Familiarization of the world through laughter” (23). In the comparison of symbolism to Shklovsky’s formalism earlier in this chapter, I suggested that symbolism involved the defamiliarizing of the world, so as to reconnect with lost reality.

world of the novel. But if Peredonovism is indeed representative of the character of a degraded society in general, and gossip represents both the dead word and its vital counterpoint, Sologub appears to counter the supposed thrust of the Symbolist project. Consistent with the Symbolist perspective, Sologub depicts a crisis of social value typified by the *poshlost'* of everyday provincial existence. But his rejection of an *exclusively* aesthetic prioritization of meaning is a crucial repudiation to a central assumption of Symbolism. Though Sologub explicitly bemoans the failure of contemporary society to perceive the “elemental ecstasies,” that are “the interior life in nature”—essentially a rephrasing of the Symbolist objective—he locates the inability to do so not in the everydayness of *byt*, but in the individualism and individuated existence (*lichnosti i ot del' novo bytiia*) (Sologub *The Petty Demon* 311). While in one sense this is a repudiation of self-interest, it also seems to be a rejection of the Symbolist emphasis on importance of the individual consciousness. The creative element of the novel’s non-poetic language resulted from its transmissibility; what was communicated in the intersubjective space of discourse was never the intended meaning of the utterance, but its unintended possibilities. Writing about the “disarray of puns” in the Marx Brothers—Groucho would be right at home alongside Peredonov and Rutilov—Stanley Cavell suggests that while puns indeed could threaten to throw the coherence of monologic language into complete anarchy, the proliferation of implications of a word actually “works to make what sense is to be made of a world whose sense is stolen” (Cavell “Nothing Goes without Saying: Reading the Marx Brothers” 191). Sologub’s novel presents a restorative possibility for “ordinary words,” thought dead in their idleness, to conjure “beyond and between us, lives we might imagine” (191). As in Bely’s notion of living speech bursting through the dead husks of everyday language, the word of *Melkii bes* promises a possible rebirth, not by turning away from a barren discourse and into aesthetics, but by burrowing into it and uncovering a language pregnant with meanings.

II: A Terrible Promise? Symbolist Speech-Acts in *Petersburg*

The plot of Andrei Bely's magnum opus, *Petersburg*, turns on a certain "terrible promise" made by a young student of Neo-Kantian philosophy. The promise, we eventually discover, is to assassinate his own father, a senator and head of a government institution, in the midst of Russia's 1905 Revolution.⁵⁴ Despite its important function for the plot no critical literature has examined the promise itself, perhaps because viewed from within the framework of the Russian Symbolist project writ large, the significance of a promise appears not only irrelevant to, but even essentially in conflict with its concerns.

Bely and other Russian Symbolists challenge the mimetic function of art, holding that the task of the artist was not merely to represent an external reality, but to engage in an activity aimed at the creation of life itself.⁵⁵ A central tenet of Symbolist creation was the concept of 'creation of life,' "*zhiznetvorchestvo*."⁵⁶ This principle is clearly operative in *Petersburg*. From its first moments, the novel discloses a principle of creation that links the aesthetic organization of the text with the

⁵⁴ *Petersburg* was serialized between 1913-14, first published in book form in 1916, and then substantially revised and republished in 1922. Whenever possible I will cite Maguire and Malmstad's 1978 translation of the 1922 version of the novel, as it has become the academic standard in anglophone scholarship. In certain cases I will make reference to sections in the lengthier 1916 version, which were deleted in the later edition. There I will either cite John Elsworth's 2009 translation or supply my own as the occasion requires.

As for the Russian citations, I am drawing from a facsimile copy of the 1916 Sirin edition, (and the 1922 Berlin Epokha text when necessary), but alter spelling with modern orthography for ease of reading.

⁵⁵ This is not to say that the mimetic has no place in symbolist art. In "Two Elements in Contemporary Symbolism," Vyacheslav Ivanov distinguishes between realistic and idealistic symbolic creation, where the former is mimetic, disclosing the hidden essence within the objective world and "transfiguring" reality, and in the latter the artist transforms reality through aesthetic creation (Ivanov "Two Elements in Contemporary Symbolism"). As we will see, Bely hews closer to the subjective, idealist branch of Ivanov's account.

⁵⁶ As discussed in the previous chapter, Bely writes that "Mankind's purpose is in the living creation of life" (Bely "The Magic of Words" 96). In contrast to realism's aim to represent life in art, 'life-creation' collapsed the distinction between life and art, whereby the aesthetic organization of life entails that the creative work of an artist is life itself. Avril Pyman cites symbolist Valery Bryusov comparing realism's adherence to outer reality to symbolism's focus on the inner reality of the artist (Pyman *A History of Russian Symbolism 178-9*). In her introduction to an excellent collection of essays on the concept, Irina Paperno notes that *zhiznetvorchestvo* has its origins in Vladimir Solovev's theological writing (Paperno and Grossman 22).

conditions of reality in the narrative. Seeming to lay bare the artifice of a fictional world, the narrator tells us at that the book's first character, the senator Apollon Apollonovich Ableukov, “has arisen here from non-being” (*Bely Petersburg* 4).⁵⁷ The metafictional conceit is quickly complicated, however, as Apollon, though a product of an authorial act of creation, acquires the same creative capacity to think other characters into existence:

Эта тень случайно возникла в сознании сенатора Аблеухова, получила там свое эфемерное бытие; но сознание Аполлона Аполлонович есть теневое сознание, потому что и он—обладатель эфемерного бытия и порождение фантазии автора: ненужная, праздная, мозговая игра. (*Bely Peterburg*” 72)

This shadow [Alexander Dudkin] arose by chance in the consciousness of Senator Ableukhov and acquired its ephemeral being there. But the consciousness of Apollon Apollonovich is a shadowy consciousness because he too is the possessor of an ephemeral being and the fruit of the author's fantasy: unnecessary, idle cerebral play. (*Bely Petersburg* 35)

Explicitly endowing characters' mental faculties with a capacity equivalent to authorial creation, the novel initiates a logic according to which not only is authorial creation constitutive of the novel's reality, but its characters are essentially connected to and are subjects of a creative consciousness, thereby collapsing the distinction between author and character. The creative mental process in question, “cerebral play” reflects the theurgic drive of *zhiznetvorchestvo*, where reality is the product of creative thought: “Once [Apollon's] brain has playfully engendered the mysterious stranger [Dudkin], that stranger exists, really exists. He will not vanish from the Petersburg prospects as long

⁵⁷ “...iz nebytiia [vosstavshogo] zdes' litsa?” (*Bely Peterburg*” 1.9).

as the senator with such thoughts exists, because thought exists too” (36; 73). The persistent linkage of characters’ cognitive activity with authorial creation would seem to present the aesthetic organization of *Petersburg* as in accordance with the symbolist life-creation principle.⁵⁸

Given then that *Petersburg* is constituted by the unconditioned creative activity of “idle cerebral play,” it is frankly bewildering for the making of a promise—an act whose significance is inextricably tied to conventional mores and practical reason—to lie at the center of the novel. The moral and legalistic implications of a promise regard the ways in which an individual is constrained by an obligation to others (e.g., ‘A promise is a kind of contract’; ‘What does it mean to keep or break a promise?’; ‘What responsibility do we have to honor a promise?’ etc.). If the aesthetic ambitions of Symbolism proceed from the interiority of the artist and the free play of a creative consciousness, the promise seems diametrically opposed to those aims. This confusion is the departure point of this chapter. In articulating the linguistic and philosophical significance of the promise, I aim to complicate the predominant account of the modernist aesthetics of *Petersburg* and of Bely’s theory of Symbolism on which it is based.

The previous chapter worked to develop an understanding of symbolist prosaic speech that challenged the predominant account of Symbolist language in which poetic speech alone holds the potential to generate “living speech” (Bely’s notion of *zhivaia rech*) from the stagnant concept-laden discourse of ordinary language. Developing that idea further, I seek to argue that the promise, as a fundamentally communicative speech act, makes visible the ethical and intersubjective aspects of symbolist creation. The first half of this chapter works to problematize the principle of creation central to Bely’s theory of symbolism. Bely’s theory is essentially a critical redeployment of Kantian

⁵⁸ Steven Cassedy, for one, avers that, “the creation by the author of Apollon Apollonovich and indeed the whole world of *Petersburg* itself are all experiences of the same type...a description of the authorial process which created the entire text” (Cassedy “The Novel of Fragmentation: Belyj, Rilke, and Proust” 65).

aesthetic judgment. Using Stanley Cavell's and Hannah Arendt's reading of Kant's aesthetics, I aim to demonstrate that Bely's theory of Symbolism essentially depends on the principle of *communicability*. I argue that ultimately Bely's Symbolism is not "a theory of creation," as he himself calls it, but rather a theory of communication, and by extension, of community. Taking up this idea in the second half of the chapter I read Nikolai's promise through the critical lenses of Cavell, J.L. Austin, Elizabeth Anscombe, and finally Mikhail Bakhtin, to articulate the ethical and creative dimensions of the promise as a performative speech-act, and consequently I propose a reevaluation of Symbolist *zhiznetvorchestvo*: the force of "living speech" does not inhere in the free play of a singular creative consciousness, but in its speaking in the world, in its capacity to generate and structure relations between speaking subjects.

Nearly every critical treatment of *Petersburg* observes the difficulty of fixing the text's meaning; as one scholar explains, the result of Bely's deletion of "full exchanges between characters" and restricting "descriptions of events to a minimum" in the revised 1922 edition "was that the new text contains numerous passages teetering on the edge of unintelligibility. The reader must therefore participate actively in the work[...]in order to infer the necessary continuations and conclusions" (Alexandrov 101). In short, the confusion that the text enacts both in theme and form challenges the reader to make sense of it—either to view this fragmentation as an aesthetic principle of rupture and disorientation,⁵⁹ or alternatively, to identify or introduce a principle such as the authorial creative consciousness under which the text could be organized.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ As for example, Olga Matich does, arguing that Bely is a cubo-futurist who arrests and upends narrative continuity with visual and linguistic displacements (Matich 31-50)

⁶⁰ In Roger Keys' *The Reluctant Modernist: Andrei Belyi and the Development of Russian Fiction 1902-1914*; although the author himself is reluctant to make use of 'modernist' as a typological referent for Bely, his reading of *Petersburg* centers on the ambiguity of meaning and the absence of narratorial authority. He considers the novel's "minimal" and "maximal" metafictional interpretations that either guarantee the fragmentation of voices with a unifying creative subjectivity or insist on the unstable, relative nature of meaning respectively (Keys especially 223-33); Steven Cassedy's *The Novel of Fragmentation* is the main representative of Keys' "minimal" metafiction approach to the novel, positing a single creative subjectivity behind the multiplicity of narrative voices (Cassedy "The Novel of Fragmentation: Belyi, Rilke, and Proust" 67 et passim). He argues that *Petersburg* is a particular kind of psychological, subjective novel

Critical approaches that locate the novel's aesthetic unity in an authorial creative consciousness or in a reader's metafictional perspective could be seen as an indirect response to Georg Lukacs' conception of novelistic irony in *The Theory of the Novel*. Lukacs insists that the novel must preserve a dissonance between the form-giving unity of the creative subjectivity and the ultimate independence and contingency of reality. Lukacs cautions that the totality of the novel, achieved in placing all the discrete particularities of the contingent world in relation to the novel's unified whole, should not be taken as a real ordering of reality, but only as "the system of regulative ideas which constitute the totality" (Lukacs 80). Lest subjectivity be "transformed into a will for objectivity," he demands that the novel be oriented toward self-recognition, such that the individual discovers his "ideal by entering lived experience...and the ideal becomes apparent only by the absence of the ideal [in the world]" (74-9). Irony is thus the perspective of a creative subjectivity that can simultaneously recognize the independence of the discrete parts of the contingent world, and

in which "the poetic subjectivity has enclosed the world within itself and almost entirely subjugated it to its own laws," whereby the disordered fragmentation of the historical world is reconceived as the fragmentary nature of modern subjectivity (117-8). They by no means represent the extent of critical efforts to determine the unifying principle of the novel. Vladimir Alexandrov argues that "...a great transcendent unity underlies the world in the novel," (Alexandrov 114). In his reading, the seemingly individuated experiences of each character in fact "are all symbolic of the higher unity that determines everything that is" (111). For Timothy Langen, unity is by no means guaranteed in the novel; in *The Stony Dance: Unity and Gesture in Andrei Bely's Petersburg* he reads the novel as a text of constant conflict in which different forms of unity and coherence are problematized by forces of dissolution, chaos, and the juxtaposition of contradictions. Ilya Klinger's brief treatment of *Petersburg* at the end of his *The Narrative Shape of Truth: Veridiction in Modern European Literature* argues that the fragmentary quality of the narrative itself is the condition for a kind of unifying simultaneity that permits—and even demands—a recuperation of the past into a continuous present (Klinger *The Narrative Shape of Truth: Veridiction in Modern European Literature*). Other works engage *Petersburg's* modernist thematics in terms beyond the part/whole problem: In addition to the study referenced above, Olga Matich compares Bely's representations in the novel with Wassily Kandinsky's aesthetics of abstraction (Matich 83-113); Judith Wermuth-Atkinson produced a wide-ranging monograph of the novel that situates it in the German "Modern" intellectual climate, drawing occasionally tenuous connections between the book and supposed "influences" as varied as Rudolf Steiner, Ernst Mach, Freud, Jung, and the Vienna Secession (Wermuth-Atkinson); Peter Barta's *Peripatetics in the City Novel* considers *Petersburg* the first modernist city novel, and examines the function of wandering in *Petersburg* as performing the effect of dislocation and fragmentation as essential to the genre (Barta 19-46); more recently Sandra Bahum offers a psychoanalytic reading of *Petersburg* in her theory-laden *Modernism and Melancholia*, arguing that the language of the novel evinces melancholic characteristics that reflect the melancholic historical condition in which it is set (Bahum "Andrei Bely and the Spaces of Historical Melancholia"); one of the latest works to situate Bely within a modernist framework comes from Jacob Emery's *Alternative Kinships: Economy and Family in Russian Modernism*, in which Emery argues that the centrality of kinship relations and the fluidity of identity in *Petersburg* reflect the novel's tropological structure in which the reality of the world is ordered by the identificatory force of metaphor. He develops the metaphor of 'engendering' to describe the novel's principle of creative reproduction (Emery 13-72).

also place them in a dependent relation to the form-giving unity that novel as a whole provides (Lukacs 74-80). By contrast, the creative consciousness in *Petersburg* would appear to resolve the problem of an independent reality under a thorough aesthetic unity that is *essentially* subjective. The model of totality Bely scholars derive from *Petersburg* is one in which the laws of the novel, generated by a creative subjectivity, can fully determine its reality; as an aesthetics of autonomy, it is paradigmatic of modernist aesthetics.

Part I: The Communicability of Symbolist Experience

The argument that a principle of autonomy structures *Petersburg* has its basis in Bely's theoretical writings. "Emblematics of Meaning," published in Bely's book of essays *Simvolizm* in 1909, contains his most developed formulation for a 'theory of Symbolism.' The essay does not examine the particular characteristics of Symbolist artistic practice, but instead treats Symbolism as a philosophical system that investigates the fundamental conditions of meaning. Consistent with the "slogans of contemporary innovators of the symbolist school who have placed on their banners the *primacy of creation over cognition*," Bely develops an account of the conditions of meaning, which he calls "*a theory of creation*" (Bely "The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism" 131, 93, emphasis added). In the treatise he asserts that the meaning of reality subsists neither in conceptual, scientific knowledge, nor in transcendental forms of cognition, but instead in creative activity. Bely claims that all forms of cognition and creation are determined by a transcendent notion of "value." This value is an unknowable absolute principle, an irreducible unity, which Bely terms the Symbol. Because this value is unknowable, it can only be expressed symbolically, "contained in the creation of idea-images, and it is in [re-cognizing] these idea-images that one forms

objective reality itself. Cognitive value, then, lies in the creative process of symbolization” (131).⁶¹ In short, the Symbol is the meaning of “objective reality,” and this meaning originates in the individual through the production of “idea-images.” In the creative activity of meaning-making itself Bely promises that “we discover the source of autonomous creation” (168).

To be clear, the sense of aesthetic autonomy operative here should be understood in the context of Kantian aesthetics. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant argues that judgments of taste depend on neither concepts, nor personal interest, nor the influence of others. Rather, judgments of taste are made in accordance with feelings of pleasure or displeasure which, though clearly subjective, are not private. Kant says that what is “merely subjective in the representation of an object...is its aesthetic property” (Kant *Critique of the Power of Judgment* AA 5:188). Hence aesthetic judgments—and analogously, works of art—are autonomous, because the subject alone legislates them. Thus, presenting the standard account of modernist aesthetics as an “aesthetics of autonomy,” Leonardo Lisi defines the aesthetic autonomy of an artwork as “a work’s self-sufficiency, its unity as a self-enclosed totality or an organic whole which has its organizing principle and meaning within itself” (Lisi *Marginal Modernity: The Aesthetics of Dependency from Kierkegaard to Joyce* 2).⁶² That said, in a study of the modes of aesthetic autonomy represented in modernist Anglophone literature, Andrew Goldstone suggests that the “institutional approach” to aesthetic autonomy, i.e.

⁶¹ “Poznavatel’naya tsemnost’ zaklyuchaetsya v tvorchestve idei-obrazov, opoznanie kotorykh obrazuet samuyu ob’ektivnuyu deistvitel’nost’; poznavatel’naya tsemnost’—v tvorcheskom protsesse simvolizatsii” (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriia Simvolizma* 74)

⁶² Lisi is careful to distinguish this “positive” sense of autonomy from the “negative,” sociological sense, i.e. of “art’s independence from other ideological or disciplinary purposes or restraints, be they those of state society, church, or party” (ibid). This ‘negative autonomy’ is related to the purported autonomy of the *institution* of art in bourgeois society, separate from social and political life, as rehearsed e.g. in (Bürger 10-12, 22-27 et passim). In a helpful articulation, Richard Moran recently evaluated Michael Fried’s anti-theatrical aesthetics along just these ‘positive’ lines: for “the autonomy of the work of art...the success or failure of a work of art is not determined by anything ‘outside’ the work of art itself[...]but by its own ‘inner necessities,’” and continuing further, “...‘unity,’ being now a figure for the completeness and self-sufficiency of the work of art. Hence the anti-theatrical critic, in his rejection of any heteronomous aims for the artwork, sees his work as the paring away of such external dependencies so as to reveal the operation of a unifying law” (Moran 124).

the separation of art and artist from labor, personality, political, and linguistic conditions, is more appropriate to twentieth century modernist literature than the formal conception of autonomy originating in the Kantian idealist tradition (Goldstone 12-14). As concerns the modernist aesthetics of Andrei Bely however, whose theoretical account of Symbolism is an explicit engagement with Kant and the Neo-Kantian philosopher of value Heinrich Rickert, the formal sense of aesthetic autonomy is clearly at stake.

The decidedly spiritual tenets of Russian symbolist practice seem on their surface quite ill-disposed to Kant's transcendental idealist project, which had aimed to relieve epistemology of its metaphysical baggage. Additionally, the notion of aesthetic autonomy itself would not seem to accommodate the general symbolist program, for which the purpose of art sought to *transcend* the boundaries of rational thought (governing either the objective world or aesthetic form) in order to access an unconditioned spiritual realm. Bely voices this problem declaring that, "the aesthetics of the symbolist school must seek its basis outside of aesthetics" (Bely "The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism" 192). If the symbolic value of art does lie beyond the aesthetic autonomy of the work, we can understand why the English art critic Roger Fry declaimed in 1924 that the artist, "seeking to make constructions which are completely self-consistent, self-supporting, and self-contained—constructions which do not stand for something else..." i.e. that art's aesthetic autonomy, is "entirely opposed to symbolism" (Fry 362).⁶³ But far from refuting aesthetic autonomy, Bely's symbolist aesthetics actually seeks to overcome the form-content distinction in aesthetic theory, so that Symbolism—as a theory of creation—expresses the indissoluble unity of form and content.⁶⁴ Hence, the Symbol as the irreducible unity of form and content is posited as the ground

⁶³ Moran's apt gloss on Fry here is that "symbolism...count[s] as [an] external dependency, which the work of art may partake of, but is [an] impurity obscuring what the work is in and of itself" (ibid).

⁶⁴ Ewa Thompson, who argues that Bely's theory of symbolism leads directly to Russian formalism, glosses the issue as such: Reality is unapproachable for the artist except through forms...of artistic creation" (Thompson 13).

for aesthetic autonomy, superseding accounts that would hold that either content determines form or form determines content.

However, heretofore absent from this account has been the consideration that the fundamental condition of aesthetic judgment is its communicability, i.e., the idea that aesthetic experiences are only *meaningful* to the extent that they can be communicated to other people. Indeed, central to Bely's theory of Symbolism is the matter of the communicability of symbolic experience, which I insist cannot be understood within the sphere of creative activity as such. As I will demonstrate, underlying the subjective operation of symbolization is the condition of *intersubjectivity*. Without intersubjective communication the creative activity of symbolization cannot get off the ground. What intersubjectivity entails, moreover, is that Symbolist aesthetics (and aesthetics in general) are fundamentally heteronomous. Communicability's inherent dependence on other people yields a Symbolist ethics that displaces the notion of aesthetic autonomy.

Accordingly, Bely's theory of Symbolism does indeed aim at developing a worldview that prioritizes aesthetic judgment over conceptual or scientific knowledge, and the scholarship on *Petersburg* that subsumes the motifs of fragmentation and contingency under an aesthetic principle are correspondingly well founded. However, where those studies conceive of Symbolist aesthetics as reducible to a creative subjectivity, such that the whole of *Petersburg*, as the product of creative activity, would express the irreducible unity of the Symbol, they fail to address the intersubjective relations constitutive of that unity. Characters in *Petersburg* are not mere particulars to be subsumed into a higher principle, but rather, they represent a plurality of subjectivities, from which the possibility of unity depends on their mutual recognition.

The departure point of "Emblematics of Meaning" is a critique Bely mounts against the inadequacy of Kant's theory of knowledge. Bely complains that the *Critique of Pure Reason* is not a "true theory of knowledge" because, "Kant was not interested in first finding a cognitive *norm* from

which the necessity of the cognitive forms [i.e. the Pure Concepts of the Understanding] indicated by him could then be deduced” (Bely "The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism" 121). Briefly stated, Bely thinks that because Kant makes the Pure Concepts of Understanding the premises of all possible experience, his philosophy cannot provide a “true cognitive principle” that would 1) act as a systematic norm under which the order of cognitive forms could be organized and 2) bridge the seemingly irresolvable gap between the content and the form of experience (122-123). With such a principle, “...cognition should appear to us not as an arbitrarily complex of forms of activity, but as a harmonious, self-enclosed world, where the cognitive forms appear as the means by which the unity of cognitive activity is defined” (124).

This cognitive norm functions as a regulative principle for cognition; it “is not a limiting form of cognition, but translimiting—not transcendental, but transcendent” (125, trans. modified).⁶⁵ Following Rickert,⁶⁶ he continues, “this imperative prescribes that cognition itself should be purposive. The Ought in this sense, according to Rickert,⁶⁷ is a transcendent norm...we realize that we are introducing an ethical element into cognition” (ibid). It is worth noting that at this pivotal moment in the formation of his symbolist theory of knowledge, Bely recognizes the cognitive norm (i.e. the Symbol) as “a profoundly *ethical*...force” (152, emphasis added). Bely’s ultimate investment in the Rickertian Ought is not its ethical claim, however. Rather, Bely seizes on Rickert’s idea that the Ought communicates the value of judgment through feelings,⁶⁸ and he maintains that the meaning

⁶⁵ “v etom smysle ona [norma] uzhe ne predel’naya forma poznaniya, a zapredel’naya—ne transtsendental’naya, a transtsendentnaya”

⁶⁶ First published in 1892, and substantially revised in 1903, Rickert’s *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis [The Object of Knowledge]*, provides the conceptual basis of Bely’s essay. “Emblematics of Meaning” is in Cassedy’s words, “in essence a critical adaption of Rickert’s theories” (Cassedy “Translator’s Introduction: On the Essays Themselves” 26).

⁶⁷ Rickert and the Neo-Kantians of the Southwest-German school, rather than understanding value as a relative norm—culturally or historically conditioned—re-conceived value as concerning a problem “of an objective ‘ought’ [Das Sollen]” as the basis for determinations of objective validity” (Schnädelbach 162-4). For the Southwest Neo-Kantians, only that which had value could be an object of knowledge, and thus critical philosophy became a “normative or evaluative enterprise” (Beiser 376).

⁶⁸ cf. “Values comprise whatever ought to be rather than what is; they lay down standards to which our thoughts, actions and feelings should conform” (Beiser 415).

of experience is not as a “product of the cognitive process,” but instead lies in the activity of judging according to those feelings (130).⁶⁹ It is in that insight, that “the object of knowledge is “a product of creation, of an active process in which the subject participates,” that Steven Cassedy identifies as “the true point of departure that Rickert’s philosophy represents for [Bely], acknowledging of leap from the idea of norm to that of creation is one that Bely has the kindness to make for Rickert” (Cassedy “Translator’s Introduction: On the Essays Themselves” 31). For Bely, meaningful objects of experience are not products of cognitive activity, determined in accordance with *a priori* concepts,⁷⁰ but rather are in some sense actively created by the subject.⁷¹ We can readily see how the objective reality of *Petersburg* as constituted by a chain of creative subjectivities—authorial consciousness forming Apollon Apollonovich, Apollon’s consciousness forming Alexander Dudkin, and so on—reflects this procedure.

Admittedly, it does not appear that Bely’s adaptation of Rickert’s transcendent Ought departs significantly from Kant’s aesthetic power of judgment, which also holds that the feeling of pleasure is the basis by which judgments of taste function.⁷² In this founding of a “theory of creation,” that

⁶⁹ cf. “The [so-called] representations have meaning then only insofar as they are connected with individual feelings of pleasure or displeasure, and cause the individual to want and to act. In action alone the world gains a sense.”

“Die Vorstellungen besitzen dann nur noch insofern Bedeutung, als sie mit individuellen Gefühlen der Lust oder Unlust verbunden sind und das Individuum zum Wollen und Handeln veranlassen. Im Handeln allein bekommt dann die Welt einen Sinn” (Rickert 76, my translation).

⁷⁰ In another essay published in *Simvolizm*, Bely offers a less philosophically fraught expression of why creation precedes cognition: “...the abstract concept is something that, in a determined fashion, crystallizes already past acts of cognition. But the goal of mankind is to create its own objects of cognition” (Bely “The Magic of Words” 96). As far as meaning is concerned, without abstract concepts, we can’t subsume particular ideas under the universal, and instead we have to build reality up from particulars, an operation that Kant would call “the reflective power of judgment” (Kant *Critique of the Power of Judgment* AA 5:179-80).

⁷¹ To this point, John Elsworth quips, “Bely’s attitude to reality is a problem many of his commentators have faced. It has been noted—both by critics on the basis of his work, and by memoirists on the basis of their personal acquaintance—that he seemed to perceive reality as somehow unstable” (Elsworth 18). He helpfully clarifies that Bely does not reject “the independent existence of objective reality...but he considers that while the phenomena themselves are given, the relationships between them are the product of human thought...” (ibid).

⁷² cf. “The transcendental principle...for representing a purposiveness of nature in subjective relation to our faculty of cognition in the form of a thing as a principle for judging...leaves it to the *aesthetic* power of judgment to make out in taste, the suitability of the thing (of its form) to our cognitive faculties (insofar as these [cognitive faculties] decide not through correspondence with concepts but through feeling” (Kant AA 5:194).

purportedly prioritizes creation over cognition, it appears that Bely is actually redeploying Kant's aesthetic judgment as the mechanism of symbolic experience. The principal difference between Bely and Kant's aesthetic activity is that whereas Kant's judgment of taste is grounded on the formal condition of judgment in general, i.e. the formal relation between the free play of the imagination and the lawfulness of the understanding,⁷³ aesthetic experience in Bely's account is more nebulous, formed in "experiencing chaos," similar to Fichte's intellectual intuition: "When we experience something, it is as though we were allowing these contents to pass through us. We becomes the image of the Logos, which organizes chaos. We give chaos an individual order. This order is by no means a logical order" (Bely "The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism" 184-85).⁷⁴ For Kant, judgments of taste must have "universal subjective validity" (AA 5:215 *et passim*). In much the same sense, though borrowing the term from Rickert, Bely deploys the concept of a "supra-individual subjectivity," declaring that "Any individual experience strives for universality," and that, "The eternal 'I' is experienced in the personal 'I'...The eternal world 'I', from the point of view of theory of knowledge is merely an allegory for the supra-individual subject" (Bely "The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism" 166).⁷⁵ It can be said then that for both thinkers, the formal condition of aesthetic experience is expressed *a priori*.

Although Bely presents Symbolism as a "theory of creation," the terms of that creative activity are essentially concomitant with Kant's aesthetic power of judgment. The relevance of this connection becomes apparent once we consider the weight Bely invests in the communicability of

⁷³ cf. Kant AA 5:287 *et passim*.

⁷⁴ "...переживая, мы как бы пропускаем etc содержание сквозь себя; мы становимся образом Логоса, организующего хаос" (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriia Simvolizma* 129).

⁷⁵ "...единство индивидуальных процессов становится символом целого ряда единств...индивидуум становится символом ценности;...он пересоздает свою личность; в прошлом преподносится ему образ его самого до переживаемого мгновения;...пределом переживания становится предел соединения с Ликом; в «я» лично переживается «я» вечное: ...Мировое вечное «я» с точки зрения теории знания есть лишь аллегория надиндивидуального субъекта" (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriia Simvolizma* 109-10).

aesthetic experience, or how an individual experience can claim universal assent. Bely describes the process in which the ordering of experience through the self refines an experience and reveals its depths:

[...]углубляя индивидуальное переживание, мы видим, что переживание наше проходит ряд ступеней, открывающихся нам в одном индивидуальном комплексе; процесс углубления переживания как бы конденсирует его: переживание становится острее; мы получаем возможность им заражать других” (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriia Simvolizma* 109)

If we delve into an individual experience [*perezhivanie*], we see that our experience proceeds along a series of steps that disclose themselves to us as a single, individual complex. This process of delving into experience condenses it, as it were: the experience becomes more acute, it becomes possible for us to infect [*zarazhat*] others with it. (Bely "The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism" 166)

Bely’s notion of infection here is surely a reference to Tolstoy’s theory of infection in *What is Art?* Tolstoy describes the criteria of a work of art as that which causes the audience to “experience a state of mind which unites him with [the artist...]If a man experiences this feeling, he becomes infected with the author’s state of mind” (Tolstoy *What Is Art?* 120-1). Tolstoy goes on to argue that the degree of infection relies on the clear communication of one’s individual feeling—a sentiment Bely echoes here in linking the relationship between the acuteness of experience and the viability of its infection. Bely develops this idea of infection further, continuing from the passage quoted above:

[...]глушина переживаемая [*perezhivaemaya*] сказывается вовне как сила; индивидуальное переживание становится индивидуально-коллективным

(переживания художников, поэтов); индивидуально-коллективное переживание впоследствии может стать и универсальным (переживание христианства)[...]Целый группы индивидуальностей, скользящих по поверхности переживаемого содержания, когда эти поверхности изнутри попадают в сферу воздействия индивидуума, оказываются вовлеченными в индивидуальный процесс. (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriia Simvolizma* 109-10)

The depth that is experienced becomes noticeable from outside as a force. An individual experience becomes individual-collective (as do the experiences of artists or poets). Individual-collective experience subsequently becomes a universal experience (the experience of Christianity, for example)[...]Whole groups of individualities, gliding along the surfaces of experienced content, while these surfaces from within enter the sphere of influence of the individual, find themselves drawn into the individual process. (Bely "The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism" 166)

A 'deeply' represented experience acquires a force that attracts the attention of other people. Artistic creation or religious experience are symbolic in the way that beautiful art is "exemplary" for Kant: "they must serve others...as a standard or a rule for judging" (Kant *Critique of the Power of Judgment* AA 5:308). Thus, the logic of infection describes the communicability of internal experience in externally recognizable forms. If the form an individual gives to experience affects others, the individual can be the basis for a collective experience, which in turn can be recognized as a universal experience.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Steven Cassedy argues that this embodiment of the eternal subject in the image of the personal subject implicitly invokes a notion rooted in Russian Orthodoxy of "iconicity" (Cassedy "Bely's Theory of Symbolism as a Formal Iconics of Meaning" 303-6). He explains that the function of a religious icon arises from the idea that our possible experience of Christ was limited to his corporeal aspect, and thus an icon is the analogous "concrete embodiment of the divine grace

Communicability is the precondition of aesthetic judgment for Kant as well, but Bely's account of communicative infection introduces an empirical procedure crucially impossible⁷⁷ for the former. Kant holds that the "universal capacity for communication" (*allgemeine Mitteilungsfähigkeit*) of our state of mind, is the ground of judgments of taste (AA 5:217). Subjective universal validity does not mean that everyone *is* in agreement about what is beautiful, but proceeds as if everyone *ought* to agree about such judgments:

[...]it does not say that everyone *will* concur with our judgment but that everyone *should* agree with it. Thus, the common sense, of whose judgment I here offer my judgment of taste as an example and on account of which I ascribe *exemplary* validity to it, is a merely ideal norm[...] (AA 5:239)

While aesthetic judgment lacks the certainty of conceptual determination, the feeling of pleasure connected to aesthetic judgment is not merely a private feeling (like the agreeableness of sensation), but is guided by the idea of a "common feeling," a *sensus communis*. Kant notes that this notion of "common sense" is an "indeterminate norm" that may not actually exist. As an ideal, common sense does not have any determinate criteria to adjudicate disputes between two different judgments of taste. The pleasure in the judgment gives us a ground to "solicit" universal assent, but one cannot "count" on it. Stanley Cavell latches onto the problem of the universal claim of aesthetic judgment in his essay "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy." He explores the difficulty posed by the

it represents" (304-5) He argues that Bely adopts the same formal relation with the particular subject and the embodied Symbol, and it is the formal conception of symbolization rather than a belief in a transcendent metaphysical realm that is the real essence of symbolism. As Cassedy's argument unfolds, his non-metaphysical reading of Bely brings symbolism much closer to Rickert, situating value as "a transcendent principle that must be *formally* recognized" (310). For Cassedy, the possibility of universality in symbolism refers merely to the universal apparatus of symbolization by which "conscious subjects confer and produce meaning" (311). Cassedy's argument stresses the formalism of Bely's universal communicability, and to that end places it in line with Kant's aesthetic judgment, as detailed below.

⁷⁷ cf. (AA: 5:237)

subjective universal's "demand" or "claim" for universal agreement while "knowing from experience that [our judgments] will not receive [universal agreement]" (Cavell "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" 89). Seeking available recourse for someone to account for their feelings, while at the same time being incapable of proving anything, Cavell reorients the notion of a philosophic claim. He argues that agreement or disagreement is not the evidence of correct aesthetic judgment, and so, there is nothing to be gained from trying to convince someone of the correctness of one's position: "If we say that the *hope* of agreement motivates our engaging in these various patterns of support, then we must also say, what I take Kant to have seen, that even were agreement in fact to emerge, our judgments, so far as aesthetic, would remain as essentially subjective in his sense, as they ever were" (94). Consequently, Cavell suggests that a philosophic claim, rather than being a claim on an other's assent, is a claim on one's own subjectivity: "The problem of the critic, as of the artist, is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways" (ibid). The mediation of disagreement is then not seeking to disprove the other's position, but rather clarifying one's own position for oneself as clearly as possible.

Explicitly linking Kant's aesthetic judgment to his own sense of philosophizing from ordinary language, Cavell makes a connection between the idea of universal assent and the ordinary language philosopher's claim of "we say." He explains that the "plural is still first person: it does not, to use Kant's word, 'postulate' that 'we,' you and I and he, say and want and imagine and feel and suffer together" (96). The emphasis on the we as a first-person claim is an idea Cavell explores in "Must We Mean What We Say"; in that essay the question centers on what entitles someone to make a statement like "we say" independent of empirical evidence. He writes: "the claim that in general we do not require evidence for statements in the first person plural does rest upon a claim that we cannot be wrong about what we are doing or about what we say, but only that it would be extraordinary if we were" (Cavell "Must We Mean What We Say?" 14). The availability of this kind of claim extends

specifically to native speakers of a language, as it implies a host of extra-linguistic contextual factors that govern meaning. It is an extension of Wittgenstein's idea that "the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life" (Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* §24). To return then to the matter at hand, the implication of a "we" that does not postulate shared experience is that even a "form of life" makes no explicit claim for commonality. If the interlocutor does not recognize themselves in the other's account ("look and find out whether you can see what I see"), it means that they do not share a form of life; they do not speak the same language or inhabit the same world. Cavell concludes, "All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is express as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own" (Cavell "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" 96).

So how does this relate to Bely's account of the communication of experience? Insofar as Bely describes a paradigm in which the Symbol is a transcendent norm that is contained in subjective creative activity, the idea of infection *qua* communication between subjects entails a distinctly *empirical*, and thus heteronomous basis of the universal experience. Indeed, this sense of "universal experience" Bely invokes bears little resemblance to the *a priori* transcendental universal validity of the form of judgment for Kant. And unlike Bely's other formulation of the 'eternal I' which *does* seem transcendental, "universal experience" is the result of a quantitative, accretive process, realized in the gradual transmission of the individual to the collective to the many. If we had hoped to derive a notion of aesthetic autonomy from Bely's Symbolism, this is obviously problematic, as the significance of any particular experience is dependent on its capacity to infect others. At the same time, this empiricism perhaps opens an avenue for a non-subjective basis of collective experience.

Bely adapts the concept of "experience" from Rickert. In fact, Richard Elsworth claims that Bely "parts company with Rickert...where he picks up and develops the idea of 'experiencing reality'"

(Elsworth 19).⁷⁸ Indeed, Rickert's gesture toward experience is nothing more than signaling the limit of epistemology: "to experience [*erleben*] as much of [the content] as possible," he writes, "is the only way to the solution of the 'ontological problem,' which still remains after the determination of the concept of objective reality. One will never find the unity of being in this way, but rather be always more amazed by the manifold of her content" (221 my translation).⁷⁹ For Rickert, this merely hypothetical possibility of experiencing (*erleben*) is the only way to isolate the essence of content apart from the conditioning methodological forms of cognition (Kant's Categories of the Understanding). This sense of *erleben* suggests a kind of radically passive, receptive openness to experience against which the forming faculties of the understanding could not effect. Rickert's point is that such a situation is essentially impossible, portraying the incapacitated astonishment of an individual being bombarded by the unsynthesized manifold, raw data without meaning. In turn, by Elsworth's account, Bely ignores the implied inutility of experience, and instead seizes upon the idea that the essence of reality can be sought through experience, and thereby make meaningful the

⁷⁸ In Elsworth's reading, Bely develops from "a laconic aside in [Rickert]" "the kernel of [his] argument...It is through experiencing reality...that we make the otherwise chaotic contents of consciousness meaningful" (ibid). The 'laconic original,' to which Elsworth refers are these lines that Bely quotes verbatim:

"The question of the essence of the content of reality,' says Rickert, 'is actually no question at all, since reality does not have just one content...Whoever wishes to become familiar with the content [of reality], says Rickert, 'in so far as this content is presented in the absence of the content of concepts from the individual sciences and, consequently, in the absence of methodological forms, must attempt to experience as much of that content as possible'1. (Bely "The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism" 165)

«Вопрос о сущности «содержания действительности,—говорит Риккерт,—не есть вопрос, так как действительность не имеет одного содержания»...«Кто хочет познакомиться с содержанием, —говорит Риккерт, — не обращая внимания на методологические формы, тот должен попытаться возможно многое пережить» (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriia Simvolizma* 109).

The laconic original: "Die Frage nach dem Wesen des Inhaltes der Wirklichkeit ist keine Frage, denn die Wirklichkeit hat überhaupt nicht einen Inhalt. Wer ihren Inhalt kennen lernen will, wie er, abgesehen von dem Inhalt der Begriffe der Einzelwissenschaften, also abgesehen von den methodologischen Formen, sich darstellt, der muss versuchen, möglichst viel davon zu erleben" (Rickert 221).

⁷⁹ "...der muss versuchen, möglichst viel davon zu erleben. Dies ist der einzige Weg zur Lösung des „ontologischen Problems", der nach Feststellung des Begriffes der objektiven Wirklichkeit noch übrig bleibt. Eine Einheit des Seins wird man aber auf diesem Wege nie finden, sondern immer mehr über die Mannigfaltigkeit seines Inhalts staunen" (221).

unsynthesized manifold (Elsworth 19).

However, I want to suggest that this interpretation overlooks a crucial distinction at work in these passages. Elsworth conflates two discrete notions of “experience” at play both in Rickert’s German and in Bely’s Russian. As Rickert says, objective reality is the “*Erfahrungswelt*,” the ‘world of experience,’ and that we can’t ask what is “behind *Erfahrung*” (ibid). Bely rehearses this argument later in his essay when trying to determine that still unresolved problem of how “the metaphysics of creation, which spurs the logical image itself into activity arises” (Bely “The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism” 183).⁸⁰ Providing his own definition of the methodological forms of cognition, he writes, “the categories of reason are at the same time methodological forms, that is general forms of cognition. These categories are, in short, the rules of scientific experience [*nauchnogo opytal*]” (ibid). *Opyt*, which has the same practical experiential sense as *Erfahrung*, e.g., ‘having work experience,’ also can mean ‘a scientific experiment,’ thereby echoing Bely’s critique of the method of scientific knowledge, where particular forms of knowledge mediate our contact with reality. Bely continues, “But experience and the activity of reason cannot be derived: both are given. And experience cannot be given without the category that conditions it. The condition of experience is *given* for experience” (ibid). Experience as *opyt*, just as *Erfahrung* is not a means of escaping the predetermined form of the categories. When methodological forms are removed, form gives way to content, and form is taken up by undefined images such that “image is replaced by image; we experience [*perezhivaem*] images, as something irrational, irresolvable” (184).⁸¹ Without the methodological categories to give form to content, *opyt* becomes *perezhivanie*; *Erfahrung* becomes *Erlebnis*.

⁸⁰ “No kak deyatel’nost’ samyi logicheskii obraz?” (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriia Simvolizma* 128)

⁸¹ “...forma beretsya tut kak obraz; obraz smenyaetsya obrazom; my perezhivaem obrazy, kak nechto irratsional’noe, neprazlozhimoe” (129).

As this concerns epistemology, this is no small matter, for as we saw in Rickert, unguided *Erlebnis* leaves the subject astounded by the unformed manifold. The Erfahrung/Erlebnis distinction here reflects a limit beyond which cognition fails to signify. The experiential difference between the two concepts is well illustrated in an essay by the one-time student of Rickert, Walter Benjamin; in “On Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” he investigates the nature of experience of urban modernity, which he conceives of as a shock. While “philosophy has made attempts to lay hold of the ‘true’ experience [*Erfahrung*] as opposed to the [*Erfahrung*] that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses,” these efforts, he explains, were isolated from “man’s life in society” (Benjamin 156). Situated within the modern city, however, one encounters “...the shock factor in particular impressions,” as “the greater the share[...], the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience [*Erfahrung*], [the sooner they fulfill the concept of *Erlebnis*]” (163). Ilya Klinger (drawing from Susan Buck-Morss) helpfully glosses this situation: “A failure of *Erfahrung*, then, is a failure in the procedure of combining the multiple and varied stimuli we receive from the world into a coherent whole, a failure of synthesis” (Klinger *The Narrative Shape of Truth: Veridiction in Modern European Literature* 185).⁸² Thus, within the conceptual framework of a theory of knowledge, *Erlebnis* is diametrically opposed not only to a function of ordering, but moreover, to meaning-making altogether.

But in Bely’s thought, ‘perezhivanie’ *does* have a kind of regulative function, simply not as that of logical form. The “chaos” that Bely calls the unformed content of consciousness, in being “experienced, it is as though we were allowing these contents to pass through us; we become an

⁸² Buck-Morss’ explanation also helps to clarify the *Erlebnis* pole as well: “As a defense against shock, the urban individual insulated himself by sealing himself off. He simply endured the colliding stimuli rather than respond to them, that mere existence (*Erlebnis*) replaced active, reflective experience (*Erfahrung*), in the Kantian sense of the unity of perception” (Buck-Morss 160).

image of the Logos, organizing chaos” (Bely “The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism” 185).⁸³ The language of “organization” or of “giving to chaos an order (*porjadok*)” treads closely to the form-giving act of cognition, but Bely clarifies that this order “is not a logical order; it is the order of the *flow* in us of experienced content” (ibid).⁸⁴ This invocation of a stream, *techenie*, that becomes the order for the procession of mental processes, i.e., *a stream of consciousness*, has a striking resonance for the modern reader. Perhaps Bely gleaned the idea from William James, whom he discusses briefly in his 1904 essay “On the Borders of Psychology,” which was also published in the *Simvolizm* book.⁸⁵ But, particularly in the centrality of *perezhivanie* as the “cognition that is not cognition,” and Bely’s concern for the “individual essence” of content, it is difficult not to hear the pre-echoes of Edmund Husserl’s *Erlebnisstrom*.

The affinity is just barely anachronistic; the *Logical Investigations* and *Prolegomena to a Pure Logic* are translated into Russian in 1909.⁸⁶ Bely’s relationship with Gustav Shpet, who is principally responsible for the spread of Husserlian phenomenology in Russia, began in 1907,⁸⁷ but Shpet himself doesn’t become acquainted with Husserl until 1912. Nonetheless, the means by which ordered experience in Bely becomes the basis for a universal or collective experience resonates strongly with the relation in Husserl between the phenomenological “I” and other individuals. In the second chapter of *Ideas I*, Husserl seeks to delimit the essence of consciousness from reality understood in the natural attitude. In it, he marks out a distinction between the essences of

⁸³ “...perezvivaya, my kak by propuskaem etc sodержaniya skvoz’ sebya; my stanovimsya obrazom Logosa, organizuyushego khaos” (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriia Simvolizma* 129).

In Elsworth’s interpretation, “Clearly the human faculty that performs [the process of organizing chaos through ourselves] is that which he calls ‘feeling’” (Elsworth 19).

⁸⁴ “даем хаосу индивидуальный порядок; этот порядок вовсе не есть порядок логический; это—порядок течения в нас переживаемых содержаний” (ibid).

⁸⁵ For more on the symbolists’ and Bely’s familiarity with William James see (Obatnim esp. 114-5)

⁸⁶ (Haardt 54)

⁸⁷ (Tihanov 57-9)

Erlebnissen and the material world, whereby the sense of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* are the inverse of Benjamin's conception. *Erlebnisse*, which constitute the unity of the *Erlebnisstrom* comprise the objects of consciousness in general—thoughts, feelings, memories, dreams, reflections etc., but also things we come to experience (*erfahren*). As *Erlebnis* and consciousness are opposed to the material world, Husserl poses a question similar to the problem we have been exploring in Bely and Rickert: “if the material world stands in contrast to all consciousness, and to the own-essentiality [*Eigenwesenheit*] of consciousness, as ‘something alien,’ the ‘otherness,’ then how can consciousness become involved with it” (Husserl *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* 81-2). He suggests that “sensuous experience” [*sinnliche Erfahrung*] is the “source which[...]makes it possible that I consciously find a factually existing world of things confronting me and that I ascribe to myself a body in that world” (82). In this view *Erfahrung* is subsumed under the general category of *Erlebnis* as a kind of perception whose object is transcendent to the cognizing subject. As we encounter a physical object in a series of adumbrations, it becomes unified in the stream of *Erlebnisse*, and thus the essence of an object of consciousness inheres as an immanent *Erlebnis* rather than as a physical object in the world.

As in Bely, then, the *Erlebnisstrom* marks out the means by which the cognizing subject orders its world. But a particular insight of Husserl's into the coordination of multiple cognizing subjects complicates what Elsworth means by “experiencing reality”: When not actively seized upon, both immanent *Erlebnis* (e.g. a latent memory) and a physical thing yet to be perceived subsist in a “background[...]ready to be perceived,” and can be brought into “my surrounding world” once seized upon (99-100). Husserl then reflects on this claim to ask: “if, instead of a single Ego, a plurality of Egos is taken into consideration” (100). He asserts that, “Only by virtue of the relationship of possible mutual understanding can my experienced world become identified with that of others and,

at the same time, enriched by their more extensive experience” (ibid).⁸⁸ While the immanent content of consciousness has absolute essence for a particular subject, Husserl introduces the *Erfahrungswelt* as the common field of experience among subjects—a concept that seems roughly synonymous with his notion of the *Lebenswelt*. Moreover, the language of “mutual understanding” (*Wechselverständigung*) and enriching (*bereichern*) by others’ experience suggests a manner by which essence is communicated beyond the individual ordering of a subject. And while Husserl is careful to distinguish between absolute certainty of immanent *Erlebnis* and the possible dubitability of the existence of transcendent things, such as alien consciousnesses, his language brings Bely to mind: “No counter-sense is implicit in the possibility that every other consciousness, which I posit in empathic experience, is non-existent. But *my* empathizing, my consciousness of whatever sort, is originarily and absolutely given not only with respect to its essence but also with respect to its existence” (101).⁸⁹ There are two important claims here that are significant for Bely: first, that other consciousnesses are posited by the subject through “empathic experience” (*einfühlender Erfahrung*), and secondly, that despite the fact that the existence of other consciousnesses lie beyond verification, what subsists absolutely is the *empathizing itself*.

Bely writes, “The rhythm of the relation of our experience to the experience of others broadens the individual understanding of a religion into a collective one” (Bely “The Emblematics of Meaning: Premises to a Theory of Symbolism” 189).⁹⁰ The mechanism that brings individual experience into a collective one is grounded on “empathy,” Bely suggests. Strengthening the affinity

⁸⁸ “Prinzipiell ändert sich daran nichts Wesentliches, wenn wir stat eines einzelnen Ich eine Ichmherheit berücksichtigen. Nur durch die Beziehung möglicher Wechselverständigung ist meine Erfahrungswelt mit der anderer zu identifizieren und zugleich durch ihre Erfahrungsüberschüsse zu bereichern” (Husserl *Ideen Zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie Und Phänomenologischen Philosophie* 96).

⁸⁹ “Kein Widersinn liegt in der Möglichkeit, daß alles fremde Bewußtsein, das ich in einfühlender Erfahrung setze, nicht sei. Aber mein Einfühlen und mein Bewußtsein überhaupt ist originär und absolut gegeben, nicht nur nach Essenz, sondern nach Existenz” (97).

⁹⁰ “ritm otnošeniya nashikh perezhivaniy k perezhivaniyam drugikh rasshiraet individual’noe ponimanie religii do kollektivnogo” (Bely *Kritika, Estetika, Teoriya Simvolizma*)

to Husserl, Bely explicitly invokes the *Einfühlungstheorie* of the German psychologist and phenomenologist Theodor Lipps, noting, “It is easy to see a religious foundation in this process of cognition that Lipps calls *Einfühlung* [empathy]. And if *Einfühlung* lies at the basis of aesthetic experiences, then by the same token, artistic creation receives its illumination in religious creation” (ibid). Empathy—the etymologies of the German *Einfühlung* and Russian *vchuvstvovanie* have the same structure ‘in-feeling’—seems to describe a communicative relation between subjects that could transcend the subjective constraints of aesthetic judgment. It suggests that what is meaningful is not the communicability of experience, i.e. its possibility, but rather the communication itself is significant, as it generates the mode of relationality between subjects.

Among the maxims for the *sensus communis* listed in §40 of the third *Critique* is “To think in the position of everyone else,” which reveals an “expanded way-of-thinking” (AA 5:294-294). While the idea seems in concert with Bely’s formulation of empathy, Hannah Arendt cautions that it pointedly does not consist in “an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others”⁹¹ (Arendt 43-44). Why ‘common sense’ does not postulate shared experience Kant and Cavell make clear. But Arendt offers an astounding interpretation of the notion of ‘thinking in the position of the other’: it cannot mean, she explains, accepting “what goes on in the minds of [others]...as not my own,” for that would entail abandoning one’s own feelings for the other’s (43)⁹². If Cavell showed that the subjective essence of aesthetic judgment

⁹¹ cf. fn. 22 above, on Husserl’s “empathic experience”:

“Only by virtue of the relationship of possible mutual understanding can my experienced world become identified with that of others and, at the same time, enriched by their more extensive experience” (ibid).”

“Prinzipiell ändert sich daran nichts Wesentliches, wenn wir stat eines einzelnen Ich eine Ichmherheit berücksichtigen. Nur durch die Beziehung möglicher Wechselverständigung ist meine Erfahrungswelt mit der anderer zu identifizieren und zugleich durch ihre Erfahrungsüberschüsse zu bereichern” (Husserl *Ideen Zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie Und Phänomenologischen Philosophie* 96).

⁹² cf. Alina Wyman on Bakhtin’s active empathy, “grounded in the empathizer’s sovereignty as an active subject,

directs us to attend to our own subjectivity, Arendt seems to insist on the necessity of a common sphere.

Her actual point is more nuanced: she says that the maxim describes the movement in thought from the “subjective private conditions” to the disinterested “general standpoint” of the “world spectator” (ibid). Beyond the merely negative dimension of denying one’s self-interest in forming judgments, Arendt sees the implication of taking the “general standpoint” for the *sensus communis* as an imperative to “put oneself in thought in the place of *everyone else*” (71, emphasis added). The exercise to open one’s thought to all possible forms of judgment imaginable makes judgment answerable to an idea of the community. The criteria of judgments of taste is essentially not subjective, then, but is presupposed by an idea of what is possible for everyone. As a standard for judgment, the *sensus communis* is “like an extra-mental capability—that fits us into a community” (70).

Focusing on communicability as the condition of aesthetic judgment, Arendt makes clear that the beautiful has meaning only to the extent that it addresses “a community of men who can be addressed and who are listening and can be listened to” (40). She takes up Kant’s formulations that “the beautiful interests [us] empirically only in *society*” and that “for himself alone a human being abandoned on a desert island would not adorn either his hut or himself” (AA 5:297), as demonstrations of how “Kant was very early aware that there was something nonsubjective in what seems to be the most private and subjective sense[...]. In other words, the nonsubjective element in the nonobjective senses is intersubjectivity” (Arendt 67). Even though we judge through feeling, it is not private; in fact it is only relevant to the extent that it reflects the idea of a community. And therefore, the supposedly subjective pleasure in judgment “is actually rooted in this community

whose unique individuality is not dissolved in the process of empathizing” (Wyman 15 et passim).

sense” (72). As a consequence, we see an inversion of the notion that the subjective aims at the assent of others. Instead, sociability is “the very origin, not the goal of man’s humanity; that is, we find that sociability is the very essence of men insofar as they are of this world only” (73-74). As the meaning of feelings depends on their general communicability, communicability is not the ultimate ground of judgment:

Communicability obviously depends on the enlarged mentality; one can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person’s standpoint; otherwise one will never see him, never speak in such a way that he understands. By communicating one’s feelings, one’s pleasures and disinterested delights, one tells one’s *choices* and one chooses one’s company. (74)

If we follow Arendt here, and understand that underlying the possibility of meaning is the recognition of participating in a community, we can read Bely’s idea of empathy as a communal form of feeling. Perhaps there is nothing that guarantees communication, but the *sensus communis* indicates a principle of mutual recognition without which one is isolated in their individuality. Even Cavell’s argument for the necessary subjectivity of taste originates in the social world; we are invited to take part in “forms of life.”

Plainly, the heteronomy of communicative experience complicates the conception of Symbolism as premised on an aesthetics of autonomy. It would appear that the condition of aesthetics in general depends on a condition of communicability that is expanded through intersubjective contact. But, whence the promise? As it happens, the promise figures as a prominent issue in Kant’s practical philosophy; in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant reflects on the possibility of making false promises as an explication of the categorical imperative—though one may lie, he reasons, to make the maxim of false promises a universal law would mean that there could be no promises at all (Kant *Practical Philosophy* AA 4:403). In a similar vein, in the

Metaphysics of Morals Kant addresses the issue of promising in the “Doctrine of Right” while examining the procedure of a contract. He confronts the question of how it is possible for a possession to transfer from one person to another. An empirical performance of coming to an agreement is difficult to ensure, for on one hand, we can never be sure if one party reneged during the procedure. Additionally, Kant takes issue with the idea that two people can have contradictory rights to the same object. The stakes of this intervention are none too thrilling, to be sure. And yet, Kant’s transcendental solution speaks precisely to our interests: the condition of a promise between promisor and promisee is only possible through the “united will of both...declared *simultaneously*” (Kant *Practical Philosophy* AA 6:272). The right one acquires in a promise, moreover, is not the right to a possession, but to the “active obligation on the freedom and means of the other” (AA 6:274). Like a judgment of taste, then, the promise is grounded on a relation that presupposes the possibility of a shared world. But where an aesthetic principle can conceal its dependency on a social sphere behind the illusion of subjective autonomy, the promise is utterly dependent on the possibility of a unified will. Without a common world of experience, a promise has no sense whatsoever, it would seem. Accordingly, if Bely’s Symbolism indeed situates the possibility of community as a precondition for meaning, the very fraught question of whether community in fact inheres in *Petersburg* would seem then to center on the meaningfulness of the promise.

Part II: *Petersburg's* Participatory Reality

As a senator and bureaucratic representative of the soon to be ancien régime, Apollon Apollonovich Ableukov is the figure of self-contained individuality par excellence. What better representative of the myth of individual autonomy? With events of *Petersburg* hurtling toward the literal and symbolic destruction of the patriarchy, it is apt that Apollon, intended victim of patricide, should be identified with a philosophically retrograde worldview compared to Symbolism. We are told that Apollon is in fact a descendent of Adam the first man and that he delights in the rigid structure of categories: “proportionality and symmetry soothed the senator’s nerves,” and desires to impose upon the earth a “rectilinear principle, unembraceable infinity; so that the network of prospects, should expand into the abysses of the universe in planes of squares and cubes” (Bely *Petersburg* 10-11). Apollon was “born for solitary confinement,” and whether in his offices or riding in his enclosed carriage, he maintains barriers between himself and the undifferentiated masses that populate the city. Arguably, the insulation of his subjectivity from others’ influence is what endows Apollon with his aforementioned creative capacity. As both biological father to his son Nikolai and theurgic progenitor of the shadowy stranger,⁹³ Apollon is to be sure, a life-creator. However, he demonstrates no ability to reconcile his seemingly accidental creative power (manifest in idle cerebral play) with the rigid categorical structures of his cognitive disposition.

Apollon’s communicative deficiencies are also shaped by his association with the Apollonian preference for order over fluidity.⁹⁴ He delights in awful puns which he inflicts upon his bureaucratic underlings, and his reliance on categorical concision imposes limits on his language. Even the conditions under which creation *is* possible for Apollon are also circumscribed by his cognitive

⁹³ Indeed, the narrator says of Apollon that he “was like Zeus: out of his head flowed goddesses and geni” (20).

⁹⁴ Apollon and Dudkin’s correspondence to a Nietzschean duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian, respectively, is well trod territory that hardly needs elaboration; see: (Langen 53-66), (Bennett), (Mann), (Rosenthal *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism* 33-50), and on Dudkin as Zarathustra (Maguire and Malmstad)

isolation. Like his father, Nikolai Apollonovich secures an ephemeral sense of creative autonomy when walled in from the world: “Here in his own room, Nikolai Apollonovich would truly grow into a self-contained center, into a series of logical premises that flowed from the center and predetermined thought, soul, and this very table. Here he was the sole center of the universe conceivable as well as inconceivable, [flowing cyclically in all eons of time]” (28 with addition from 1916 version).⁹⁵ In this description of Nikolai's cerebral play seemingly drawn directly from “Emblematics of Meaning,” Nikolai's methodological form giving knowledge “predetermines” reality, until:

[...]тогда ему начинало казаться, что и он, и комната, и предметы той комнаты перевоплощались мгновенно из предметов реального мира в умопостигаемые символы чисто логических построений; комнатное пространство смешивалось с его потерявшим чувствительность телом в общий бытийственный хаос, называемый им *вселенной*; а сознание Николая Аполлоновича, отделясь от тела, непосредственно соединялось с электрической лампочкой письменного стола, называемой “*солнцем сознания*”. Запершись на ключ и продумывая положения своей шаг за шагом возводимой к единству системы, он чувствовал тело свое пролитым во “вселенную”, то есть в комнату[...] И сместив себя так, Николай Аполлонович становился воистину творчески существом. (*Bely Peterburg*” 1.56)

[...]it began to seem to him that both he and the study, and the objects in the study,

⁹⁵ “Здесь, в своей комнате, Николай Аполлоновичу воистину вырастал в предоставленный себе самому центр—в серию из центра истекающих логических предпосылок, предопределяющих мысль, душу и вот этот вот стол: он являлся здесь единственным центром вселенной, как мыслимой, так и не мыслимой, циклически протекающей во всех зонах времени” (*Bely Peterburg*” 1.55).

were instantly transforming from objects of the real world into mental symbols of purely logical construction; the space of the study merged with his desensitized body into a general chaos of being, which he called the universe; and Nikolai Apollonovich's consciousness, separating from his body, was directly linked to the electric lamp on the writing desk, which was called 'the sun of consciousness.' Behind locked doors and thinking through his system, which was being raised step by step to unity, he felt that his body was spilt out into the 'universe,' that is to say, the study[...] And thus [displaced], Nikolai Apollonovich became a truly creative being. (Bely *Petersburg* 59 from 1916 version).

Nikolai experiences the entire ascent to a higher consciousness, becoming "a truly creative entity" once he displaces himself (*smestiv sebya*), and transforming discrete objects into a shared plane of existence. Nowhere else in the novel does Bely offer as precise a representation of the imagined creative act of cognition as in this moment. We might even wonder why, if Nikolai does ascend to a higher plane of reality in his room, can he not preserve his enlightened state of communion with the electric-lamp-sun-of-consciousness? As it happens, "a voice, a rustle, or the footsteps of another person, transforming the *universe* into a study, and the *consciousness* into a lamp, shattered the fastidious structure of Nikolai Apollonovich's thought" (Bely *Petersburg* 59).⁹⁶ Interestingly, the 1922 edition alters the meaning substantially from the 1916 version here, in addition to reducing the scene considerably. The revised line says that "...both the rustle and the footstep of an intruder shattered his consciousness" (Bely *Peterburg* 40 *my translation*).⁹⁷ The revision to the abrupt "shatter his consciousness" (*soznanie razbivali*) makes Nikolai's consciousness itself the object of physical

⁹⁶ "[...]golos', shorokh ili shag postoronnego cheloveka prevrashchaya vselemnyu v komnatu, a *soznanie*—v lampu, razbival v Nikolae Apollonoviche prihotlivyi stroi myslei" (Bely *Peterburg*" 1.56-7).

⁹⁷ "[...] i shorokh, i shag postoronnego sheloveka, soznanie razbivali." The revision to "shatter his consciousness" (*soznanie razbivali*) makes consciousness itself the object of physical destruction as opposed to the earlier disembodied 'structure of thought.' In amplifying the destructive force of interruptions, the revision emphasizes the fragility of cerebral play.

destruction as opposed to the earlier abstract “structure of thought.” In amplifying the destructive force of interruptions and omitting the processual transition back to the realm of the everyday (the universe into a study), the 1922 revision dramatizes the fragility of cerebral play. Dependent on the cognizing subject’s tenuous ability to bracket off “everyday trifles” (*zhiteiskie melochi*) and “the abyss of inapprehensibilities called the world and life,” the ascent of consciousness in cerebral play is structurally compromised by the return of the everyday, the intrusion of another subjectivity (Bely *Petersburg* 28). Nikolai’s expansion into the universe is essentially an isolated activity. As such, cerebral play cannot be the basis for any communicable experience.⁹⁸

Like the constraints on Nikolai’s cerebral play, it would appear that nowhere in the creative or regulative capacities of Apollon’s worldview is it possible to share reality with another person. Sandra Bahun argues that “modernist texts[...]conceive of subjecthood (including political subjecthood) in heterogenic terms, as a melancholic whole borne out of, and constantly reshaped by its past and present object-cathexes” (Bahun “Andrei Bely and the Spaces of Historical Melancholia” 88). If the constitution of the subject is composed of its relations with others, as she suggests, the issue of intersubjective communication appears all the more vital. Subjecthood, as Bahun writes, “necessitates constant discursive reassessments and dialogues” but, she cautions, “lest we are led to believe that such subjecthood is easy to achieve, dialogues are precisely what Bely’s characters do worst. The melancholic organization of relationships in the novel is glossed specifically through the characters’ failure to communicate. The characters in the novel are repeatedly precluded both from establishing a dialogic relation[...]and from expressing that relation symbolically” (ibid). Jacob Emery argues that Apollon and Nikolai experience the simultaneous “absolute identity of parent and child,”

⁹⁸ For this reason, it is clear why Vladimir Alexandrov’s reading of cerebral play necessitates positing a unifying metaphysical-mystical realm in the novel. Without granting a common transcendent realm, the isolated condition of cerebral play has no possible connection to a common universal sphere of meaning.

and “absolute difference between perpetrator and victim of violence,” whereby the two are essentially a single self-alienated subjectivity (Emery 47). The self-same identity negates communicability, because the correspondence of experience is not pointed toward another consciousness, but to one’s mirrored consciousness, a closed feedback loop of alienation and self-recognition. Their attempts at ‘dialogue’ then sputters in the self-cancelling frequencies of a single voice.

The Apollon-Nikolai dynamic hardly exhausts the representation of dialogic modality in the novel. The communicative failures do however indirectly establish a certain requirement for the conditions of communication between subjects. In “Emblematics of Meaning” Bely claims that the limit of an individual’s experience is the limit of one’s own life; beyond that limit are the experiences of other particulars. Communicative infection purports to bridge the gap past the bounds of the self. Neither Apollon nor Nikolai can challenge the limit of the other’s life, and as such, their common language is antiseptic. What would seem to be required for infectious communication, by contrast, is a marked difference between subjects. To wit, the possibility of communication depends on the alienation of individuals.

Bahun’s observation about the repeated failure of dialogic relations is therefore still relevant. Situated at the core of the novel is Nikolai’s “rash promise,” yet the narrative does not explicitly disclose the *content* of the promise, i.e., that Nikolai had undertaken to assassinate his father, until nearly the half-way point of the book. With the content of the promise obscured from reader and character alike, it is not presented as a transparent contract then, and the Kantian idea of the unified will of a promise’s participants is hardly apparent. That the promise unfolds as a site of disjunction between promisor and promisee is not unusual within the intersubjective relations in *Petersburg*. But, even in spite of its inscrutability, the promise *effects*, driving the tension of the narrative forward. Because the event of making the promise is withheld, the sense and force of the promise would appear to be reflected in its claim on those implicated by it, and the commitments that it enacts

between those individuals. In a novel defined by the continual seclusion of its characters, the plot is compelled by an act that insists on mediating difference and creating agreement between two people.

While most readers approach idea of unity in *Petersburg* with regard to the question of the formal autonomy of the novel, Timothy Langen conceives of unity as a connectedness that does not insist on a rigid distinction between part and whole. He writes that in *Petersburg* “the primary human gesture—ethically, aesthetically, epistemologically, personally, metaphysically—is the reach across an abyss” (Langen 144). Langen reflects on the texture of the work as a multiplicity of “possible” connections, an unstable “artistic epistemology” in response to the expectations of certainty and stability. I want to develop his idea of “reaching across” somewhat differently. The very possibility of active connection between subjectivities in the novel would provide a vision of “reaching across” in experiential communication. It implies a counterintuitive relation; in a book that presents the crisis of modernity as a persistent view of the looming abyss, the condition for its overcoming is premised not on self-same identification (as in Emery’s kinship metaphor), but in fact on the individuation and alterity characteristic of the abyss itself. While the principle of creativity can otherwise constitute reality in idle cerebral play, as we have seen in Nikolai’s cerebral play, it is incompatible with the presence of another subjectivity. Accordingly, for symbolic creation to have communicative force in a world of multiple subjectivities, cerebral play does not satisfy. By contrast, the promise, as a performative speech act that actively creates something in its uttering, and in its obligatory force structures relations between individuals, is paradigmatic of Bely’s symbolic unity.

The Promise as a Performative Speech Act

As one of the primary speech acts taken up by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words*, promising concerns the limits of understanding and of knowing an other, and it hangs on the

possibility of making oneself understood. As a member of Austin's category of "performative utterances," a promise does not have an analytic truth-value. It does not describe a state of affairs; it is neither correct nor incorrect; rather, a promise *does* something. *What* it does, and moreover, determining *whether* it does what it should do—what Austin calls "the 'happy' functioning of a performative"—depends on certain conventional procedures and circumstances that are non-linguistic (Austin 14). That is, the possibility of performatives, and promising in particular, requires—to some extent—a common worldview between the implicated individuals in the act.

The broader consequence for the promise is whether it supports the possibility of dialogic relations in *Petersburg*, and therefore illustrates the communicability of value between subjects. More immediately ahead however, lies the matter of how a promise generates the force of obligation. Recall that in "Emblematics of Meaning" obligation refers to the Rickertian 'transcendent Ought,' or Kant's subjective universal, asking how one *should* make judgments in accordance with a non-conceptual standard. Does to promise something mean just to say some words, or does the nature of a promise itself entail something beyond words, something perhaps communicable in 'feeling?' As I noted, reference to Nikolai's promise in the first half of the book withholds the details of it. For his part, Nikolai, as we will see, knows he has given a promise, but it is not at all clear that he himself knows *what* he has promised. Until the content of the promise is revealed to be to assassinate his father, the promise functions as a signifier of terrible import despite the concealment of a determinate signified. We will therefore see how the promise's obligatory force inheres not in the severity of the act it demands, but in the severity of the act of promising itself.

Tellingly, the promise is first mentioned in a dialogue between the shadowy double agents Lippanchenko and Morkovin: "Be sure to report it: Nikolai Apollonovich has given a

promise...”(Bely *Petersburg* 23).⁹⁹ Overheard, spoken by shadows, citing a promise without indirect object—given...to whom...to do what? The promise barely is spoken into existence. It is next mentioned in a similarly marginal aside, as Nikolai stands on the bridge where he had nearly committed suicide some months previous. Remembering that night wracked by pains of unrequited love and not quite able to throw himself into the Neva, having just lowered his leg from the railing, “...he had conceived an ill-considered plan: to give a terrible promise to a certain [light-minded] party” (Bely *Petersburg* 61).¹⁰⁰ Ambiguity surrounds its import. Was the plan ill-conceived because of the terrible nature of the promise? Or because of its recipient? While a more exacting promisee might bind the promiser irrevocably to their promise, a light-minded party seems less obdurate. Either the promised deed is terrible, or there is something in that light-mindedness that complicates the promise.

When Nikolai confronts his promise, he acknowledges its obligatory burden in particular, not its content. The sub-section “An Utterly Smoke Sodden Face” is pivotal in illustrating the dynamic of the promise, in which the incommunicable presence of the promised act drives the tension in Nikolai and Dudkin’s dialogue. This is especially true in the 1916 version, in which its additional passages draw out the suspense of the conversation. The scene unfurls with the contaminating emission of cigarette smoke filling Nikolai’s reception room; Dudkin warns his host that smoke, “penetrates the gray mater, the hemispheres get all clogged up,” and entreats him to open a window and ventilate the room lest it fill with smoke (Bely *Petersburg* 49). Nikolai, upon observing his guest’s “smoke-sodden face,” experiences the aforementioned effect: he “felt the

⁹⁹ “[...]Tak-taki peredaite im, chto Nikolai Appolonovich obeshchanie dal” (Bely *Peterburg*” 1.46)

¹⁰⁰ Not togda-to sozrel u nego neobdumannyi plan: dat’ uzhasnoe obeshchanie odnoi legkomyslennoi partii (1.59). Elsworth renders *legkomyslennoi* here as “reckless.” Bely’s adjective on the other hand, literally ‘easy to thought’ suggests the origin in cerebral-play, and offers a disquieting juxtaposition of the terrible promise with an individual not meant to be taken seriously. ‘Reckless,’ to the contrary would seem to legitimize the terrible potential of any promise. Even the most benign pledge to a ‘reckless’ person could be risky.

hemispheres of his own brain clogging up and sluggishness pouring into his organism” (Bely *Petersburg* 49). This experience of being weighed down is not on account of the physical cigarette, the narrator explains, but “of how to get out of a ticklish situation with dignity, [how he would—he thought—how he would act in a risky situation, if the stranger were to, if he were to]...” (Bely *Petersburg* 50 with 1916 addition).¹⁰¹ Escaping from an entanglement—getting out of it with “dignity”—ties knots in Nikolai’s train of thought. The potent magic of naming resounds at the periphery of his incomplete thought: to complete the subjunctive phrase, to name the promise would actualize it, entrapping him again in its demand.

The naming of the word, Bely writes in “Magic of Words,” “is the original act of creation. The word connects the speechless, invisible world swarming in the subconscious depths of my individual consciousness with the speechless, senseless world, swarming outside my individual ego” (Bely “The Magic of Words” 94). Consequently, the tension of the entire scene builds on Nikolai’s anticipation of the re-creation of the promise, when Dudkin “would break off his chatter and remind Nikolai Apollonovich of how he, Nikolai Apollonovich, had once upon a time, through the mediation of this weird stranger given—how exactly to put it...” (Bely *Petersburg* 97). A narratorial interjection, marked by the impatient, “in a word” (*slovom*), introduces a parallel layer of reality by which the narrator names the promise while preserving its irreality for Nikolai’s internally tied tongue:

Словом, дал в свое время ужасное для себя обязательство, которое выполнить
принуждала его не одна только честь; ужасное обещание дал Николай
Аполлонович разве только с отчаянья; побудила к тому житейская неудача;

¹⁰¹ “[...]kak emu s dostoinstvom byiti iz shchekotlivogo sluchaia, kak by on,—dumal on,—postupili v tom riskovannom sluchae, esli by neznakomets, esli by...” (Bely *Peterburg*”2.102).

впоследствии неудача та постепенно изгладилась. Казалось бы, что ужасное обещание отпадает само собой: но ужасное обещание оставалось: оставалось оно, хотя бы уж потому, что назад не было бзято: Николай Аполлонович, но правде сказать, основательно о нем позабыл; а оно, обещание, продолжало жить в коллективном сознании одного необдуманного кружка, в то самое время, когда ощущение горькости бытия под влиянием неудачи изгладилось; сам Николай Аполлонович свое обещание несомненно отнес бы к обещаниям шуточного характера. (*Bely Peterburg*"2.102)

“[In a word], he had once upon a time given what was for him a terrible [obligation (*obyazatel'stvo*)], which not just honour now forced him to fulfill; Nikolai Apollonovich had given the terrible [promise] out of nothing but despair; [an everyday failure (*zhitejskaya neudacha*)] had made him do it; gradually thereafter the [failure] had been effaced. [It would seem] that the terrible promise would be cancelled of its own accord: but the terrible promise remained in force: it remained if only because it had never been withdrawn: to tell the truth, Nikolai Apollonovich had thoroughly forgotten about it; but it, the promise went on living in the collective consciousness of a certain incautious circle, just at the time when the feeling of the bitterness of being, brought on by the [failure], was effaced; Nikolai Apollonovich himself would doubtless have [attributed his promise to promises of a joking character (*otnes by k obeshchaniyam shutochnogo kharaktera*)]. (*Bely Petersburg* 97-98 trans. modified as noted in brackets)

The narrator's intervention defines the promise rather unusually. First of all, to make a promise here means to give oneself an “obligation.” That formulation strikes English ears rather

strangely; we don't give obligations; we accept them or take them on. What does it mean to give oneself an obligation? The circumstances surrounding the giving of the obligation are all the more complicated. The passage recalls the origin of Nikolai's conception of the promise at the site of his near-suicide on the bridge. His "everyday failure," (*zhiteiskaya neudacha*) referring to either his unsuccessful pursuit of Sophia Petrovna (a married socialite), or his failure to kill himself and its attendant despair,¹⁰² is given as the cause of the promise. Additionally, the narrator suggests that the validity of the promise rests on the conditions under which Nikolai gave it. Once the failure had been "effaced" (*izgladilas'*), the reflexive form—literally 'the failure was rubbed out,'—this ought to have meant that the promise became invalid. However, the promise remained, because it had not been withdrawn, and thus was subsisting in some collective-consciousness. These represent two contradictory and irreconcilable conceptions of the promise. The first inheres in Nikolai's intentions: the promise was valid as long as he was motivated to execute it, and ought to have been invalid when the motivation dissipated. In the second conception, a promise's validity depends on whether any agent sustains its existence. Once the promise was brought into being, that Nikolai no longer felt the need for the promise—and in fact forgot about the promise altogether—is irrelevant to the fact of the promise, for it was preserved in some other consciousness.

Relative to these mutually exclusive conceptions of the promise, Nikolai's category of "promises of a joking character" has two different implications. The contingency of the promise as dependent on the spirit in which it was made would permit the idea of "joking promise." It brings to mind the dependence on context by which Rickert says a representation is meaningful: "it is valid only for the individual I in the spatial position and moment in time where the individual had the

¹⁰² In the scene on the bridge, Nikolai, "recalling now that unsuccessful act of his" (Bely *Petersburg* 61), ("Vspominaya teper' etot svoi neudachnyi postupok" (1.59)) the referent of the unsuccessful act is somewhat ambiguous. It could both refer to the aborted suicide attempt and the memory of "unsuccessful love" (*vosspominaya o neudachnoj liubvi*).

feeling of desire” (Rickert 111 my trans.). However, we see that this formulation is complicated if some other consciousness maintains the feeling of the promise. The apparent problem lies in the fact that the meaningfulness of a promise, unlike some descriptive proposition, is dependent on more than a single consciousness. If only one agent involved in the promise had taken it to be a joke, to what extent does that imperil the seriousness of the promise in general? Austin premises his analyses of performatives on the presupposition that they are given “seriously,” that is, “that the person uttering the promise should have a certain intention, viz. to keep his word” (Austin 11). Without seriousness, such acts are given to a class of “abuses,” acts given in bad faith, i.e., that the fact of the promise “arose from mistake and misunderstanding. It should be noted that mistake will not in general make an act void, though it may make it excusable” (42). The manifold conditions wherein a certain performative would be void relate to the proper adherence to the rituals and conventions that oversee the validity of the act in question. That is, had the conventional procedure of promising not been upheld, say, had the promise not been “accepted,” or that Nikolai had mistakenly promised something not his to give, the promise could be said to have misfired, never getting off the ground in the first place (25-38). But the abuse of a performative, under which “a joking promise” would seem to fall, is a more complicated affair due to the involvement of the feelings at play in the promiser.

For Austin, the thoughts or feelings present in the one doing the act are not constitutive of the act itself. This is a result of the rather stark line he draws in the sand in repudiating the view that takes an utterance as an external description of an inward act:

We are apt to have a feeling that their being serious consists in their being uttered as (merely) the outward and visible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act[...]for many purposes the outward utterance is a description, *true* or *false*,

of the occurrence in the inward performance[...]Thus 'I promise to' obliges me—puts on record my spiritual assumption of a spiritual shackle (9-10)

The danger of assigning the "truth" of an utterance to its correspondence to the invisible spiritual performance of the agent, is that it provides an out for those in violation of their contractual utterances. Thus, he concludes that "[a]ccuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*' (11). To be sure, Austin marks the non-correspondence of intention and utterance as infelicitous, but intention itself does not invalidate the conventional grounds of the promise. This distinction becomes especially fraught as he organizes the promise under the speech act class of illocutionary commissives: "the whole point of a commissive is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action" (157). It is not entirely clear how a promise could commit a speaker to a course of action if it was given insincerely; shouldn't sincerity be essential to the promise's affective obligation? In his view there would be no sense in the idea that the promise would become invalidated by the erasure of its intention, especially after the fact of it being enacted. Moreover, Austin's conception is rather indifferent to whether or not the promiser feels the obligation he is committed to; the words, spoken in the right circumstances, are enough for him. If we bring the issue of Nikolai's feelings and internal motivations to Austin's analysis of the promise, it appears Austin is ill-equipped to adjudicate the promise on those grounds. In fact, the conditions of the promise in general matter to Austin only at the invocation of the speech act itself; otherwise he might say a promise ought to be honored because that is what a promise means. The contingencies of obligation that the narrator raises slip entirely from Austin's purview.

The Promise as Giving an Obligation: Anscombe's Restriction and Cavell's Passionate Utterance

That problem of obligation is more pointedly taken on by Elizabeth Anscombe when she investigates the extent to which “it is essential to [a certain act], that someone who is doing it should think that he is doing it” (Anscombe 61). Refining the notion of Austin’s commissive, she proposes that “...When a man gives an undertaking [i.e. Promises to do something] he typically tends to restrict his (absolute) possibility of acting well, and so he typically tends to impose (derivative) necessity on himself” (69). Her investigation pulls at the notion that the force of obligation is contained in the concept of the promise itself, thereby clarifying how Nikolai’s giving of a promise is a giving of an obligation to oneself. It is by no *necessity* that the promiser is actually bound to uphold the undertaking he promises, but at the same time, “purely by my voluntary giving of the sign [of I promise], the restriction is created,” such that, “the meaning of the sign is that my possibilities of doing well are restricted” (70). With a restriction to “act well” a promise puts pressure on the promisee to conform to the dictates of the promise. Acting well in this sense means to honor the value contained in the interests of the promised party; it takes priority over one’s own desires and other drives, and thus becomes the ethical condition for living “well.” This is not a causal necessity for Anscombe, as much as a necessity of ‘going along with’ the accepted procedure, insofar as the procedure “is an instrument in people’s attainment of so many of the goods of common life...it is the necessity that Aristotle spoke of, by which something is called necessary if without it good cannot be attained” (75). The obligation of a promise is an obligation of participating in the common sphere, of acknowledging a shared value about human activities between the two parties that ought to be promoted. By this account Nikolai’s “joking promise” has no significant place whatsoever. A promise is only meaningful insofar as it reflects an agreement to uphold the sense of good entailed by a restriction of action.

Between the two models of the promise—contingent on feeling or maintained by a sense of contractual obligation—it seems that at bottom, what determines the validity of the promise is whether or not both parties recognize that a promise is invoked. Without recourse to a universal authority, e.g., the legal adjudication of a contract, or the existence of a theoretically determinant moral good, ‘authority’ is displaced by a consideration of whether two individuals *acknowledge* that they have committed to a promise. If one recognizes the claim of the other, the promise is valid, and if not, the debt is not merely still unpaid, but essentially irredeemable. If the promiser does not feel the ought of action, then the promised party has no substantial recourse to reproach him. Furthermore, because the meaning of the promise subsists in the relation between individuals, i.e., in the *feeling* of obligation, the specific content of the promise is extraneous to the intersubjective pact.

Accordingly, that Nikolai has both forgotten the content of the promise, and at the same feels the force of its obligation, suggests that he recognizes the legitimacy of Dudkin to make a demand on him. This scene illustrates the way in which the *feeling* of obligation is communicated regardless of the ability for either Dudkin or Nikolai to make the promise explicit. What is important is not the content of the promise but that it has the power to ‘restrict Nikolai’s freedom.’ The feeling of obligation rushes forth from Nikolai immediately upon Dudkin’s mere invocation of “remembering”: “hearing that strident falsetto pronounce ‘remembering,’ Nikolai Apollonovich all but cried out aloud, ‘My offer?...’ But he at once again regained control; and he merely observed: ‘I see, I’m at your service,’ and in doing so thought how his politeness had destroyed him” (Bely *Petersburg* 99).¹⁰³ Clearly, the obligatory force of the promise is on display in full effect. Even Nikolai’s measured response reveals an inescapable sense of indebtedness. But what remains

¹⁰³ “[...]proiznosivshuiu ‘*pomniya*’, Nikolaii Apollonovich edva ne vykriknul vsukh: ‘O moem predlozhenie?...’ No on totchas zhe vzial sebja v ruki; i on tol’ko zametil: ‘Tak, Ya k vashim uslugam’—i pri etom podumal on, chto vot vezhlivost’ pogubila ego...” (2.104)

strikingly unaccounted for in the scene is how it is that Nikolai still feels compelled. Following Austin, when one of the concomitants of the promise is absent, the promise is “void, or given in bad faith, or not implemented” (Austin 11). Nikolai’s feelings to the contrary imply that the promise is undeterred by the absence of the articulation of the promise and the remainder of his own desires. Dudkin’s apparent allusion to the promise places the emphasis squarely on the act: “I’m not really talking about tobacco...but about business...and not really about business, even: the whole point is a favor—and this favor you can do for me” (Bely *Petersburg* 98).¹⁰¹ The word order presents Nikolai’s involvement as almost an afterthought to the matter of the service itself. Nevertheless, to be reminded of his promised service (*usluga*) compels him to aver a relation to Dudkin mediated by that service, “*Ya k vashim uslugam*” (“I am at your service”).

Austin’s insights continue to seem misapplied to this matter. Their imprecision owes to the nature of Nikolai’s anxiety; in the moment of apprehension his thoughts do not turn to the validity of his promise, i.e., whether the circumstances surrounding the promise were in order. Rather, Dudkin’s remark unnerves Nikolai, because he hears the address “*you* can do for me” as implicating *him* in particular. The content of the promise is subordinated to the affective force of the form of direct address.

We might better consider the exchange with respect to the demand for recognition that defines Stanley Cavell’s notion of the “passionate utterance,” an extension of Austin’s speech act theory. If the performative utterance is “an offer of participation in the order of law,” the passionate utterance however, is “an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire” (Cavell *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* 19, 185). The difference between the two is a lack of logical necessity; as an illocutionary utterance, the rules and commitments of the promise should be contained in the

¹⁰¹ “I dazhe ya ne o dele: vsia sut’ tut v uslug—i etu uslugu vy, konechno, mozhete mne okazat’” (2.103).

moment of saying, 'I promise'; a passionate utterance in Cavell's formulation is more of a perlocutionary utterance, which "produces certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience" (Austin 101). Cavell notes that whereas in the illocutionary act, "The 'I' who is doing the action...does essentially come into the picture...I might comparably say: In perlocutionary acts the 'you' comes essentially into the picture" (Cavell *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* 180). The passionate utterance functions as a confrontation that must be responded to, and "failure to have singled you out appropriately in passionate utterance characteristically puts the future of our relationship, as part of my sense of my identity, or of my existence more radically at stake" (184). We can thereby read Dudkin's phrases, "a service...I feel very awkward, but remembering..." as a subtle passionate utterance, an invitation for Nikolai to remember his obligation, to acknowledge a relation between them that transcends the service itself.

**Obligation as Recognition:
Bakhtin's *Philosophy of the Act***

This subtle restatement of the obligation of the promise as the recognition of the demands of the other suggests the relevance of yet another theorist who might further focus the sense of the ethical event in this scene. Mikhail Bakhtin's own early Neo-Kantian influences strike a trenchant parallel to Bely's thought both in "Emblematics of Meaning" and *Petersburg*. Bakhtin came into contact with Neo-Kantianism through his closest friend Matvei Kagan, who studied with Hermann Cohen, founder of the so-called Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism.¹⁰⁵ His *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* was written between 1920 and 1924, at the height of his interest in Neo-Kantianism,¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ For Kagan's relationship with Bakhtin and the influence of Neo-Kantianism see (Clark and Holquist 41-48) and (Holquist 26-30).

¹⁰⁶ The imprimatur of Neo-Kantianism was so significant apparently, that in 1920 Bakhtin actually appropriated Kagan's autobiography as his own, writing in his curriculum vitae that *he* had studied for four semesters at the University

concurrent with Bely's revisions of *Petersburg*. In its critique of the theoretical formal ethics of Kant and Rickert, which endeavors to relocate value from a theoretical world to the conscious activity of life-as-event, Bakhtin's essay oddly treads on the same ground as "Emblematics of Meaning." His argument merits some unpacking, both due to its complexity, and its crucial relevance to the obligatory force of the promise at play in *Petersburg*.

Bakhtin argues that Rickert's crucial misunderstanding is conceiving of the Ought as a formal theoretical category. He repudiates the idea that the moral norm, the Ought, is theoretical, rejecting both its determinate and theoretical content. Instead, he insists that the Ought "is a distinctive category of the ongoing performance of acts or deeds [*postuplenie*] or of the actually performed act (and everything is an act or deed that I perform—even thought and feeling)" (Bakhtin *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* 6). The performed act, with its non-theoretical meaning, is "an instance of participative-thinking [*uchastnoe myshlenie*] (which seeks to overcome its own givenness for the sake of what-is-to-be-attained) sustained in a penitent tone; this participative thinking, however, proceeds within that architectonic of Being-as-event which is affirmed and founded *by us*" (11, first emphasis added). Glossing Bakhtin's meaning here, the singular event of meaning is created in the moment of an act of participation; truth is not a timeless theoretical concept, but as in Rickert, created *by us* in affirming. Moreover, what is given in experience is not fully determinate; our participation in the act, with our participative-thinking informs the purpose of a word, gives it value in intonation (32-3). Bakhtin further explains the event as follows:

Единственную единственность нельзя помыслить, но лишь участно пережить.
Весь теоретический разум только момент практического разума, т.е. разума
нравственной ориентации единственного субъекта в событии единственного

of Marburg as well as in Berlin from 1910-1912, reproduced in (Lisov and Trusova 165).

бытия. В категориях теоретического безучастного сознания это бытие не определимо, но лишь в категориях участно-действенного переживания конкретной единственности мира. (Bakhtin *Sobranie Sochinenii V Semii Tomakh: Filosofskaya Estetika 1920-X Godov* 17)

Once-occurrent unique or singularity cannot be thought of, it can only be participatively experienced or lived through [*uchastno perezhit*]. All of theoretical reason in its entirety is only a moment of practical reason, i.e., the reason of the unique subjectum's moral orientation within the event of once-occurrent Being. This Being cannot be determined in the categories of non-participant theoretical consciousness—it can be determined only in the categories of actual communion, [*prichashchenie*] i.e., of an actually performed act, in the categories of participative-effective experiencing of the concrete uniqueness or singularity of the world. (13)

Of principal importance in Bakhtin's elucidation of the event is its individual character and singularity. As moral orientation is contained in the event itself, the Ought is instantiated in the unique singular moments of the event. The major consequence of this is that Bakhtin's moral vision is intolerant of universal validity.

Bakhtin's critique of Kantian formal ethics follows the same trajectory: "the legality of the categorical imperative as universal and universally valid consists precisely in this theoretical justification of it...the law, which applies a norm to my act or deed, must be justified as capable of becoming a norm of universal conduct" (Bakhtin *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* 26). Accordingly, the determination of Being—the meaning of being—is not theoretically derived, but subsists in the performance itself of the actually performed act. His invocation of *prichashchenie*, religious communion, as in receiving the Eucharist, generates a vision of the participatory experience of the

act, taken from within the moment itself.

Refusing the external perspective afforded by theoretical contemplation, the force of Bakhtin's idea of the "actually performed act" centers on the singularity and immediacy of the event in its "concrete unity." The act, "taken from within[...]in its answerability[...]is the taking-into account in it of all the factors—a taking into-account of its sense validity as well as of its factual performance in all its concrete historicity and individuality" (28).¹⁰⁷ In Bakhtin's conceptions of the act itself, e.g., its "unitary and unique, and[...]final context"; "its undivided wholeness"; "a truth that united both the subjective and the psychological moments, just as it unites the moment of what is universal (universally valid) and the moment of what is individual (actual)," he offers a unity that is essentially an *intersubjective unity*, abiding in the immediacy of the ethical act. (Bakhtin *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* 29). Moreover, properly understood, Bakhtin's concept of the act recasts Bely's question of the communication of experience from a two step procedure—the experiencing of one's own content of consciousness and the communication of it through the creation of symbolic images—to a singular act of communal unity, the obligatory act that situates oneself in a relation with the other, a relation indifferent to the content of value itself (38). Bakhtin's argument virtually retraces the obligatory character of Nikolai's promise we derived from Anscombe: "This content could not by itself, in isolation, have prompted me to perform the act or deed—to undersign-acknowledge it, but only in correlation with my decision to undertake an obligation—by performing the act of undersigning-acknowledging" (38ff). That is, the promise acquires its force not from the seriousness of the content of the promise, but in acknowledging the legitimacy of its obligation, its restrictions on the possibility of 'acting well.'

¹⁰⁷ The notion of answerability, *ответственность* or responsibility, is central for Bakhtin, particularly in his seminal essay "Art and Answerability." Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson offer a helpful distillation of the term's ethical component in that essay: "one's obligation in answerability is to rescue the other from pure potential; reaching out to another consciousness makes the other coalesce, and turns the other's 'mere potential' into space that is open to living event" (Emerson 76).

Ultimately, Bakhtin's so-called philosophy of the act turns on the negotiation of two discrete "value-centers" embodied by the encounter between the cognizing subject and the other. Central to the distribution of the unity of meaning in the world in this case is precisely the essential difference of value-centers—put in Anscombe's terminology, the difference of interests. This relation, which he calls the "evaluative architectonic division of the world into *I* and those who are all *others*," is "incessantly and actively realized through my answerable deed, upbuilt by my deed and possessing stability only in the answerability of my deed" (75). The latter claim implies that the meaning of the relation of the act inheres in the answerability, the recognition of the value of the other relative to the unique value of the individual, and maintaining oneself as a center, rather than passively dispossessing one's own perspective. To do otherwise, he notes, would "disintegrate into abstractly universal, merely possible moments and relations, which can be reduced to an equally abstract-universal, merely possible unity" (58). The actualization of unity of meaning, therefore, occurs in the unitary act of negotiation, of facing the value of the other with one's own. Discussing Bakhtin's later conception of "polyphony" in the novel, essentially an evolution of the relation in the encounter between I and the other, Ilya Klinger astutely explains that it "does not achieve anything like an assimilation of the isolated modern individual into a community of the 'allman' united in God. Rather, it presupposes a togetherness in isolation, an agonistic unity, a discursive struggle between a number of principled perspectives on the world" (Klinger "Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy: Genre and Modernity in Ivanov, Pumpyansky, and Bakhtin" 82). The dynamic at play between Nikolai and Dudkin depicts that struggle precisely.

The recognition of the demands of the other creates a unity in *Petersburg*, but a unity that is not universal, and certainly that cannot furnish a through-going principle for the novel as a whole. Indeed, as the philosophical exposition of the promise has demonstrated, its force inheres in the singularity of the event, the mutual acknowledgment it elicits between its participants. In this sense

the promise can be seen as a paradigmatic example of *zhiznetvorchestvo*, the speech-act creates a vibrant resonance between the promiser and promisee. In the singularity of that event, a profound agonistic unity emerges. The actualization of the unity of value inheres in the moment of obligation between two individuals, but does not (and cannot) set a prescriptive norm.

At its core, Nikolai's promise to kill his father argues for language's creative potential to transform social relations, whereby Nikolai's recognition of the promise generates an ethical claim on him powerful enough to disrupt the pre-existing ethical norms inherent to kinship relations—an obligatory force that stands to violate the ethical transgression of patricide. That the bomb eventually misses its mark reflects the limits of this intersubjective unity's reach; beyond the context of the event (the promise), it cannot ultimately serve as an ethical principle applied universally.

Seen through the lens of intersubjective unity, the botched execution of the promise is less a failure of obligation as it is the frustration of a principle of dramatic necessity—if the unity of communication is maintained only in fleeting moments of mutual recognition, the dissolution of those bonds correspondingly affects the integrity of narrative resolution. At the same, the singularity of the promise does not imply that it bears no lasting consequences; if Nikolai's *isolated* cerebral play was delimited by interruption, the *collaborative* creation of the promise initiates a persistent chain reaction, that like the personification of the bomb, Pepp Peppovich Pepp expands continuously, irrevocably, until it bursts (Bely *Petersburg* 168).

III: “something resembling sympathy”: Confidence, Silence, and anti-Dialogism in *Under Western Eyes*

The assassination of Vyacheslav Konstantinovich von Plehve, Russian Minister of the Interior, in July 1904 serves as the model for the pivotal assassination plots in both Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*, and Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. Where Bely's novel feverishly builds to the frustrated climax of the failed assassination of Apollon Apollonovich, the action of *Under Western Eyes* is set in motion by the explosion of an assassin's bomb that kills Minister-President de P—. As narrative mechanisms the two fictionalized accounts of von Plehve's assassination operate as inversions of each other that could be termed explosive and implosive: the roiling dissonance of Bely's prose articulates the spirit of the 1905 Revolution, driving toward an explosive denouement—an ironic misfire as Nikolai Apollonovich loses track of the sardine can that non-fatally detonates in his father's study; in Conrad's telling, the successful assassination of de P— sparks its own misfire, implicating the unwitting Razumov in a revolution of which he wants no part, foisting conspiratorial affiliations upon him that he cannot disavow, which ultimately consume him. In the previous chapter I argued that Nikolai's promise to assassinate his father revealed the constitutive role ethics plays in Symbolist aesthetic creation, making visible an “intersubjective unity” formed by the force of obligation created between individuals. The promise epitomizes Symbolism's concept of *zhiznetvorchestvo*, life-creation: in the resonance of living words exchanged between individuals, singular moments of profound communal unity could emerge. The bomb becomes an abstracted afterthought, a dramatic deflation that indicates the limitations of intersubjective unity; it cannot serve as a discursive principle to organize the total work of art. The bomb then is both a representation of the forceful discharge of *zhiznetvorchestvo* as well as the conditionality and non-guarantee of its effect, the limited range of

its impact.

At the beginning of his study of “forced dialogue” in the work of Joseph Conrad, Aaron Fogel describes a similar approach to “detonation” as a paradigmatic closure in Conrad’s work: “‘Detonations’ are, in Conrad’s poetic glossary, oxymoronic: loud explosions which are at the same time silencings, muffled events: ‘de-tonings,’ or final losses of any clear tonality...the loud silence which absorbs, without completely resolving or explaining, all the conflicted political noises and silences that have accumulated in the course of the action” (Fogel 2). Fogel argues that Conrad’s detonative letdown endings shatter the fantasy of narrative resolution and completion, and instead point to the insufficiency and finitude of social reality: “Conrad wants the reader to attend, as an exercise in poetic and social imagination, to a plurality of dialogized rather than transcendental, mystical, or ineffable silences” (190). The lack of lethality in Bely’s detonation speaks to a similar ethos: the much-anticipated explosion is not ultimately transformative of social relations, in fact quite the opposite: the political and legal order continues unaffected (arrests were made), and Nikolai leaves Russia, alone.

Where the assassination plot in *Petersburg* provides a site for intersubjective mobilization, in *Under Western Eyes* it swiftly founders against Razumov’s “solitary individuality” (16). Between Nikolai and Dudkin the promise demonstrates the creative capacity of language to generate shared ethical value between individuals. For the student of philosophy at the heart of Conrad’s novel, however, those social bonds can be unwelcome, and language functions less as a mechanism to facilitate mutuality than as an unbalanced lever, giving some a disproportionate power to constrain the other, and leaving an unwilling speaker no safe word with which to be left alone. It seems appropriate then that the assassination that orients the rising action of *Petersburg* and structures its formation of social relations is merely the point of departure for *Under Western Eyes*. Whatever potential for emancipatory social transformation the assassination of the fictionalized figure of von

Plehve may have held in *Petersburg* are promptly deadened by Razumov's decision to turn the assassin over to the police.¹⁰⁸ The destruction of a representative of despotic tyranny surprisingly does not open up a space for free and spontaneous discourse propelled by the productive agonism of intersubjective unities, far from it: the orientation of interpersonal contact in the novel is concerned with its effect on the integrity and independence of the individual. Razumov finds his independence to be under the constant threat of other people's words.

Razumov does not enter into conversations with other people so much as he finds himself ambushed by their words. When Minister de P—'s assassin, Victor Haldin, unexpectedly appears at Razumov's door, he feels "the sentiment of his life being utterly ruined by this contact with such a crime" (20). Quite aside from the practical anxieties that accompany being implicated in a criminal conspiracy, what makes this contact so "utterly" destructive is the social entrapment itself: "Razumov of course felt the safety of his lonely existence to be permanently endangered" (24). With the weight of the narrative turning on Razumov's efforts to remain lonely, which he understands as freedom from the claims of others' speech about him, the novel's attitude toward dialogic speech is radically different from its function in the Russian Symbolist works discussed in the previous chapters. The capacity for speech acts to restructure reality and constitute ethical relations between speaking subjects could be conceived in the symbolist novels as essentially consistent with the symbolist project of life-creation. Yet in *Under Western Eyes* the same obligatory force language exerts between speakers appears to be problematic, subordinating the freedom of an individual, dictating rather than dialogizing. Ultimately, we have here two incompatible visions of the individual in community, one mutually made and remade through polyphonic dialogue, and another that insists on an indissoluble

¹⁰⁸ Avrom Fleishman has noted that the particular details of the assassination in *Under Western Eyes* more closely resemble the assassination of Alexander II in 1882 (Fleishman *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* 219).

autonomous self that will prefer deafness to bending to the claims of the other raised in dialogue.

Coercive confidence

That first encounter with Haldin illustrates Razumov's fraught struggle to maintain his "solitary individuality" within the social reality of the novel. After Haldin's reveals his role in the assassination to Razumov, Haldin interpellates the latter's lack of response, "You say nothing, Kirylo Sidorovitch! I understand your silence. To be sure I cannot expect you with your frigid English manner to embrace me" (20). Razumov's silence and frigidity mark his attempt to preserve his "solitary individuality" by refusing to be drawn into dialogue. Leonardo Lisi detects precisely this quality of subversive resistance in the representation of silence in the novel: "[Silence] seems to constitute an active danger that must be subdued and tamed by the speaker who otherwise risks the destruction of his or her verbal-ideological framework...because it represents that which falls outside a given framework but which must nevertheless be assimilated through interpretation so as not to undermine its claim to absolute authority." (Lisi "Power, Truth and Play in *under Western Eyes*" 110). Accordingly, Razumov's silence threatens to frustrate the bonds of camaraderie that Haldin relies on in appealing for his help. At first, Haldin attempts to attribute Razumov's silence to his moral character: "You are a man of few words, but I haven't met anybody who dared to doubt the generosity of your character which cannot exist without courage" (20). Rather than take Razumov's "silence" or "reserve" as reticence, he asserts it as evidence of willing trustworthiness. But he goes further; to overcome any lingering uncertainty of Razumov's commitment, Haldin forcibly annuls the efficacy of silence as a mode of resisting dialogic participation.

The ethical force of speech acts in *Petersburg* strikingly contrasts with analogous utterances in *Under Western Eyes*. If in Bely, the act of promising created a structure of mutual consent, in

Conrad, speech acts are unidirectional weapons of control. The following exchange is illustrative:

Razumov made an effort to speak calmly.

“But pardon me, Victor Victorovitch. We know each other so little...I don’t see why you...?”

“Confidence,” said Haldin.

This word sealed Razumov’s lips as if a hand had been clapped on his mouth. His brain seethed with arguments.

“And so—here you are,” he muttered through his teeth.

The other did not detect the tone of anger. Never suspected it” (22)

Unlike the promise, “confidence” bypasses mutual consent and immediately imposes a relation of dependence on the confidant. For Razumov the utterance itself has perlocutionary force: “The word sealed Razumov’s lips as if a hand had been clapped on his mouth” (22). Razumov experiences Haldin’s disclosure as an act of physical violence, a forceful silencing that denies the possibility of response. This is a paradigmatic example of what Aaron Fogel calls “forced speech,” arguing that for Conrad the notion of communication as a free act between equal participants is illusory, but is instead an asymmetrical relation of power. Fogel takes Conrad to be pushing back on a Bakhtinian notion of dialogue as a site of potential freedom, showing it to be instead “the nearly opposite idea of dialogue as involuntary, forceful, and productive bondage of speakers to each other” (Fogel 9).¹⁰⁹ Advancing Fogel’s argument, Leonardo Lisi explains that in this situation of coercive dialogue, “the other’s speech[...]is always a threat to the listener’s freedom, since it constitutes a verbal-ideological

¹⁰⁹ Fogel discounts the productive agonism inherent to Bakhtinian polyphony. Though dialogue is not akin to forced bondage for Bakhtin, the persistent tension of shaping one’s discourse to the response of another is not so distant.

position which, if accepted, defines him or her in terms of a dialogical contract that excludes alternative possibilities of Being” (Lisi "Power, Truth and Play in *under Western Eyes*" 109). To follow this formulation, Haldin’s utterance of “confidence” threatens to ensnare Razumov in a dialogical contract that would fix his ‘Being’ in terms dictated by Haldin. There doesn’t seem to be any conditionality however, in Haldin’s bestowal of confidence; it does not depend on Razumov’s acceptance. To not refute the claim of confidence upholds its validity nonetheless. Razumov does not—and perhaps *cannot*—reject Haldin’s confidence; his response, “‘And so—here you are,’ he muttered through his teeth,” meekly addresses the state of affairs (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 22). Haldin’s bestowal of confidence apparently restricts Razumov’s expression of disagreement to the subtleties of tone. That his attempt at communicating failed to register with Haldin not only reflects an insufficient attunement to the other (“the other did not detect the tone of anger”), but suggests that it was so ineffectual that it went effectively unheard (“Never suspected it”). Essentially, Haldin’s “silencing” of Razumov is at the same time the foreclosure of silence as a valid procedure in the dialogic contract. Razumov is moved to say words, but those words have no communicative force. No words can remove Razumov from his association in this conspiracy. His effective silence has been forced upon him by Haldin’s confidence, not the silence of “frigid distance,” but of stifling intimacy.

After Razumov eventually betrays Haldin to General T—,¹¹⁰ his interactions with Haldin provides the rare occasion in the novel that it is the *other’s* silence that Razumov must overcome: “Razumov was made uneasy by this attitude. ‘What move is he mediating over so quietly?’ he thought. ‘He must

¹¹⁰ In internal dialogue Razumov rejects the language of “betrayal”: “Betrayal! Why! the fellow had done all that was necessary to betray himself. Precious little had been needed to deceive him. ‘I have said no word to him that was not strictly true. Not one word—’ Razumov argued with himself” (61). That Razumov’s changing of allegiance (real or perceived) is internally coherent to him (“I have said no word to him that was not strictly true”) and is not an arbitrary conversion from one position to the next is a crucial point that will be discussed later in the chapter. Razumov’s dialectical constitution permits simultaneous recognition of conflicting positions. He can tell truth from lies and lies from truth.

be prevented. I must keep on talking to him” (53). Anxious that Haldin’s silence may indicate his intentions to leave, Razumov endeavors to detain him with conversation. An ironic reversal of the earlier situation in which Haldin’s presence posed such a danger to Razumov, having now informed General T—,¹¹¹ he depends entirely on Haldin remaining in his room: “Should he take fright at my manner and rush off somewhere I shall be undone completely” (50). Of course, irrespective of Razumov’s betrayal, Haldin’s arrival was irrevocable; leaving could not erase the stain of alleged conspiracy. As Razumov reflects, even killing him could not fix the situation: “Nothing short of complete annihilation would do. And that was impossible. What then? Must one kill oneself to escape this visitation?” (32). He is so entangled in networks of dependency with and related to Haldin (i.e. with General T—) that his freedom of speech is thoroughly circumscribed: against Haldin’s claim of confidence he can say nothing; but he is forced to speak to Haldin to merit the confidence of the General. Silenced by confidence and compelled to speak by confidence, no words are his own.

The constraints against Razumov’s speech are not confined to the direct encounter with the other, however. Within the total dialogic situation of the autocratic state, Razumov is helpless against its totalizing authority over speech. Fogel writes that Razumov is “the most fully conscious of the limitation and the forcedness of his own silences, even while he has little recourse but to practice them and to want more from them” (Fogel 191). Razumov recognizes that Haldin’s confidence in him is irrevocable, albeit misplaced. The framework of conspiracy can encompass the entirety of his potential speech under its supervision; he realizes that, “The police would very soon find out all about him[...].Everybody Haldin had ever known would be in the greatest danger. Unguarded

¹¹¹ The scene with the General is a repetition of Haldin’s use of “confidence” to coerce mutuality. The General repeatedly notes, “[Razumov] inspires confidence,” and asserts, “I have a perfect confidence in you Razumov (43, 47). Razumov asserts that he is innocent of any complicity with Haldin, insisting, “I provoked no confidences—I asked for no explanations—” (45). The subtle distinction between ‘inspiring’ and ‘provoking’ confidence suggests that the tendency for others to convey confidence in him does not turn on anything Razumov *does* but on who he *is*. Perhaps analogous to describing someone as trustworthy, in this context it communicates weakness, his vulnerability to being confided in.

expressions, little facts in themselves would be counted for crimes” (24). Nothing can remain his own, innocent and disconnected, anything is potential evidence, assimilating Razumov into social relations, forcing him to speak.

Even after ridding himself of Haldin, Razumov cannot regain his freedom or reclaim—as Bakhtin would say—his “final word.” When the student Kostia confronts Razumov we see how both the presence of the autocratic State and Haldin’s speech maintain their hold upon him. Believing that Razumov had assisted Haldin, Kostia praises his character:

There’s no getting to the bottom of your mind. Not for fellows like me. But we all agreed that you must be preserved for our country. Of that we have no doubt whatever—I mean all of us who have heard Haldin speak of you on certain occasions. A man doesn’t get the police ransacking his rooms without there being some devilry hanging over his head...(68)

In this single utterance the coercive forces of the autocracy and Haldin’s confidence are collapsed together to ensnare Razumov. Although direct knowledge of Razumov’s nature is closed off from Kostia (“There’s no getting to the bottom of your mind. Not for fellows like me”), he avers certainty based on two pieces of evidence: 1) “all of us who heard Haldin speak of you”; and 2) “A man doesn’t get the police ransacking his rooms.” The effect of Haldin’s speech acts survive Haldin himself; as Razumov thinks, “The fellow’s casual utterances were caught up and treasured and pondered over by all these imbeciles” (70). It is not the particular ethical force of Haldin’s “confidence” then that compromises Razumov’s solitary individuality; even “casual utterances” are weaponized against him. Similarly, simply the police’s search of his room is for Kostia and his comrades evidence of Razumov’s trustworthiness; the irony that Razumov’s cooperation with the police is observed by others to signify precisely the opposite underscores how Razumov’s solitary individuality is thoroughly undermined in the political-social reality. There is no neutral, private

ground between the monolith of State power and the camaraderie of revolutionary resistance. In Razumov's mind both sides are tyrannical to his individual autonomy: "Again he experienced that sensation of his conduct being taken out of his hands by Haldin's revolutionary tyranny. His solitary and laborious existence had been destroyed—the only thing he could call his own on this earth" (69). Within the paradigm of Russian autocracy even political resistance to it has the character of "revolutionary tyranny."

So, in a continuing effort to reclaim his "final word," Razumov agrees to become a spy for the Okhrana, the pre-revolutionary secret police. Aaron Fogel astutely observes the irony of Razumov's predicament, explaining that Razumov enters into a contract with Councillor Mikulin under the semblance of a freely realized agreement, when in actuality it entrenches him in a further state of dependence: "one enters [contracts] to escape forced dialogue or control it, and one fails, because the essence of contractility is that it is not voluntary agreement but forced mutuality" (Fogel 217)¹¹². Razumov's ideal of individual autonomy, his desire for independence constantly collapses in the social reality of the novel. On one side of the political spectrum Haldin and the revolutionary groups co-opt his participation and conscript him into their community against his will; his only apparent alternative is the secret police where the power of the autocratic state wields immeasurable power in subordinating him to their agenda¹¹³. Razumov is trapped in a paralyzed stasis, between a collapsing illusion of individual autonomy and omnipresent coercive forms of community that offer no avenue to individual freedom. The narrative structure of the novel mimics Razumov's paralysis when

¹¹² Fogel's perspective on the coercive quality of contracts provokes a compelling rejoinder to my claim that the obligatory force of the promise functions as a site of ethical relation in the previous chapter. It may be that the non-binding, extralegal context of the promise provides enough leeway for free action (e.g. breaking a promise) without statutory consequences that "forced mutuality" wouldn't be an apt description of the relation between Nikolai and Dudkin.

¹¹³ Avrom Fleishman's reading of Razumov's double bind follows similar lines to Fogel's, explaining that the "collective body is the source of the strength to which Razumov, the alienated individual, turns, but in doing so he allies himself with a repressive autocracy, and it becomes necessary for him to free himself of this identification, to acquire an association with a genuine community or with some surrogate of it, if he is to survive" (Fleishman *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* 232).

Councillor Mikulin poses the question to Razumov, “Where to?” at the conclusion of Part I, Conrad breaks off the scene abruptly and does not provide the answer until Part IV. The knowledge that Razumov has contracted to become a counter-revolutionary is withheld from the reader, and as a result Razumov’s appearance in Geneva in the middle sections seem arbitrary and unmotivated, and read as a disconnected entr’acte rather than the direct consequences of his meeting with Mikulin.¹¹⁴ Razumov’s response to the question is inevitable: capitulation to autocracy, the ellipsis conveys the foreclosure of possible paths to self-determination. His narrative horizons are thus shaped by capitulation to the demands of the autocracy.

Thus far we have explored how, contra the *Petersburg* communicative paradigm, where speech acts like the promise drive the plotted action and articulate new ethical relations between individuals, the dialogue in *Under Western Eyes* bears little resemblance to the creative capacities of Symbolist language. Here dialogue is portrayed as an assault on the principle of Razumov’s “solitary individuality.” Speech acts function as either mechanisms of state control (contracts), or as weapons of conscription that set otherwise neutral actors like Razumov in involuntary affiliation with those that oppose autocracy. This invites the question as to what meaning is contained in Razumov’s individual autonomy. And if we consider the matter of Razumov’s individual autonomy as his capacity to speak for himself—the owner of his last “word”—in what dialogic framework could his speech operate that isn’t simply a fantasy of self-reliance? Let us then turn to examine the nature of this “solitary individuality.”

¹¹⁴ Keith Carabine, who compares this scene to Porfiry’s question of “Where to?” to Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, argues that the middle sections of the novel constitute “in their entirety...a reply to Dostoevsky’s moral vision” (Carabine 239). He persuasively argues that Razumov is not afforded the potential reconciliation with Christian sympathy, as Raskolnikov is, as the State demands that as a double-agent he must enter into dishonest dialogue with others. As such “his spy-mission ensured his moral isolation” (246).

“Solitary individuality” under Western and Russian Eyes

As Razumov’s futile efforts at remaining silent serve to preserve his ideal of individuality, it is striking that Rebecca Beasley attributes his silence to his “English character”; “Razumov’s distinguishing feature is his silent aloofness, a feature[...]Haldin describes as ‘your silent frigid manner[...]It is this supposedly English characteristic that drives much of the novel’s plot” (Beasley 197). We would be tempted then to situate Razumov as the standard-bearer of a form of English or Western individuality that seeks to resist the coercive aspects of both Russian revolutionary mysticism and of autocratic exploitation. In *Under Western Eyes*, which Beasley has provocatively deemed Conrad’s “anti-Russian novel,” she argues that Conrad pushes back against the values of “The Russian novel, [which,] according to Conrad, has been at best an unwitting product of, and at worst complicit in, autocracy’s work, peddling an empty mysticism that leaves autocracy in place, rather than crafting a Flaubertian fidelity that cultivates a critical attitude” (205). Beasley is certainly not alone in situating Conrad’s novelistic project at loggerheads with the Russian novel, and with Dostoevsky in particular.¹¹⁵

However, I would argue that reading the opposition between Western individualism and Russian collectivism into the relation between Razumov and the novel’s coercive Russian characters ascribes

¹¹⁵ Most critical work on Conrad and Russia is divided between those that examine his autobiographical connection to Russia, reviewing his anti-Imperial prejudice and Polish nationalist identity, and those that have analyzed the thematic comparisons between Dostoevsky and Conrad. For the former camp, see (Kaye 118-45) on Conrad’s affinity for Turgenev, (Wheeler), and (Crankshaw). The comparative work on *Crime and Punishment* and *Under Western Eyes* includes a brief analysis by Fogel contrasting Dostoevskian polyphonic “participatory addition” with Conrad’s secular forcedness, (Fogel 200-07), a protracted comparison of the two novels centered on the divisive responses to the question of ‘Where to?’ posed by Porfiry to Raskolnikov and Mikulin to Razumov (Carabine), (Kaye 145-55), and (Masing-Delic). Liudmila Voitkovska has a fascinating article that reviews the reception history of *Under Western Eyes* in Russia, revealing that anti-Russian sentiments in the novel were omitted in the 1991 translation to not offend Russian sensibilities. She concludes that average Russian reader would have little interest in the novel and Conrad’s objectification of Russian culture (Voitkovska).

an all too stable identity to Razumov, which reduces the complexity of his dialogic negotiations to be a matter of competing ideologies. I seek to take a somewhat different view and suggest that Razumov himself embodies the homo duplex, a divided consciousness, both solitary individual and member of a community. That Razumov could contain within himself both English individuality and Russian collectivity is certainly in keeping with Conrad's conception of identity; in a 1903 letter, Conrad described himself as a homo duplex, "...the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. Homo duplex has in my case more than one meaning" (Conrad *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* 89). Nidesh Lawtoo has argued that the figure of the homo duplex pervades Conrad's corpus, wherein apparently opposing identities presage the formation of a "composite soul" (Lawtoo 22, 108-13 et passim). Indeed, the etymological implications of Razumov's name belie the simple ascription of an English character and point to diametrically opposed attributes of a co-present Russian consciousness.

The name Razumov stems from the Russian "*razum*," 'reason' or 'mind.' That it is the *family* name of Kirylo Sidorovitch is curiously ironic, as the narrator tells us, "The word Razumov was the mere label of his solitary individuality. There were no Razumovs belonging to him anywhere" (16). 'Razumov' doesn't seem to be a meta-textual appellation of parental origin, as it would for Andrei Bely's characters who are literally called products of the author's "cerebral play"—though he could be said to share an inter-textual kinship with Dostoevsky's Razumikhin in *Crime and Punishment*. What should be that which denotes familial affiliation is not only emptied of that significance in the narrator's phrasing but made to mean essentially the opposite: "the mere label on his solitary individuality." We might make of this "mere label" that he is self-sufficient, the solitary bearer of mind and reason, requiring no bonds of kinship to ground his identity. But in the next sentence, the narrator claims quite jarringly "His closest parentage was defined in the statement that he was a Russian" (ibid). How can we reconcile his "solitary individuality" with this statement that situates him

as a Russian, a signifier of national affiliation? The seemingly incoherent identification of Razumov as at once an orphan and solitary individual and yet essentially, a Russian, is in fact a distillation of the question of the value of the individual in and against the community that traced a through line in the Russian intellectual thought of the nineteenth century.

The emphasis on Razumov's "solitary individuality" suggests an interpretation in light of the key Russian philosophical and religious concept of "*lichnost*," which Derek Offord tells us "is capable of translation in various ways: as 'personality,' 'or 'individual,' or even 'selfhood,'" and thus encompasses both the notion of the individual as a singular person, a unitary identity, and also as an "individual member of society" (Offord "*Lichnost*? Notions of Individual Identity" 13). Unlike Western European philosophy's long preoccupation with the nature of the autonomous rational subject, the *disregard* for the value of the individual independent from its social function has been endemic to Russian thought since the 1830s. Thus, the coincidence of *razum* with the character of Razumov posits him as the rational subject at odds with his Russian identity; the Western narrator repeatedly insists that the Russian character is irrational, e.g., "The illogicality of their attitude, the arbitrariness of their conclusions" (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 12). If reason is a capacity of the individual intellect, 'Razumov' as the solitary thinking subject would seem to have little kinship with the Russians' irrational collectivity, situating him in paradigm distanced from Russian irrational collectivity.

In fact, the question of the individual was at the center of the so-called Slavophile/Westernizer debates in Russia during the nineteenth century that sought to determine the course of the country's cultural development. In 1836 Petr Chaadaev's first "Philosophical Letter" set the terms of the debate, arguing that the western Christian tradition is the source of universal human development, and that the Russian Orthodoxy, by contrast, had closed Russia off from participating in the European enlightenment. Rallying around Chaadaev, a number of Russian intellectuals (among

them, Mikhail Bakunin, Alexander Herzen, and Vissarion Belinskii), criticized Russia's backwardness and believed that the country should adopt western, European values. The Westernizers criticized the communitarian nature of Russia's peasant communes and identifying *lichnost'* as a central factor in the difference between European and Russian societies, sought to import the western concept of personhood. Sergey Horujy has described the Westernizers' conception of personhood as corresponding to "the anthropocentric paradigm, in which personhood is understood to be an autonomous, self-contained *individuum*, related closely to the Cartesian subject" (Horujy 46). The formation of personality in this Cartesian paradigm is crucially independent: self-realization grounded in the freedom and rationality of the individual.

In response to these Westernizers other thinkers extolled the unique nature of Russia's development, rejecting western rationalism, and sought to develop a philosophy rooted in Russian Orthodoxy and its autochthonous culture. For these so-called Slavophiles (notably Ivan Kireevsky, Aleksey Khomiakov, Konstantin Aksakov, and most relevant to this discussion, Fyodor Dostoevsky), the Western reliance on individuality emerged from the absence of *obshchina*, the peasant commune. *Obshchina* inculcated the value of communal consensus in Russian society whereas European society necessitated individual conflict. As Horujy explains, "The Slavophiles commonly asserted that the commune (*obshchchina*) or peasant community (*mir*) constituted a unique feature of Rus', a feature that was absent in the West and even unknown to western scholarship" (33). That said, *lichnost'* was not altogether absent from Slavophile discourse; it more closely resembled the second, participatory definition Offord provides, "an individual member of society."

For the Slavophiles the concept of the individual was not distinct from the community, but rather in service of it. Stemming from the centrality of the church and the concept of the hypostatic union of God—the unity of the divine and human natures in one personality—the limitations and finitude of the individual could be transcended in communal participation toward a profound wholeness, a

realized *lichnost'*.¹¹⁶ As Derek Offord writes, "...for the Slavophiles, and for later Russian romantic conservatives such as Dostoevskii, the highest form of self-expression to which the human could aspire was effacement of individuality through self-sacrifice for the common good, after the example of Christ" (Offord "Herzen" 54). The effacement or subordination of the individual to the communal should not be understood as the devaluation of *lichnost'*, but a reconceptualization, that its highest realization lies in social unity. This principle underlies the concept of *sobornost'*, a term introduced by the Slavophile Aleksey Khomiakov, denoting the spiritual communion that results from the subordination of the individual, an idea of freedom in togetherness.

On its face, it may seem anachronistic to suggest that the nineteenth century Slavophile/Westernizer debate is at all relevant to *Under Western Eyes*. After all, there is little reason to believe that Conrad was versed in contemporary Russian intellectual writing, much less its philosophic tradition of the preceding century. And although in the 1920 edition's Author's Note, Conrad writes that the novel was "an attempt to render...the psychology of Russia itself," elsewhere he was eager to disavow any particular knowledge of Russia or its language. Discussing *Under Western Eyes* in a letter to his friend Constance Garnett, the renowned translator of Russian literature, he wrote "But the fact is that I know extremely little of Russians. Practically nothing," and continues, "Not being to school then I never knew Russian. I could not tell a Little Russian from a Great Russian to save my life. In the book as you must have seen I am exclusively concerned with ideas" (Conrad *Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895-1924* Letter to Constance Garnett 20 Oct. 1911, 232). Writing years later to her husband Edward, Conrad averred, "The trouble is that I too don't know Russian; I don't even know the alphabet" (Conrad *Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895-1924*

¹¹⁶ See Horujy's discussion of the Slavophiles' "theocentric personological paradigm" (Horujy 46-47). Horujy concedes that the Slavophiles did not develop "a consistent personalistic philosophy of theology based on this concept," which became a task for the Silver Age (46). Accordingly, Andrei Bely's effort to situate the unity of the Symbol in the supra-individual subject, as discussed in the previous chapter, could appear to be a derivation of the Slavophile project in conceptualizing personhood: the unity of whole subject from the collective-conscious.

Letter to Edward Garnett May 1917, 248). That said, as many scholars have argued, *Under Western Eyes* is a rewriting of, and direct challenge to the worldview of *Crime and Punishment*, and Conrad's refutation of Dostoevsky's Slavophilic moral project retroactively situates *Under Western Eyes* in that debate. Edward Crankshaw even suggests—somewhat implausibly—that Conrad's contemptuous portrayal of the bleak humanity manifest in Russia in his 1905 essay, "Autocracy and War" may have been a direct paraphrasing of Petr Chaadaev's first "Philosophical Letter," which we recall is the seminal text at the heart of the Westernizer/Slavophile debate (Crankshaw 102).¹¹⁷

Coincidentally, Russian Symbolism's iteration of the Slavophile position provides a fascinating counterpoint to read a contemporaneous reception of the Dostoevsky. As the symbolist project could be seen as the evolution of the organic philosophy of the Slavophiles into the Russian Silver Age, it could illuminate potential shared ethical commitments in Conrad's reception of, or resistance to Dostoevsky. For the Russian Symbolist theorist and poet, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Dostoevsky's moral project is perhaps most realized in depictions of the Slavophile concept of *sobornost'*.¹¹⁸ Robert Bird explains that Ivanov developed the concept of *sobornost'* from its Slavophile origin to describe an "aesthetic utopia" where "only a voluntary unification of sovereign individuals could ground an authentically Orthodox community in the modern age" (Bird 27). Thus Ivanov writes that Alyosha Karamazov "begins his activity in the world with the establishment of such a connection between people surrounding him, that can only be called—*sobornost'*."¹¹⁹ Ivanov similarly sees Raskolnikov's

¹¹⁷ The comparison between "Autocracy and War" and Chaadaev's "Philosophical Letters" is also made by Marcus Wheeler (Wheeler 25).

¹¹⁸ The centrality of *sobornost'* in Dostoevsky is not idiosyncratically Symbolist to be sure; cf., for instance, Avril Pyman's argument that sees Bakhtin's concept of polyphony in Dostoevsky as a "dramatic, artistic, tragic form of *sobornost'*" (Pyman "Dostoevsky in the Prism of the Orthodox Semiosphere" 113).

¹¹⁹ "Алеша начинает свою деятельность в мире с установления между окружающими его людьми такого соединения, какое можно назвать только — соборностью" (Ivanov "Lik I Lichniy Rossii. K Issledovaniyu Ideologii Dostoevskogo" 459 my translation).

Robert Bird explains that for Ivanov, "the achievement of Alesha's brotherhood is that it communicates the tragedy [of Iliusha's death] to all individuals, binding them in a common experience that shapes social reality" (Bird 224).

confession as emblematic of *sobornost'*; as Ilya Kliger glosses Ivanov's reading: "Raskolnikov's public confession and kissing of the earth reflect a mode of communion with the whole, a return to the bosom of humanity after a prolonged exile of individuation" (Kliger "Dostoevsky and the Novel-Tragedy: Genre and Modernity in Ivanov, Pumpyansky, and Bakhtin" 75).¹²⁰ As I will discuss later in this chapter, although Razumov's confession does share elements with what Ivanov called Raskolnikov's "mystical socialization of conscience," it is ultimately *neither* a repudiation of Dostoevskian *sobornost'* nor a defense of individuation, but an act that negates both (Ivanov "On the Crisis of Humanism: Toward a Morphology of Modern Culture and the Psychology of Modernity" 174).

In other words, Conrad's rejection of Dostoevsky's Slavophilic worldview manifests not as a straightforward oppositional defense of the individual, but rather as an argument that claims that neither individual freedom nor *sobornost'* are possible in Russia. As Keith Carabine writes about the beginning of *Under Western Eyes* "in one comprehensive formulation the whole moral basis of Dostoevsky's world and possibilities for either individual spiritual growth or national regeneration are swept away" (Carabine 226).¹²¹ Razumov, I want to argue, embodies as homo duplex both the illusory ideal of Western *lichnost'* and the flawed utopianism of *sobornost'*. From the dialectical sublimation of both terms Conrad proposes a *tertium non datur* that is less synthesis as it is consolation, a meager mediation between the self and others: sympathy.

¹²⁰ Kliger is discussing Ivanov's 1919 essay, "On the Crisis of Humanism: Towards a Morphology of Modern Culture and the Psychology of Modernity."

¹²¹ Cf. also Peter Kaye, referencing Conrad's "Autocracy and War": "Conrad's Russia is the diametrical opposite of the Russia that Dostoevsky embraced. Where Dostoevsky saw his country, at least in its visionary potential, as a beacon of Christian hope and enlightenment, Conrad saw it as a 'bottomless abyss'...Where Dostoevsky heralded his native land as the potential salvation of Europe, the one possible source of affirming, unifying truth that could steady a confused, despairing continent, Conrad condemned Russia as a disruptive monster" (Kaye 134). The opposition here is not collective unity with individual freedom, but between wholeness and nothingness, Russia as an abyss.

Russia as Negation; Communalism as Autocracy

Now, although I have asserted that Razumov embodies the conflicting motivations of English individualism and Russian collectivism, I have yet to substantiate the latter. If we take seriously the idea: “His closest parentage was defined in the statement that he was a Russian,” we must ask what precisely is implicated by the condition of being “Russian” (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 16)? In “Autocracy and War” Conrad’s scathing polemic against Russian Autocracy in the midst of the Russo-Japanese War, he writes reminiscent of Chaadaev that Russia’s autocratic foundation has set it outside the realm of historical development and made its nature totally inscrutable to Western eyes.¹²² Separated from both the narrative of a European humanist progression toward “Concord and Justice” and from the political geography of Europe, Conrad describes Russia as “simply the negation of everything worth living” (Conrad “Autocracy and War” 45). The formulation is a reference to an anecdote he shares about how Otto von Bismarck who, having served as Prussian Minister to Russia, had a ring inscribed upon the conclusion of his tenure in St. Petersburg in 1864 that read “*La Russie c’est le néant*” (41). Conrad goes further than von Bismarck, insisting on the thoroughgoing corrosive force of autocracy: Russia is not merely *le néant*, nothingness, but *negation* itself:

She is not an empty void, she is a yawning chasm open between East and West; a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge; every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience. Those that have peered into that abyss—where the dreams of Pan Slavism, of universal conquest, of hate and contempt for Western ideas, drifted

¹²² See in particular, “But under the shadow of Russian Autocracy nothing could grow. Russian Autocracy succeeded to nothing; it had no historical past and it could not have an historical future. It can only end. By no industry of investigation, by no fantastic stretch of benevolence can it be presented as a phase of development through which a society, a state, must pass on the way to the full consciousness of its destiny. It lies outside the stream of progress” (Conrad “Autocracy and War” 43).

impotently like shapes of mist—know well that it is bottomless; that there is in it no ground for anything that could in the remotest degree serve even the lowest interest of mankind—and certainly no ground ready for a revolution. (45-46)

If Russia is so overdetermined by autocracy that any alternative political possibility (revolution) or moral value (personal dignity, freedom) is impossible, then to be Russian would carry no positive value for Conrad. If we were to apply this conception of Russia to *Under Western Eyes*, the posited Western/Russian duality of Razumov would not be of western individuality and Russian *communality*, but of individuality and Russian *negation*; if “Russia” represents purely a negating force, individuation would serve by contrast as the countervailing constitutive will. That dichotomy would place Conrad squarely—albeit anachronistically—in the Westernizer camp, whereby Razumov’s “solitary individuality” would make him a tragic figure, hopelessly striving for the self-actualization of *lichnost’* against the omnipresent forces of autocratic negation. Following this logic, Haldin and the ex-patriot revolutionaries in Geneva would not represent an alternative politics to autocracy, but simply an extension of it. This scans with Razumov’s assertion of Haldin’s “revolutionary tyranny.” Following along the lines of Fogel’s analysis of coercive speech, every dialogue that would seek to draw Razumov into idealized communicative camaraderie—e.g. Haldin’s bestowal of confidence—would essentially act as a negation of his independence, an erasure of difference from the hegemonic ideology of autocracy.

It is not simply that conversations intending to elicit communal identification ended up accomplishing the opposite; rather, it is precisely through the language of community and ethical relation to the other that Razumov’s independence is negated. When a report in an English newspaper leads Haldin’s sister and mother to believe that Razumov was a “comrade and intimate fellow revolutionist” to Victor, Razumov and the narrator—as the teacher of languages—quarrel about

the (ir)relevance of the story's verity. After a stunned Razumov asks the teacher, "How can you tell truth from lies,"¹²³ the teacher points out that what was at issue was not the truth or falsity of the story, but "the *effect* the few lines of print in question had produced—the *effect* alone" (148 emphasis added). The effect, the narrator explains, is the resulting bond created between the family Haldin and Razumov:

...but you may believe my assertion that these words are *forcible* enough to make both his mother and his sister believe implicitly in the worth of your judgment and in the truth of anything you may have to say to them. It's impossible for you now to pass them by like strangers (149 emphasis added)

The idea here of course, anticipating J.L. Austin, is that the newspaper story functions as a kind of performative speech act. The story's meaningfulness cannot be determined from its truth value; its words have *force* that substantively creates an interpersonal relationship founded on the women's belief in the value of Razumov's words. Accordingly, it transforms the limits of Razumov's discourse, erasing the distinction between truth and lies; as with Haldin's confidence, not only is he unable to disavow their belief in him, but he has been unwillingly ensnared in an ethical claim expressed in the assertion that "it's impossible for [Razumov] now to pass them by like strangers." This is crucial. The teacher's demand plays upon an expectation of an existing normative ethical code: if someone is not a stranger to you then familiarity dictates you ought to acknowledge them in a certain way, say, in emotional recognition, care, consolation, sympathy. One might assume that the transition from indifference to a stranger to a network of obligated responsiveness would rely on some experiential

¹²³ Leonardo Lisi takes up this line in different, but quite productive, direction. Suggesting that the phrase "to tell" could refer to the notion of uttering the truth *by means of* a lie (Razumov was questioning the narrator's capacity to *distinguish* truth and lies), Lisi's analysis regards the way in which fictional discourse can create different frameworks of reality, rejecting the epistemic authority of any one narrative (Lisi "Power, Truth and Play in *under Western Eyes*" 118-21).

process of coming to know the other, developing intimacy and emotional recognition. Here, however, the affective force of the newspaper story combined with the teacher's appeal bypasses that procedure and imposes ethical claims directly on Razumov. This is to say that a seemingly "positive" affect like moral sympathy that could motivate the reconstitution of social relations—i.e. inspiring one to go from treating the other with the anonymity of a stranger to the care and consideration of a friend—is deployed here not through an authentic interpersonal experience of feeling, but through the enforced consequences of a speech act. Ethical care becomes coopted as a form of asymmetric autocratic control.¹²⁴

When we consider that the teacher of languages is the novel's narrator, we realize that staging Razumov's dialogic encounter with him makes visible the asymmetrical coerciveness of the ethical claim on Razumov in a way that could have been otherwise less detectable in the narrative frame. Had the narrator receded from view and conveyed *in sotto voce*, 'Razumov could no longer pass them by like strangers,' the teacher's morality would, as psycho-narration, impute that morality to Razumov himself. While such monologizing is the epitome of asymmetrical control, Razumov's agonistic engagement with the narrator as an interlocutor does suggest a discontinuity between the ethical framework of the narrative (as set by the narrator) and Razumov's individual sense of morality. Hence, in response to Razumov's hopeless plea, "Must I go then and lie to that old woman!," the teacher counters, "Won't the truth do then? I hoped you could have told them something consoling" (ibid). The constraints that the statement "it's impossible[...]to pass them by

¹²⁴ There is also a fascinating underlying irony in this scene in that the newspaper story is almost certainly planted by the *Okhrana* in order to provide cover for their operative to be trusted by his target. Though Conrad could not have known at the time, the imperial secret police's Foreign Agency did establish offices in cities like Geneva to disseminate propaganda as acts of provocation to disrupt the efforts of the revolutionary groups there. For more about the *Okhrana's* provocation efforts in émigré communities see (Hillis 124-54). Entertaining the possibility that the newspaper story is political provocation, we can appreciate how autocracy has so deeply embedded itself within the fabric of social relations: it is the secret agent that not only forces the Haldins into believing Razumov an ally, but also coerces Razumov into sympathetic obligation with them.

like strangers” has imposed on Razumov’s freedom subverts a deontological correspondence between truth/lies and good/evil. Razumov implies that in order to behave morally he is compelled to lie. Or to put an even finer point on it, to be compelled to speak to her at all (and not pass her by as a stranger) is itself a lie, a false representation of his interiority.

In this situation, where ethical norms are exploited as mechanisms of autocratic control against an individual’s autonomy, norms can enforce social relations on the basis of moral principles. That autocracy dictates an individual’s moral concern for another is for Conrad the most dramatic tyrannical overreach into individual agency. In his analysis of “The Secret Sharer,” Nidesh Lawtoo has argued that Conrad takes issue with such a conception of morality based in *a priori* universal principles. Lawtoo writes:

Conrad proposes an ethics that counters transcendental, universal, and vertical notions of the law in order to advocate a more immanent, horizontal approach in which ethical responsibility is fundamentally redefined as a human, empirical, contextual, and systemic problem. This also means that, for Conrad, ethical evaluations in a situation of catastrophe cannot rely on *a priori* moral principles. Instead, they require a careful reexamination of the system of affective, human, and environmental interrelations that inform the complex ecology of the tale. (Lawtoo 63)

Lawtoo’s argument helps illuminate why the issue of moral sympathy is a productive point of tension in *Under Western Eyes*. An alternative ethics would prioritize the interpersonal context of the dialogic situation and offer a way for dialogism to represent a mode of interpersonal relations not reducible to mechanisms of coercion. By these lights we can appreciate the disjunction between the normative implications of “it’s impossible to pass them by like strangers” and Razumov’s despair in “Must I go then and lie to her.” The moral obligations conveyed in the teacher’s discourse compel

Razumov to lie, thus inducing a contradiction of that moral code. But sympathy, which here is merely implied as something Razumov ought to have for the Haldins, and isn't operative, does seem to invite an immanent, interpersonal relation. Describing sympathy as a "mimetic affect characterized by a moral concern for the other so truly felt that the affect of the other becomes a shared pathos (*sym-pathos*)" (63), Lawtoo argues that for Conrad a shared bond between others is the "starting point to build an ethics...on alternative, intersubjective relational foundations" (76).¹²⁵ As I will argue later in this chapter, forms of sympathy appear in *Under Western Eyes* in varying intensities of authentic interpersonal connection. From Razumov's rapport with Councillor Mikulin to Tekla and Sophia Antonovna after his confession, we can observe the gradual disentanglement of sympathy from its exploitation in the conflict between individuality and communality. In this case, however, sympathy is invoked only obliquely, as a gesture of moral obligation to constrain Razumov's independence. Because of it Razumov cannot maintain an aloof distance from Natalia and her mother and ignore them as anonymous strangers; he is now bound to confront their suffering as intimates and ease the pain for which he was responsible.

Just as with Haldin's confidence, Razumov can say nothing to preserve his independence from Haldin's sister and mother. Consequently, Razumov's silence throughout the novel serves as a blank page on which motivations can be ascribed to him by others. Somewhat at odds with Leonardo Lisi's claim about the danger silence poses to the speaker, Rebecca Beasley has recently suggested that Razumov's "silent aloofness" non-confrontationally conceals the true nature of his character, against which other characters either "misread" him "or threaten to interpret him correctly" (Beasley 197).

¹²⁵ I am admittedly distorting his argument somewhat. In his reading sympathy is one of several contagious affects that it compel a suspension of moral judgment, and demand a consideration of both individual actions and intentions with view toward the "shared, systemic consequences of such actions" (64). Sympathy does highlight the moral ambiguity of affective identification with others, but is not determinative of "ethical wisdom." What *does* secure frayed social bonds is "esteem," a concept Lawtoo takes from Jean Luc-Nancy, emphasizing the rapport with *singular others* (75-77). It is not clear to me what work the ineffable singularity of the other's face (à la Nancy, Levinas) is doing for his argument, as it seems that sympathy—especially as he pursues the concept—also reconstitutes social bonds through mimetic affect.

This exterior/interior metaphor of Razumov's psychology obscures the fact that the interpretations of both misreader and visionary interpreter are equally effective. The threat of being 'truly' understood by the penetrating interrogations of Councillor Mikulin or Sophia Antonovna are no more perilous—and perhaps even less so—than Haldin's "casual utterances" about Razumov that linked him to the assassination plot (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 70). Although Sophia Antonovna's observation that Razumov "perhaps [is] only playing a part" (i.e. Razumov's true identity is not as he appears) felt like "physical contact" to him (194), and her question about his role in the assassination was like "a bullet which strikes some time after the flash of the fired shot," her remarks' speculative rather than postulative nature were not decisive, ultimately giving Razumov the "conviction that no random shot could knock him over now" (196-7). Arguably, even the revelation of his identity (as spy and traitor) in his final confession is no more authoritative in determining who he is *really*, than who he is made out to be by other characters. Far from being an "effective shield," against misreading, Razumov's silence renders him wholly vulnerable to the transformative effect of other people's words.

Razumov and the "true Russian man"

While such scenes typify the way in which Razumov's British silence is essentially futile in preserving his independence from the negating/socializing force of Russian autocracy, other moments make visible a conception of Russianness in the novel not reducible to the idea of negation. In fact, the "bottomless abyss" that Conrad calls Russia in "Autocracy and War" takes on a more complex meaning in *Under Western Eyes*. Although the abyss is what makes impossible the notion of *lichnost'*, it is also the condition for community, and a distinct meaning of what it means to be Russian.

The outcome of Razumov's interaction with Ziemianitch and his subsequent decision to betray Haldin makes visible Razumov's Russian identity—which almost simultaneously discloses the logical collapse of its viability. Razumov does not immediately rush to Prince K— to report Haldin, but initially agrees to find a peasant, Ziemianitch, who is supposed to help Haldin escape Petersburg. Haldin describes him as “A bright soul! A hardy soul!,” a sentiment modulated sarcastically by the waiter of the eating house, who tells Razumov that Ziemianitch is drunk, “A proper Russian man—the little pig[...]A true Russian man[...]A proper Russian driver” (21, 29-30). Upon finding Ziemianitch passed out in a drunken stupor, Razumov viciously beats him. The position of the narration that follows is rather ambiguous: “Some dull sensation of pain must have penetrated at last the consoling night of drunkenness enwrapping the ‘bright Russian soul’ of Haldin’s enthusiastic praise” (31). Is this free indirect discourse attributed to Razumov or moralistic editorializing by the narrator, our teacher of languages? The issue is clarified somewhat with a clear-cut instance of free indirect discourse: “Ziemianitch’s passionate surrender to sorrow and consolation had baffled him. That was the people. A true Russian man! Razumov was glad he had beaten that brute—the ‘bright soul’—of the other” (ibid). In both cases the deployment of what Bakhtin calls “double-voiced discourse” is notable in Razumov’s references to Haldin and the waiter’s descriptions of Ziemianitch. “Double-voiced discourse,” which Bakhtin says is predominant in the work of Dostoevsky, occurs when a speaker’s discourse is the internal dialogization of an other’s speech, where “discourse becomes an arena of battle between two voices” (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 193).¹²⁶

Razumov’s intention in re-voicing these descriptions is far from certain. It may be that he is polemicizing or parodying their declarations about Ziemianitch at odds with his manifestation as a decrepit drunk. This seems to be along the lines of Leonardo Lisi’s reading of the encounter, where

¹²⁶ For Bakhtin’s wide ranging discussion of double-voiced discourse cf. (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 192-204 et passim) and (Bakhtin "Discourse in the Novel" 324-227)

encountering the limitation of a particular worldviews drives Razumov to move from one verbal-ideological position to the next. In this case, Haldin's description of Ziemianitch as a "bright spirit":

is unable to assimilate the description of a drunken, immoral fool that the inhabitants give of Ziemianitch, and Razumov must therefore dismiss it as an outrageous lie. When nonetheless presented with the drunken and speechless Ziemianitch, Razumov is forced to give up the framework inherited from Haldin, and sets out to find a new one. (Lisi "Power, Truth and Play in *under Western Eyes*" 110)

Without a doubt the encounter with Ziemianitch "baffled" Razumov, but it should not be taken for granted that these descriptions of Ziemianitch—and the internal dialogizing repetition of them—are actually in tension with one another. I want to suggest a possible alternate reading in which the move toward Dostoevskian double-voiced discourse here is the invocation of a distinct dialogism to the modes of coercive speech thus far discussed, in which not only are Haldin and the waiter's descriptions assimilable, but so too is Razumov's beating. The unification—or at least harmonization—of these seemingly disparate voices into a coherent logic is part and parcel of Razumov's Russian parentage. This needs some unpacking, to be sure.

After beating the "true Russian man" Razumov engages in an extended internal monologue over the course of which the Razumov's conversion unfolds: he decides to turn Haldin in. Tracing the development of this process we can see that its logic is grounded on a concept of Russian communality. Faced with the despairing reality that to resolve the Haldin situation, his individual agency is impotent ("Nothing short of complete annihilation would do. And that was impossible"), and the crushing solitude ("He had nothing. He had not even a moral refuge—the refuge of confidence"), Razumov "stamped his foot[...]and felt the hard ground of Russia," and "received an almost physical impression of space and of countless millions" (32-33). The revelation unfolds:

He responded to it with the readiness of a Russian who is born to an inheritance of space and numbers. Under the sumptuous immensity of the sky, the snow covered the endless forests, the frozen rivers, the plains of an immense country, obliterating the landmarks, the accidents of the ground, leveling everything under its uniform whiteness, like a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history. It covered the passive land with its lives of countless people like Ziemianitch and its handful of agitators like this Haldin—murdering foolishly.

It was a sort of sacred inertia. Razumov felt a respect for it. A voice seemed to cry from within him: ‘Don’t touch it.’ It was a guarantee of duration, of safety, while the travail of maturing destiny went on—a work not of revolutions with their passionate levity of action and their shifting impulses—but of peace. What is needed was not the conflicting aspirations of a people, but a will strong and one: it wanted not the babble of many voices, but a man—strong and one! (33)

In a radically different understanding of the metaphor of the “bottomless abyss” that we saw in “Autocracy and War,” here Russia *qua* abyss is an endless immensity that obliterates difference (read: individuation), and populating the uniform immensity with “countless people like Ziemianitch...and Haldin.” This description hews rather closely to a Dostoevskian/Slavophilic moral worldview that links the land and people together in a harmonious unity. In this view Ziemianitch in fact is a “true Russian man” an archetypal member of the *narod*, through whom Razumov could enact a turn toward *sobornost*. Indeed this is exactly how Razumov paradoxically resolves his beating of Ziemianitch: “‘Have I not got forty million brothers?’ he asked himself unanswerably in the silence of his breast. And the fearful thrashing he had given the inanimate Ziemianitch seemed to him like a sign of intimate union, a pathetically severe necessity of brotherly love” (34). This momentary

evacuation of personality in favor of “intimate union” admittedly does not drive Razumov to confess to Haldin and enter into a mystical brotherhood, but strikingly toward autocracy: “‘What else,’ he asked himself ardently, ‘could move all that mass [the people] in one direction? Nothing could. Nothing but a single will” (35). The logical progression from communality to autocracy here, though shocking is coherent from a Slavophile perspective.

In fact, the passage seems to be a clear reference to Tolstoy’s nationalistic sentiment expressed toward the end of *War and Peace*: “Where Willarski saw deadness, Pierre saw the extraordinary, mighty force of vitality, that force which, in the snow, over this vast expanse, painted the life of this whole, special, and united people” (Tolstoy *War and Peace* 1108).¹²⁷ In Both Conrad and Tolstoy the image of the snow erases individual difference creating a vast expanse, a uniform whiteness, under which all people—Ziemianitch and Haldin; “the coachman, the stationmaster, the muzhiks on the road”—are all united (ibid). The passages differ significantly, however, in what we might call the directionality of force. In Conrad Russia is a babble that is tamed by the snow, covering everything from above; Russia requires the superimposition of autocracy to institute order, the sacred inertia. By contrast, the force of vitality “*silu zhiznennosti*” in Pierre’s vision is not the force of the snow, but is expressed through it. The snow maintains or supports (*podderzhivala—pod-*from below, *derzhivat’* to hold) life. Here, the organizing authority of the state is thus organically generated from within the vital force of the *narod*.

In Lisi’s reading, the “logical leap that links the immensity and uncertainty of Russia to the singularity and destiny of autocracy, in spite of the obvious incompatibility of these concepts” signals the arbitrary mobility of Razumov through different ideological frameworks (Lisi “Power, Truth and

¹²⁷ Там, где Вилларский видел мертвенность, Пьер видел необычайно могучую силу жизненности, ту силу, которая в снегу, на этом пространстве, поддерживала жизнь этого целого, особенного и единого народа (Tolstoy *Voyna I Mir* 211)

Play in *under Western Eyes*" 111).¹²⁸ Actually however, there is nothing strictly speaking incompatible between Russia's immensity and countless millions and the requirement of a single individual will to control it. Neither Slavophiles nor Westernizers saw the autocrat as incompatible with the essence of *narodnost'* on one hand or the pursuit of *lichnost'* on the other.¹²⁹ As in Tolstoy's rendering, there is a natural symbiosis between the *narod'* and the state. That is to say that Razumov's belief in the necessity of a strong, single will is not indicative of an incompatibility with Russian identity, nor does it signal his reversion to Western individuality, but a recognition, natural to nineteenth century Russian political ideology, of the necessity of autocracy.

Joining with Conrad's argument in "Autocracy and War" that the essence of Russian history is the ahistorical imposition of power, Razumov *qua* Russian, welcomes the "guarantee of duration, of safety" that the autocratic will ensures (33). By these lights revolutionaries like Haldin and "the babble of many voices" are senseless, useless disruptions ("Haldin means disruption,' he thought to himself"), against which Razumov sees the will of autocrat as necessary to preserve the sacred inertia of the bottomless abyss (*ibid.*). Razumov thus rationalizes that the notion of common conviction properly understood is consistent with autocracy, and Haldin's avowal of confidence is false obligation and not binding; "every obligation of true courage is the other way," Razumov tells himself (36).

Conrad's insistence on casting Russia as quintessentially autocratic assuredly colors the necessary

¹²⁸ Andrew Long offer a divergent, but compelling reading of the scene that tracks alongside Lisi's interpretation of Razumov's inability to identify with Haldin's verbal-ideological position. He argues that unlike Haldin, Razumov lacks an organic link with Russia, and the image of the frozen ground here symbolizes its closure to Razumov. Consequently, Razumov's failure to engage organically with the idea of Russia leads him to embrace an identification with the autocratic state (Long 502-03).

¹²⁹ "[The Slavophiles] fervently believed that the common people did not want to intrude into [political] spheres: the people considered them as sinful and therefore delegated political authority to the tsar and to his agent. At the same time, however, the *narod* wanted to preserve its free and inviolable "internal life," i.e. its religion, customs, and way of life" (Horujy 43).

"Even the Westernizers' respect for the individual personality still was subordinated to authoritarian leadership of the state" (Offord "Herzen" 55).

logical progression from the momentary recognition of *sobornost'* to Razumov's endorsement of autocracy. Because the erasure of *lichnost'* is essential to the actualization of *sobornost'*, Razumov's British valorization of his solitary individuality is fundamentally irreconcilable with mystical communion as a potential resolution. The tolerance of autocracy in the Dostoevskian schema undermines the viability of *sobornost'* as an ethical position for Conrad. But, as we saw, "solitary individuality" is also not a tenable possession for Razumov. Within the social and political landscape of Russian Autocracy all interpersonal relations, all discourse renders his independent position unstable. He cannot maintain his own words, as Russia's coercive communality is the negation of individual freedom. Within this dialectical relationship of individual and the communal, each term neutralizes the aim of the other. Razumov is thus a solitary individual among millions, with neither solitariness nor communal embrace as viable solutions. It is from that dynamic that Razumov voices his character's essential desire:

With something resembling anguish he said to himself: I want to be understood. The universal aspiration with all its profound and melancholy meaning assailed heavily Razumov, who, amongst eighty millions of his kith and kin, had no heart to which he could open himself [...]

Razumov longed desperately for a word of advice, for moral support. Who knows what true loneliness is—not the conventional word but the true terror? To the lonely themselves it wears a mask. The most miserable outcast hugs some memory or some illusion. Now and then a fatal conjunction of events may lift the veil for an instant. For an instant only. No human being could bear a steady view of moral solitude without going mad. (37)

The simultaneous coincidence of his individuality and communality is distilled here. Even in an

immense kinship, his moral solitude isolates him from interpersonal connection. In turn, the allure of being understood opens Razumov up to a completely different mode of interpersonal comportment. Razumov seeks a connection that could recognize his loneliness but at the same time not subsume it into a union that effaces individuality. It is in Councilor Mikulin that Razumov first seeks the possibility of sympathy.

Communicative silences

Razumov meetings with Councillor Mikulin, the pivotal scenes of the novel that mark the end of Part I and the beginning of Part IV, bring to a head Razumov's conversation-avoidance strategies—namely, silence—and the thematic concern that has shaded the discussion thus far, the situation of solitary individuality within both explicitly asymmetrical autocratic conditions as well as latently coercive communal, dialogic relations. In what Aaron Fogel describes as “Conrad's single most complete scene of forced dialogue,” Razumov is summoned to an interrogation that unfolds with Razumov determined to remain silent in the face of questioning, yet induced to logorrhea seemingly from his own inner dialogue (Fogel 191). The result of their meetings finds Razumov agreeing to become a counter-revolutionary spy, typifying what Fogel described as the “forced mutuality” of contracts, whereby Razumov, seeking to ensure his independence from Haldin, is tragically ensnared in an ever more binding contract that condemns him to dependent fealty to the State. But although that ultimate contract certainly reflects Razumov's forced dependency, the interrogation itself is strikingly anodyne. In fact it's only in his running internal dialogue that we see Razumov forced to speak, his responsiveness to an imagined interrogation that structures his spoken utterances:

“I must be very prudent with him,” he warned himself in the silence during which they sat

gazing at each other. It lasted some little time and was characterised (for silences have their character) by a sort of sadness imparted to it perhaps by the mild and thoughtful manner of the bearded official [...]

Razumov's mistrust became acute. The main point was, not to be drawn into saying too much. He had been called for some reason. What reason? To be given to understand that he was a suspect—and also no doubt to be pumped. As to what precisely? There was nothing. Or perhaps Haldin had been telling lies...Every alarming uncertainty beset Razumov. He could bear the silence no longer and cursing himself for his weakness spoke first, though he had promised himself not to do so on any account. (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 72-3)

Razumov's failure to remain silent, despite his avowed intention to, is not a result of overt coercion—Mikulin makes no demands on him to speak—but rather, he could not bear *Mikulin's* mild and thoughtful silence.¹³⁰ What is unbearable in Mikulin's mild silence recalls Leonardo Lisi's argument that silence constitutes a danger that must be subdued by a speaker. Silence here is a deficit of information, a multiplicity of possible meanings, and deprived of definitive explanation, Razumov attempts to occupy both speakers' positions in his inner-dialogue, performing a kind of self-interrogation, but his efforts cannot overcome the uncertainty maintained in Mikulin's silence. And thus, "with a great flow of words he complained of being totally misunderstood" (73). The fear of being misunderstood then is what compels him to speak, to give an account of himself. This is a

¹³⁰ The conflict between his resolve to remain silent and compulsion to speak is repeated throughout the scene, cf: "He resolved to chatter no more. Reserve! Reserve! All he had to do was to keep the Ziemianitch episode secret with absolute determination, when the questions came. Keep Ziemianitch strictly out of all the answers" (75);

"I must positively hold my tongue unless I am obliged to speak," he admonished himself. And at once against his will the question, "Hadn't I better tell him everything?" presented itself with such force that he had to bite his lower lip" (76). The immediacy of the contradictory impulse in the latter quote is striking, as well as the physical manifestation of "such force that he had to bite his lower lip."

striking inversion of Rebecca Beasley's suggestion that characters interpret Razumov through their words to or about him. Unlike other instances in which Razumov deploys silence in order to contend with the interpretive efforts of his interlocutors, here it is Mikulin's thoughtful *silence* that signifies some understanding of Razumov (perhaps informed by Haldin "telling lies"), which Razumov actively tries to correct through *speaking*. It becomes apparent that this is Mikulin's intention, cultivating an ostensibly amicable dialogic space that offers Razumov the opportunity to participate in apparently equitable communication.

Councillor Mikulin speaks softly and dispassionately, appearing as more a vague presence than imposing inquisitor. Repeatedly staring down at his own beard, Mikulin is described as "nothing formidable," and "surprisingly detached," posing questions that are "insinuated quietly," or "murmured with gloomy discontent" (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 72-82). His interrogational technique seems to invite Razumov's participation rather than directly impose demands on him: "Councillor Mikulin uttered a series of broken sentences. Instead of finishing them he glanced down at his beard. It was a deliberate curtailment which somehow made the phrases more impressive" (74). Andrew Long astutely describes Mikulin's approach as seeming "as though he is merely providing a discursive space for Razumov" (Long 500). In his analysis, which examines the novel through a Foucauldian lens, Long argues that the interrogation is a site in which modern subjectivity is constituted; Razumov as the modern subject, defines himself in relation to the authority of the surveillance state: "Razumov becomes not only a discursive partner, but also an accomplice to his own subjectivization" (501). The following exchange appears illustrative of Long's argument, as Mikulin begins:

"By listening to you as I did, I think I have proved that I do not regard our intercourse as strictly official. In fact I don't want it to have that character at all...Oh yes! I admit that the

request for your presence here had an official form. But I put it to you whether it was a form which would have been used to secure the attendance of a..."

"Suspect," exclaimed Razumov, looking straight into the the official's eyes. They were big with heavy eyelids and met his boldness with a dim, steadfast gaze. "A suspect." [...]

"I was about to say a misunderstood person, when you interrupted me," insinuated quietly Councillor Mikulin. (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 74)

That Razumov characterizes himself as a "suspect" represents in Long's account the response to the interpellation of the state, inviting Razumov to situate himself within the logic of autocratic politics (i.e. he is a political subject insofar as he is subject to suspicion). What such an interpretation misses in this wonderful exchange though, is the discordance between Mikulin and Razumov's utterances. Razumov's hysteric self-indictment is comically disproportionate to the entreating terms of Mikulin's preceding utterance. In stating that he does not view their "intercourse as strictly official," Mikulin initially seeks to alert Razumov to the (in-)formal conditions of their communication, what Bakhtin would refer to as "speech genre." Mikulin thereby demarcates a communicative space in contrast with the extra-verbal context that the setting of the Secretariat and the summons sent to Razumov would have otherwise presupposed a kind of official, inquisitorial sphere of communication. Within this non-official speech genre that Mikulin proposes, the intonation of "misunderstood person" is more appropriate to the "referentially semantic content of the utterance," than "suspect," which belongs to a distinctly different genre (Bakhtin "The Problem of Speech Genres" 84). Indeed, Mikulin seizes upon Razumov's earlier invocation of "being totally misunderstood" and translates it to function as an appositive, a "misunderstood person." He thus creates a category that stands outside the sphere of formal communication, immune to the

compelling force of an official subpoena or the conferral of guilt.¹³¹

Razumov's 'interruption' with "suspect" reflects not only a misalignment of speech genres, but his misreading of Mikulin's "speech plan or speech will, which determines the entire utterance, its length and boundaries" (77). Bakhtin discusses how in the course of taking a responsive position to an other's speech, we attempt to anticipate what a speaker wishes to say in order "to measure the finalization of the utterance" (ibid). Finalization here denotes the point at which we understand that the speaker has said everything they wish to say, at which point a response is possible. In interrupting him, Razumov prevents Mikulin from finalizing his own utterance. Leaving the other's discourse unfinalized, and thus open and uncertain, Razumov ironically sets himself against precisely the sort of discourse he finds unbearable. Despite the absence of animosity in Mikulin's speech, Razumov preemptively anticipates Mikulin's "speech plan" as one that will lead to an accusation—so to interrupt with "suspect" is on one hand the misuse of a lexicon inappropriate to a particular speech genre, and on the other, a meta-commentary on Mikulin's speech plan, cutting to the chase, signaling that he can guess the hidden meaning behind Mikulin's entire utterance. The lack of agreement between the two speakers' speech genres manifests an asymmetry of sorts—not an imbalance of political power but of facility of speech. "The better our command of genres," Bakhtin writes, "the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them[...], the more perfectly we implement our free speech plan" (80). Mikulin's art in other words, lies in his facility to create the generic conditions in which individuality can be expressed—not his own, but Razumov's. He understands Razumov so that he can manipulate his compliance:

¹³¹ An example of this situation in the inverse can be seen in the 1992 film *My Cousin Vinny*, in which a confused NYU student, unaware of the expressive limitations defined by the speech genre of an Alabama police interrogation realizes that his utterance, "I shot the clerk!?" is misheard as an admission of guilt rather than an expression of confusion. Here the New York regional intonation that would informally convey a semantically structured statement as a question is foreign to the communicative sphere occupied by Sheriff Farley who understands such an utterance as a confession.

The power of Councillor Mikulin consisted in the ability to seize upon that sense, that side, in the men he used. It did not matter to him what it was—vanity, despair, love, hate, greed, intelligent pride or stupid conceit it was all one to him as long as the man could be made to serve. The obscure unrelated young student Razumov in the moment of great moral loneliness was allowed to feel that he was an object of interest to a small group of people of a high position. (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 235)

Held against the revelation of Mikulin's cynical compassion, we gain an even clearer appreciation of the persuasive force in calling Razumov a "misunderstood man." In complaining of being misunderstood, we take Razumov to mean roughly, 'You don't understand the situation, you have the wrong idea about me and Haldin. I should not be a suspect.' Mikulin's response is double-voiced discourse, directed both to the referential object, suspect—(i.e. implying agreement, 'to call you a suspect is surely a misunderstanding'), and also, it appeals to Razumov's earlier internally voiced desire: "I want to be understood" (37). Mikulin subliminally endears himself to Razumov as a companion with whom to overcome his moral loneliness. Through a Bakhtinian prism we can read "Moral loneliness" as an estrangement from speech genres—there is no dialogic situation in which Razumov can freely express himself. What Mikulin offers him, and the underlying motivation of his 'contract,' is not safety (whether from prosecution or feelings of obligation to Haldin), but moral understanding—which we can thus read as the bestowal of a discursive space amicable to Razumov; when "the idea of...*confessing* to Councillor Mikulin flashed through his mind," Razumov at once recognizes the irrationality of the notion: "Establish a false complicity and destroy what chance of safety I have won for nothing—what folly!," but cannot quiet the temptation it entails: "Yet he could not defend himself from fancying that Councillor Mikulin was perhaps the only man in the world able to understand his conduct. To be understood appeared extremely fascinating" (228).

Mikulin's 'bad' sympathy

Conrad rehearses the theme of the un-official summons in Part IV, a clear repetition of Mikulin's earlier comments, as if to make painstakingly clear the heart of Razumov's motivations in cooperating with the state. When he receives a letter inviting him to an occultist's office for a second meeting with Councilor Mikulin, we are told:

Whether, looking at the unofficial character of the summons, he might have refrained from attending to it is hard to say. Probably not. At any rate he went; but what's more he went with a certain eagerness, which may appear incredible till it is remembered that Councillor Mikulin was the only person on earth with whom Razumov could talk taking the Haldin adventure for granted. (233)

The stress again is put on the *unofficial*, *informal* condition of their relation. The safety Razumov finds in Mikulin is not reducible to some juridical authority; it is crucially because it is someone with whom he can freely converse. Unlike with the others who believe that he assisted Haldin, Razumov recognizes that the truth of the situation is communicable to Mikulin. The freedom to converse with Mikulin turns on their shared knowledge. Although his complicity with Haldin is not definitively determined by Mikulin, the truth of Razumov's experience is communicable to Mikulin, but is not to others who suppose complicity. That he feels valued as "an object of interest," provides interpersonal connection to the "unrelated Razumov." The possibility of being understood is thus set forward as an ideal of a non-coercive communion, a relationship with an other that doesn't interpret or impose its own ideological-context. Indeed from the first moment of their contact together, Mikulin's comportment conceals any trace of antagonism: "He followed

Razumov with his eyes while that last crossed the room and sat down. The mild gaze rested on him, not curious, not inquisitive—certainly not suspicious—almost without expression. In its passionless persistence there was something resembling sympathy” (72). The affect of sympathy, or at least something resembling it mediates their encounter.

In Aaron Fogel’s reading of the scene, he argues that the sympathetic relation between Razumov and Mikulin is “a kind of symmetrical, rather than conscious or sentimental, sympathy” (Fogel 193). He sets out to redefine the terms of sympathy from a moral or psychic feeling of understanding for the other (as we had in *Lawtoo*, the mimetic affect of shared pathos), to essentially the recognition of the structural constraints of dialogue as such: “as common immersion together in forced dialogue,” which reveals itself as “the pathos of symmetrical forcedness in all human relations, and the power to fix all human relations (193-4).

Fogel actually devotes a chapter of his book to the idea of “the fragmentation of sympathy” in the *The Secret Agent*. His argument, which I engage below, is that Conrad advances the question of the limits and contradictions of sympathy that emerges in the nineteenth century English novelistic tradition of Dickens, James, Austen, and George Eliot. Conrad makes explicit the breakdown of sympathy as a coherent aesthetic or social value, as Fogel sees Conradian sympathy operating within the terms of “forced dialogue” (Fogel 146-79). He argues that for Conrad “sympathy cannot be the ground of community,” because it occurs in the isolated imaginative interiority of the individual, forcing interpersonal connection that lack unifying collective principles (162). He also reasons that because sympathy in Conrad appears in discrete forms of “sensory metaphors” that he terms “imagination,” “overhearing,” and “tact,” which do not integrate into a “unified whole,” sympathy operates by a principle of fragmentation (174). Thus, if community requires a unifying organizing principle, Conradian sympathy in both its individuating process and inconsistent form, is subordinate to the totalizing principle of “forced dialogue.”

Our point of divergence seems to lie where Fogel dismisses the constitutive interpersonal bond that compassion for the other engenders as simply illusory of “the ideology of sympathy as free exchange” (162). By contrast I want to reassert the ethical value available in such connection, however limited. Conceding that the individuated operation of sympathy cannot provide a collective universal value, we might consider what kind of ethics *is* made available by sympathy. Rather than shunt sympathy into a higher order system, as in, “Community can be seen not typically in dialogues of free sympathy but in the whole range of ‘forced dialogues,’ of which sympathetic secret agency is one instance,” we recognize that the terms of community are only legible in the particular (ibid). Like Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act through which we evaluated the “promise,” the conferral of sympathy points to the active recognition of value in the I-thou encounter that is not derived from abstract universal principles.

Fogel’s argument for the structural conception of sympathy in the scene turns on the primary question of whether Mikulin in fact feels sympathy for Razumov. The reader’s uncertainty about it, he claims, “puts the reader into an interpretive quandary,” and raises the question in turn of “*our* sympathy for Mikulin—our ability to get a hold of his ‘inner state’” (193). The unavailability of that knowledge for the reader points to the need to reconsider sympathy beyond the “cognitive terms of ordinary dialogical ‘sympathy’” (193). If we grant that the withheld interiority of Mikulin impedes our access to the truth of his sympathy for Razumov, we can at least state that 1) sympathy has an apparently positive appeal for Razumov and 2) Mikulin’s sympathy is instrumental: “The power of Councillor Mikulin consisted in the ability to seize upon that sense...in the men he used.” It is the *performance* of sympathy, or at best the *expression* of something like sympathy, which elicits a feeling of connection for cynical ends. Nidesh Lawtoo distinguishes “good mimesis,” which is the shared bond with an other that can build an ethics on “alternative, intersubjective relational foundations” from “bad mimesis,” which marks those other affective forces that “generate the

dissolution of the social bond” (Lawtoo 76). While actual dialogic sympathy would certainly belong to the category of “good mimesis,” the revelation that Mikulin’s act of sympathy extended to the aim of ensuring Razumov’s cooperation as a spy shows its ability to have “bad” mimetic results. It may be that Mikulin does actually feel sympathy, but the institution of autocracy that ultimately delimits the terms of their relation also constrain the possibility of *their* sympathy to generate alternative ethics. Mikulin’s observation of pity seems to point at the inevitability of dependence that sympathetic bonds cannot alleviate, “You are a young man of great independence. Yes. You are going away free as air, but you shall end by coming back to us” (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 227).

Now, Fogel argues that it’s essentially the representational inaccessibility of Mikulin’s interiority that shows that the concept of dialogic sympathy is inadequate to account for the sort of sympathy there is in Conrad. He concludes that, “the modes of political representation available—melodramatic dialogue and documentary reporting—are grossly inadequate[...]and that traditional ‘sympathy’ between the characters or on the reader’s part is not adequate to the political question” (Fogel 195). However, his resolution—developing the idea of the structural sympathy inherent in the *symmetrical* forcedness of Razumov and Mikulin situation in dialogue—necessarily assumes that Mikulin is as involuntarily forced into the role of interrogator as Razumov is as interrogatee. He seizes on the idea of Mikulin’s “involuntary sympathetic tyranny,” which he concedes derived from only a “subtle indication” given to the reader (193). He claims that “Mikulin acts not on his own but under the orders from General T—” (195). That he is acting on someone else’s orders doesn’t imply that he is doing so unwillingly; indeed, Fogel dismisses a reading that would make “Mikulin a pensive, compassionate liberal, caught in an autocratic role: his job nullifies the real sympathy he feels,” as such an interpretation relies on unavailable insight into Mikulin. His reading of symmetrical forcedness absolutely hangs on the involuntariness of Mikulin’s position, which is never borne out in the text, and the claim then begs the question of how the reader does understand his forcedness—

if it is not related to intimate revelations of Mikulin's character.

Narratorial sympathy

Without symmetrical recognition of the other's situation in forced speech, this structural concept of sympathy doesn't seem like it can get off the ground. The question remains then tantalizingly unanswerable of whether Mikulin's "something like sympathy" is sympathy. From the third-person limited perspective that recounts Razumov's meetings with Councillor Mikulin, the lack of insight into Mikulin as a person beyond the ambiguous surface of his sympathetic gaze and silent beard renders the interrogator merely the individual representation of the state apparatus. This would flatten Razumov's ordeal as of the impotence of an individual against the machinations of the autocratic state. The narrator, sensitive to this conclusion, admits that the reader may be all too familiar with the kind of Faustian archetypal encounter, and the binary morality implied therein:

To the morality of the Western reader an account of these meetings would wear perhaps the sinister character of old, legendary tales where the Enemy of Mankind is represented holding subtly mendacious dialogues with some tempted soul. It is not my part to protest. Let me but remark that the Evil One with his single passion of Satanic Pride for the only motive is yet, on a larger modern view allowed to be not quite so black as he used to be painted. With what greater latitude then should we appraise the exact shade of mere mortal man, with his many passions and his miserable ingenuity in error, always dazzled by the base glitter of mixed motives everlastingly betrayed by a short-sighted wisdom. (233)

This intervention, simply put, is astounding. The mere mortal man in question here is not Razumov, but Mikulin. The narrator insists upon acknowledging the complexity of an individual,

not satisfied with letting Mikulin stand indiscriminately in for the evils of the state. What follows in the text is the narrator's conspicuous presence in filling out a concise paragraph long backstory for Councillor Mikulin, complete with an account of his eventual downfall in a show trial, in which we are told how he maintained a "bureaucratic stoicism" remaining silent, not protesting his innocence, and preserving the secrets of the state (234). The effort to separate the individual from the state both purports to confer complexity onto the Razumov-Mikulin relationship and also to hurl another attack against "savage autocracy"'s propensity to devour friend and foe alike.

The visibility of the narrator here, as elsewhere throughout the novel, has another effect on the reader typical of Conrad's work: calling attention to the mediating narrative frame. The layer of mediation constituted by the framing of the narrator/teacher of language's recounting of Razumov's journals puts into question the status of Razumov's interiority. Do we imagine that the free indirect discourse in the narrative, as "his gaze...was something like sympathy" is a 'translation' of Razumov's reported mental discourse in his journal, i.e. [I felt something like sympathy in Councillor Mikulin's gaze]? Or is it perhaps the narrator's empathetic projection into Razumov, to make sense of or provide justification for actions that he—through the moral tint of his Western eyes—cannot comprehend? As a "teacher of languages," the task of the narrator lies not only in translating Razumov's journals from Russian to English, but of making sense of them. The narrator prefaces his translation at the onset of the novel with an acknowledgement of that difficulty:

I confess that I have no comprehension of the Russian character. The illogicality of their attitude, the arbitrariness of their conclusions, the frequency of the exceptional, should present no difficulty to a student of many grammars, but there must be something else in the way, some special human trait—one of those subtle differences that are beyond the ken of mere professors. What must remain striking to a teacher of languages is the Russians'

extraordinary love of words [...but...] one can't defend oneself from the suspicion that they really understand what they say. (12)

Cora Diamond, writing on Wittgenstein's ethics, but could have just as well been commenting on our humble narrator, explains that to understand a person who utters nonsense requires an imaginative act of taking nonsense for sense, which entails a kind of translation as it were, to express that nonsense in an understandable language. She writes, "If I understand a person who utters nonsense, I enter imaginatively into the seeing of it as sense, I as it were become the person who thinks it. I treat that person's nonsense in imagination as if I took it to be an intelligible sentence of a language that I understand, *something I find in myself the possibility of meaning*" (Diamond 165).¹³² Taking a bit of an interpretative leap from Diamond to Bakhtin's theory of the monologic and dialogic novel types, we could consider the extent to which the moral vision of Razumov or Mikulin coincides with the narrator's voice. Does the inaccessibility of interiority confer an independence to the characters, an epistemic barrier that preserves their nonsense as nonsense? Or does the narrative frame fold Russian morality under the monologic gaze of the narrator, where "something like sympathy" is the narrator's effort to make sense of foreign intersubjective relations?

Both Rachel Hollander and Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan have keyed upon the ethical possibilities revealed in the narrative frame of the novel.¹³³ Hollander argues that representations of Razumov's interiority are the creation of the narrator, reflecting an effort to understand and sympathize with

¹³² This imaginative act, which Stanley Cavell calls "projective imagination" also resonates with Bely's invocation of empathic "*Einfihlung*" in "Emblematics of Meaning" (Cavell *The Claim of Reason* 145 et passim).

¹³³ Erdinast-Vulcan's argument is less relevant to this discussion. She considers how the collapse of the narrative frame undermines the stability of the reader's external 'Western' position, which would otherwise absolve the reader from ethical engagement with the text. She rehearses the Bakhtinian ethical project of *Philosophy of the Act* to situate the reader's ethical responsiveness to the novel and takes the narrator's overt framing of his Westernness (and the readers') contra the Russian otherness as an abdication of being present, absolving himself and the reader of ethical responsibility. However she argues that the breakdown in the narrative frame, the slippage between narrator and other characters' viewpoints reveals the "permeability of the frame," which "not only destabilize[s] the authority and reliability of the narrator, but it also undermines the stability and coherence of the characters themselves" (Erdinast-Vulcan "The Conradian Subject-in-Process: The Question of Ethics in *under Western Eyes*" 103).

him. In her reading, “the exhaustion of th[e] effort [to probe the limits of Razumov’s humanity] in the face of the persistently unknowable ultimately creates a space for alternative ethics and politics” (Hollander 10). She argues that Razumov’s deafening at the novel’s conclusion effects a resolution to the problem of the unknowable, rendering him radically open: he “occupies the position of the Levinasian self, completely open to the face and demands of the other. Razumov’s position of pure receptivity marks Conrad’s turn to a radically different understanding of ethics” (ibid). Hollander’s proposal that the narrative voice is thoroughly the narrator’s speaks convincingly to the idea of the narrator as monologizer. She writes, “The conceit that the teacher translates Razumov’s journal allows Conrad to emphasize Razumov’s desire for a coherent life narrative, while the third-person narrative voice, which does not belong to a character within the novel, provides much more intimacy with and insight into his fractured psyche than a real diary could” (ibid). While the claim that Razumov could not achieve a comparable degree of introspection in his own writings seems somewhat tendentious, it is certainly fair to suggest that the narrator’s speculative insight into Razumov’s psyche is likely *otherwise* than Razumov’s own perspective. The thrust of the idea here is that the narrator’s presence as interpreter and as sympathetic other is inseparable from our access to Razumov’s represented interiority. The narrator’s invocation of sympathy becomes performatively enacted by the narrator’s sympathetic, non-judgmental representation of Razumov.

For these readers the barrier to interiority and the persistence of unknowability forces a reevaluation of Conrad’s ethical stakes. Whether sympathy must be understood as structural forcedness or the narrator’s mediation invites the possibility of alternative ethical modes of understanding the other, dialogic sympathy does not appear to be sufficient in itself for orienting interpersonal relations. Fogel sees structural forcedness as a necessary reconceptualization of sympathy in light of what he views as dialogic sympathy’s incapacity to address Conrad’s political questions. Hollander and Erdinast-Vulcan’s insights into the visibility of the narrator’s mediation

respond to the illegibility of characterological moral attitudes due to the unavailability of access to Razumov's mind. With that said, I propose that Tekla's care for Razumov at the end of the novel reasserts sympathy as a vital ethical force in the novel.

Confession as a return to *sobornost'* or to independence?

For many readers Razumov's confessions mark a resolution for Razumov and an opening for a kind of alternative ethics. In addition to Hollander's reading of Razumov's blindness as a radical Levinasian openness, Avrom Fleishman has notably argued that Razumov's public confession achieves self-realization through communal identification (Fleishman *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* 241). In his reading the form of discourse of Razumov's public confession supersedes his other two confessions: his written confession in the journals, and his direct confession to Natalia Haldin. Fleishman argues that the mode of "public speech" puts Razumov into a "permanent relationship with his audience," who as a group can accept him more readily the limitations of an individual, like Natalia. (Fleishman "Speech and Writing in *under Western Eyes*" 127). This communal relationship is essentially personal and concrete, fulfilling Razumov's "quest for a community of real people, rather than one of mystical abstractions" (Fleishman *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* 237). Indeed, authentic personal connection in Fleishman's reading is what characterizes Conrad's ideal community as Western. He opposes the extreme of Russian autocracy to the individualism of Swiss democracy, and concludes that Razumov achieves what he deems a Western synthesis in communal identity: "Conrad's collectivism must not be seen as an irrational or mystical one, like the Russian variety, but rather as a Western and modern ideal of brotherhood" (233). The difference between Fleishman's concept of so-called 'Western brotherhood'—ostensibly *fraternité*—and Russian

sobornost' would seem to have to do with Fleishman's stress on "personal identification" involved in the former and the "mystical" valences of the latter (ibid). The return to *sobornost'* in Dostoevskian confession fosters immediate human connection in the service of a utopian vision of a future Holy Russia." By contrast, the communion Razumov might achieve with his confession is in a decidedly secular realm; there is no mystical collective unity, only those around him. But it remains rather dubious whether entrance into a community is either his intention or the unwitting outcome of the confession.

If anything, it actually seems like the confession is an attempt to extract himself from the claims of either autocracy or communal relations. After he confesses, in the moments before he is beaten by Nikita, he proclaims triumphantly, "I was made safe—I made myself free from falsehood, from remorse—independent of every single human being on this earth" (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 279). His confession finally discloses the truth of his betrayal, but far from a transcendent purification of conscience its liberating force is strictly practical: it makes him useless to either the revolutionaries (a betrayer) or to the State (his cover is blown). His confession moreover, is not an appeal for understanding, it makes no effort to entreat forgiveness or provide excuses, in fact the confession mocks the reader's desire for insight into Razumov's interiority: "Am I to tell you of the feelings of that student sought out in his obscure solitude and menaced by the complicity forced upon him? [...] Observe—that man had certain honest ideals in view. But I didn't come here to explain him" (277). In other words, it appears as if Razumov manages to reclaim his "final word" for himself, asserting the right to judge himself and separate his speech, at last, from the appropriating discourse of others.

Except that he doesn't. In Bakhtin's writing on confessional discourse, he develops the concept of the "loophole," "the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's words[...]the word with a loophole should be an ultimate word and does present itself as

such, but in fact is only the penultimate word and places after itself on a conditional, not a final, period” (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 233). If confessional utterances are intended to give the hero the final word about themselves—the “independence” that Razumov claims he has achieved—a confession with a loophole would be one in which the confession is accounting for the subsequent response of the other. Not only is the finalizing intent of the confessional revealed as unfinalized in such instances, but Bakhtin shows that that even the confessional utterance is inescapably dialogic, ever attuned to the judgment of the other. We might detect a loophole in Razumov’s confession, in, “that man had certain honest ideals in view—But I didn’t come here to explain him.” In his delimiting of the confessional discourse, there is a distinction marked between what he confesses and the persistent privacy of his honest ideals, which he is not here to disclose. As a loophole it prepares a rejoinder to any potential followup from the revolutionary tribunal. He suggests that he is opting to leave something unsaid, his unshared motivations are in a conditional tone, indicating that this is not the full story. But more in line with our reading thus far, the third-person narrativization of his own confession calls to mind implied presence of the narrator. Even here access to Razumov’s final word is withheld, mediated by the narratorial framing.¹³⁴ Unlike in Dostoevsky, the persistent monologic control of the narrative precludes the possibility of Razumov securing his own distinct word.

It is his deafening, though, that most clearly undermines Razumov’s intended independence from dialogue. As the cynical deployment of sympathetic relations with Councillor Mikulin was ultimately ‘bad’ mimesis, confession too fails to provide an emancipatory ethics. The revelation that the “revolutionist Nikita” was in fact “a traitor, himself a betrayer” points perhaps to the limitations

¹³⁴ There are in fact several levels removed from the narrated event; we eventually learn that the teacher of languages hears about the public confession from Sophia Antonovna, who was not present herself, but was told about it later by Razumov (287).

of confessional discourse or communal identification in Conrad's social reality (279, 288). Perhaps in an ideal community there might be the possibility of reconciliation and admission into a unified social organism, but Nikita, representing the pervasive reach of the autocracy, is a sobering reminder of the reality of political violence. Sophia Antonovna tells the teacher of languages that the beating was in fact "not authorised"—as if political authority lay anywhere else but in the discrimination of the autocracy.

If Razumov's confession freed him from the coercive claims of either the State or the revolutionary community, Nikita takes idea to the extreme, as he tells Razumov, "We shall make you harmless" (279). Beaten senseless by the double-agent Nikita, run over by a tramcar, Razumov enters into a "world of mutes," where despite the loss of the physical mechanics for conversation, he finds himself passively susceptible to the spectacle of communication: "Silent men, moving unheard, lifted him up, laid him on the side-walk, gesticulating and grimacing round him their alarm, horror, and compassion" (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 280). In this unescapable silence, Razumov can no longer be cajoled by any speech to be sure, but likewise has no autonomous position. The "dumb show" of exchanged looks renders Razumov a permeable screen, but from which no constitutive communicative relations can be found.

Tekla and the Ethics of Care

"He is a Russian and I am his relation," Tekla tells the Genevans standing around the deaf Razumov (281). Echoing the narrator's prefatory remark that Razumov's "closest parentage was defined in the statement that he was a Russian," Tekla claims kinship on that very ground (16). Cast out of political society, beyond the judgment of the law and thus subject to Nikita's extra-judicial violence, bereft of the capacity to engage in dialogue, what remains of Razumov is akin to Giorgio

Agamben's *homo sacer*. It's startling then that Tekla not only asserts their kinship, but also refers to his citizenship as relevant to the question of their relation. Their connection is deep seated, as it turns out; Tekla "affirms that there was some understanding between them—some sort of compact...That in any sore need, in misfortune or difficulty or pain he was to come to her" (283). With Tekla Razumov finally finds understanding. Theirs is not a penetrating insight into consciousness, but a relationship premised on attending to the the pain of an other. Tekla is the "Good Samaritan," tending to Razumov "unweariedly with the pure joy of unselfish devotion. There was nothing in that task to become disillusioned about" (287). But is Tekla's care actually indicative of mutual understanding? Need it be?

The problem of evaluating the authenticity of sympathy in the case of Mikulin centered on the lack of access to his mind, i.e. without knowing how he actually felt about Razumov, we can only guess if the gaze was truly sympathetic, or merely something like it: a sympathetic façade. Certainly we are no closer to knowing Tekla's mind, but the unavailability of her interiority somehow does not put into question the reality of their "sort of compact," the authenticity of her "unselfish devotion." That is, it is not that we *can't* wonder if her apparent devotion is truly unselfish, but our response to it is less vexed than in beholding Mikulin's sympathetic gaze. One might immediately insist that the comparison is not fair; Tekla is responding to obvious bodily trauma and her care for Razumov does not depend on understanding him; she is simply attending to his physical condition. Meanwhile the nature of Mikulin's sympathy is essentially intellectual; Razumov's suffering in that instance was abstract, the feeling of moral solitude; to be sympathetic toward Razumov's suffering entails understanding Razumov, discerning in him an internal pain not immediately as legible as blown eardrums and broken bones. In short, one might say that the problem of other minds is relevant for Mikulin precisely because his sympathy involves accessing to some extent Razumov's mind, whereas the care for a body in pain neither depends on nor is constitutive of an understanding of the other.

In response we might first clarify that the comparison is not strictly between Mikulin's gaze and Tekla's tending, but of Mikulin's "something like sympathy" and "some understanding between [Tekla and Razumov]—some sort of compact." As the narrator relates, the factual account of Tekla discovering Razumov ("She had screamed out to him, by name, to know what was the matter. He never even raised his head[...]She started in pursuit and rushing out into the road, came almost directly upon the arrested tram-car and the small knot of people picking up Razumov" (284)), does not in itself explain why she attends to him, let alone why she continues to care for him in the hospital and thereafter. Natalia's explanation of their "some sort of compact" is essential to accounting for their relation. We grasp that an understanding was communicated between them that structured her responsiveness to his pain beyond the observable somatic expression in the moment.

Note that the narrator's account of the event describes an initial failure of communication: "She had screamed out to him"; "He never even raised his head" that undercuts the supposed transparent communicability of physical pain. That Tekla "screamed out" is a marked contrast from the heretofore representation of her character. She is not an obvious dialogic partner, as she tells Razumov in their first meeting, "No one is told my name. No one cares. No one talks to me, no one writes to me. My parents don't even know if I'm alive. I have no use for a name and I have almost forgotten it myself" (182). Explaining to Razumov that she—part and parcel to being a woman—could "keep dumb" under potential police interrogation, she says, "What's the good of speech to me? Who would ever want to hear what I could say?" (183). Between Razumov's aversion to speech and Tekla's marginalization as a useful or worthy speaker, it seems miraculous that they ever communicated an understanding. Compacted with Razumov's deafening, and descent into "a world of mutes" as well as a seemingly gratuitous reminder of Tekla's difficulty with language ("I am a relation,' she insisted in bad French" (281)), we can appreciate how their "some understanding" had to surmount an expansive separateness. We can at least now counter the idea that care is an

immediate response to physical pain and does not proceed from understanding the other.

However, this line of argumentation separates her care from their understanding; their understanding was not initiated in the moment of trauma, but preceded it as a kind of contract—[in the event that], “in any sore need” “he was to come to her.” We can go farther, though, and assert that her care does indeed provide evidence of their understanding. In his essay “Knowing and Acknowledging” Stanley Cavell attempts to repudiate the skeptical argument, ‘I cannot know another’s pain because I cannot have the same pain,’ by arguing—in part—that ‘knowing’ the other is intelligible when we consider the other uses of ‘knowing’ beyond that as an expression of certainty. Knowledge of an other’s pain, he says, is an *acknowledgment* of pain, our response to the expression of pain:

I might say here the reason ‘I know you are in pain’ is not an expression of certainty is that it is a response to this exhibiting; it is an expression of *sympathy*. (‘I know what you’re going through’; ‘I’ve done all I can’; ‘The serum is being flown in by special plane.’) But why is sympathy expressed in this way? Because your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what ‘(your or his) being in pain’ means. Is. (Cavell “Knowing and Acknowledging” 243)

Tekla’s care is thus a compelling form of knowledge, as acknowledgment. Cavell moreover links acknowledgment to sympathy. Earlier in the discussion of the newspaper article, I argued that the teacher of languages forces the claim of sympathy on an internally inert Razumov. Then with Mikulin, sympathy did not function as recognition of a claim, but was used as a cynical means of fostering connection. Cavell illustrates the claim of sympathy that necessarily arises in direct encounter with the other. He writes elsewhere that “...with pain there is a moral demand to respond

to its expression” (Cavell "Forward" xi). Tekla’s care is qualitatively different than the preceding instances of sympathy: it is a moral responsiveness to the other neither compelled from without nor expressed cynically.

The externalization of Razumov’s pain, from moral solitude to physical trauma does make its expression more legible, to be sure. But this doesn’t diminish the ethical import of Tekla’s moral responsiveness. Her acknowledgment of physical pain generating a social bond with the other is surely representative of “good mimesis.” By contrast, Mikulin’s sympathy’s “bad mimesis” has nothing to do with the internal inexpressivity of moral solitude. Mikulin’s “ability to seize upon that sense...in the men he used” shows that he does *understand* Razumov, but his sympathetic gaze is not an acknowledgement of the other. Cavell continues:

I do not mean that we always in fact *have* sympathy, nor that we always ought to have it. The claim of suffering may go unanswered. We may feel lots of things—sympathy, *Schadenfreude*, nothing. If one says that this is a *failure* to acknowledge another’s suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, to *know* that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgement is evidenced by its failure as by its success. (243)

The point is that Mikulin’s cynical response was not reflective of a lack of access to interiority—either the reader’s to Mikulin or Mikulin to Razumov. Knowledge of the other’s pain, as in Mikulin’s case, is not sufficient to generate an ethical relation. It must start with acknowledging the other.

Whatever kind of alternative ethics Tekla’s sympathy does enable is admittedly rather meager. It is hardly prescriptive of a model of politics or of resituating the individual’s relation to any community. Indeed it still seems to leave Razumov in an asymmetrically dependent relation to a

caregiver. So what exactly is generated in this ‘good’ sympathetic relationship? Sandra Laugier has developed the notion of an “ethics of care,” that could help explicate what there is to be found in Tekla and Razumov’s relation. Laugier says that an ethics of care “gives voice and attention to humans who are undervalued precisely because they perform unnoticed, invisible tasks and take care of basic needs” (Laugier 218). An ethics of care is situated in the realm of the ordinary and everyday, such that we might attend to the ethical stakes of readily visible but discounted human action rather than abstract general precepts. An attention to the devalued would restage the situation of dependency—problematic viewed against an ideal of individual autonomy—as instead enmeshed in the everyday, highlighting the importance of care.

With this view, the relative insignificance of Tekla’s action against the backdrop of geopolitical conflict gains renewed import. The descriptions of her character repeatedly emphasize her enfeebled appearance and lack of agency:

What have they done between them to that forlorn creature? [...] Have they terrified her out of her senses with ghosts or simply have they only been beating her? When she gave him his second glass of tea he noticed her lips trembled in the manner of a scared person about to burst into speech. But of course she said nothing and retired into her corner as if hugging to herself the smile of thanks he gave her.” (Conrad *Under Western Eyes*)

[Razumov] observed that she did not appear starved but rather as if she had been fed on unwholesome scraps and leavings of plates.” (179)

‘You hear everything they say.’ She murmured without any animosity: ‘So do the tables and chairs.’ (182)

“Then he reflected that the mere fact of leaving the great man [Ivanovitch] would make her

suspect. She could expect no support or countenance from anyone. This revolutionist was not fit for an independent existence.” (183)

Compared to Mikulin, whose power of understanding is coextensive with his ability to use others, in the interest of the State, Tekla is without a voice, abiding in the corner of rooms, effectively indistinguishable from furniture. When Tekla gains her voice, screamed to Razumov (ironically unheard) she perhaps “achieves an alternative tonality of language” (Laugier 232). She does not adapt her speech to the discourse of the public political sphere; when she tells the teacher of languages how she found Razumov, he notes that she does so “without any kind of comment”; “she was non communicative. She gave me news of Mr Razumov as concisely as possible (Conrad *Under Western Eyes* 284-5). His “Western eyes” are ill suited to see her as anything other than in the moral terms of “the good Samaritan.” In her care of Razumov she speaks a language withheld from the narrator’s grasp, an expression hearable perhaps only in a “world of mutes,” a potential future that she describes to Razumov: “There is a lot of all us Russians, nameless Russians. There is nothing else for us, and no hope anywhere unless[...]*Unless all these people with names are done away with*” (182).

Sympathetic Imagination

Even if Tekla and Razumov’s relationship might reorient the focus of Conrad’s ethical project, as a resolution to the problem of autocracy it still seems disproportionately outmatched. Attention and acknowledgement don’t seem sufficient to clear the ground for an alternative form of community given the requirements established in the course of this discussion. But severed from the double-bind of the illusion of self-autonomy and the coercivity of community, it is all that remains available. Perhaps, as ill-suited as sympathy is toward restructuring the terms of community or

transforming the independence of the individual, *that* inadequacy is reflective of Conrad's pessimism regarding the general futility in waging resistance against the reality of Russian autocracy.

Indeed, the sentimentality of sympathy as a powerful affect out of sync with an understanding of political reality is resonant in Conrad's thought. In "Autocracy and War," Conrad presents sympathy with a certain ambivalence, on one hand an affect that could uniquely unite people in common understanding, but at the same time one which is engendered through specific limiting conditions. He writes that the horrors of the Russo-Japanese War have "been made known to us, so far, in a pale gray reflection of its terrible and monotonous phases of pain, death, sickness[...]through the veil of inadequate words" (Conrad "Autocracy and War" 34). The "colorless print" of journalism fails to convey the profound, instructive nature of war wherein "men are driven beyond the bounds of sanity by the stress of moral and physical misery" (36). This failure it seems is a problem of form in part, but also due to the myopic applicability of the sympathetic imagination. Conrad continues:

Inadequate, I say, because what had to be reproduced is beyond the common experience of war; and imagination, luckily for our peace of mind has remained a slumbering faculty, not withstanding the din of humanitarian talk and the real progress of humanitarian ideas. Direct vision of the fact, or the stimulus of great art, can alone make it turn and open its eyes heavy and blessed with sleep; and even there, as against the testimony of the senses and the stirring up of emotion, that saving callousness which reconciles us to the conditions of our existence will assert itself under the guise of assent to fatal necessity or in the enthusiasm of a purely aesthetic admiration of the rendering. In this age of knowledge, our *sympathetic imagination*, to which alone we can look for the ultimate triumph of Concord and Justice, remains strangely impervious to information, however correctly and even picturesquely conveyed." (34 emphasis added).

Our peace of mind is left unbothered by the horrors of war because the reported information of the newspaper cannot stimulate the sympathetic imagination into moral anguish. The “saving callousness,” i.e. our ethical quietude in non-response to the horrors of war, seems to stem from the fact that our sympathetic imagination can only be stimulated in the realm of art, as aesthetic admiration; or in direct vision of some misfortune, e.g. “A man writhing under a cartwheel in the street” (ibid). Recalling Cavell, our attention and acknowledgment of an other’s pain or suffering is activated in sympathetic imagination. This is why Conrad writes that the sympathetic imagination is “to which alone we can look for the ultimate triumph of Concord and Justice.” Sympathy in this phrasing *is* constitutive of an ethics for Conrad. The problem however is that outside the realm of fiction or the immediacy of an encounter, reports of suffering from afar cannot “awaken genuine emotion.”

As a consequence, Conrad fears that the war, which should reveal that the power of Russian autocracy is illusory, and that Russia is nothing but the “negation of everything worth living” will be lost on a Western audience pacified by the noxious fumes of newspaper ink: “the printed voice of the press makes a sort of till uproar, taking from men both the power to reflect and the faculty of genuine feeling; leaving them only the artificially created need of having something exciting to talk about” (38-9). War will continue in different guises as long as the force of a sympathetic imagination is so constrained to an aesthetic appreciation of a work of art.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag asks a similar question about the communicability of photographic representations of warfare. She explores the mediating frame of photograph’s production and the ways in which its representational conditions shape our ability to respond to the image. Her study begins with Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, an essay on war written some 34 years after Conrad’s. Describing photographs of the Spanish Civil War in similar terms to Conrad’s description of the newspaper reports from Manchuria, “Photographs, of course, are not

arguments addressed to the reason; they are simply statements of fact addressed to the eye” (Woolf *Three Guineas* 20), Woolf’s estimation of art’s capacity to stimulate the sympathetic imagination is a marked departure from his position. As Sontag writes, “Woolf professes to believe that the shock of such pictures cannot fail to unite people of good will” (Sontag 6). Woolf, it seems, has more faith in the expansive communicability of common experience. If the transformative ethical force of sympathy is ultimately only seen in elegiac potentiality in Conrad, in Woolf that world is embodied. In her novels empathetic understanding has the capacity to structure interpersonal relations. Conrad’s sympathetic relations circled around the question, “Is my sympathy for the other a knowledge of him?”; *Mrs. Dalloway* advances the question a step further: “Can I understand the other without knowing him?”

IV: Woolf's polyphonic consummation; or the delimiting of empathy in *Mrs. Dalloway*

“. . . car, comme je sçay par une trop certaine expérience, il n'est aucune si douce consolation en la perte de nos amis que celle que nous apporte la science de n'avoir rien oublié a leur dire et d'avoir eu avec eux une parfaite et entière communication” (Woolf "Montaigne" qtd. in 65).

“For it is probable that when people talk aloud, the selves (of which there may be more than two thousand) are conscious of dis severment, and are trying to communicate, but when communication is established they fall silent” (Woolf *Orlando: A Biography* 286).

Toward the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh recalls a theory Clarissa had once proposed “to explain the feeling they had of dissatisfaction; not knowing people; not being known” (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 136). The feeling of not knowing the other pervades Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel as the melancholic condition of life itself; at nearly every moment the internal monologues of each character indicate seemingly insurmountable barriers between people, trapped interiorities interrupting without communicating, seeing without acknowledging. Even amid the fervent activity of metropolitan life, Woolf suggests, we somehow feel alone. “For how could they know each other,” Clarissa and Peter agree, for, “you met every day; then not for six months, or years” (136). Clarissa suggests that the solution is to expand the concept of self:

...sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of her seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had

never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. (136)

Clarissa's theory proffers a pantheistic worldview that would collapse the distance between atomistic individualities. To know the other is not to interrogate them directly, but to seek their spirit in all things. "To seek" here misleadingly suggests a prescription for action; Clarissa's theory instead reorients the project of self-knowledge toward an attunement with the vast unity of the world. She does not demand that one need confront the man behind a counter or address a tree; the feeling of an affinity with a stranger is sufficient. In the face of the impossibility of knowing even those closest to us, Clarissa proposes that people are *completed* by the world. Peter recalls that Clarissa's account

...ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death allowed her to believe...that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. (137)

Clarissa overcomes her horror of death by imbuing death with the potential to unite the self with the world, a feat impossible in life. The expected values of life and death are thereby inverted, where life is a condition marked by a feeling of dissatisfaction from "not knowing people; not being known," while death promises the recovery and reconciliation of that loss. Clarissa's pantheistic quietism could be read as an expression of what Sandra Bahun has termed the modernist practice of countermourning, "a strategy of articulating loss that...preserves the lost object, in all its cognitive obscurity and semantic instability, as a vital part of the fictional subject's world" (Bahun *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning* 60). The possibility that death provides a communion with the world offers an essentially theodical account for the disconnected and isolated condition of life represented in the novel. Life is not nihilistically bereft of meaning; the feeling of dissatisfaction

in not knowing the other indicates through its failure the existence of a whole withheld from individual experience. Early in the novel Clarissa reflects: "She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated" (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 28). Only a perspective beyond the finitude of subjective experience could glimpse that centrality, a unified whole. Whether that whole is fulfilled in death can of course only end in speculation. "Perhaps—perhaps" punctuates her transcendental theory (137). As a secular substitute for a divine perspective, the aesthetic form of Virginia Woolf's novel could potentially enact Clarissa's theory: as I argue in this chapter, in the structure of the narrative itself we might glimpse the interconnections between characters whose representation as atomized individualities bars them from discerning an analogous unity in their respective existences.

In the three previous chapters I have argued that within the conditions of degeneration, fragmentation, and disconnection that pervade those novels lie essential moments of active communication between individuals, striving to transcend the limitations of subjective experience in response to the demands of an other. In *The Petty Demon* we saw how the apparent banality of provincial gossip was in fact the fuel for Symbolist life-creation with Peredonov's generative misunderstandings of ordinary speech; the significance of the speech act for *zhiznetvorchestvo* (life-creation) is advanced in *Petersburg*, where the performative utterance of the promise makes visible the complex ethical and creative forces that foster connection and obligatory bonds amid disintegrating social and familial circumstances. In the preceding chapter the role of ethical acknowledgment in sympathetic understanding also functions to generate a kind of communicative relation between Razumov and Tekla, but Conrad is clearly more ambivalent than the Russian symbolists are about the efficacy of ordinary speech to restructure intersubjective relations. The transition from the Russians to the British in this study seems to be marked by a shift from the communicative capacity of ordinary *language* to the communicative potential of the ordinary *life*. If

Tekla and Razumov's relationship embodies Laugier's ethics of care, it is admittedly one that does not express the ordinary or feminine voice.¹³⁵ Moreover, the consideration of Conrad's idea of sympathetic imagination at the conclusion of the chapter also repositions the possibility of "Concord and Justice" from something achievable in intimate relations between individuals to an appreciation of the work of art as such.

Accordingly, with *Mrs. Dalloway* Virginia Woolf seems to push the skepticism of the efficacy of active communication even further, as Clarissa's so-called transcendental theory elevates passive affective relations over dialogic interaction. Where the fragmentation of coherent speech in *Petersburg* reflected phenomenological disorientation of the individual in the modern metropolis, we see that the failures of communication for Woolf's characters exist as a persistent condition despite their variegated situations: Clarissa feels a gulf between married people caused by age or gender politics; Richard Dalloway cannot tell his wife he loves her; Lucrezia Warren Smith, an Italian immigrant, prematurely mourns the end of her marriage; Septimus Warren Smith, the shell-shocked veteran of the Great War is traumatically isolated from the social world; Peter Walsh, visiting from India, feels alienated by British society, etc. In other words, the social sphere in Woolf's world is so thoroughly saturated with barriers to interpersonal connection that overcoming them requires a radical reconception of the conditions for communication, and the creation of what Rita Felski has called a "counter-public sphere" (Felski 164 et passim).¹³⁶

In the midst of composing *Mrs. Dalloway*, then called *The Hours*, Woolf writes that with

¹³⁵ cf. "The ethics of care draws our attention to the ordinary, to what we are unable to see, though it is right before our eyes. Rather than claiming a 'women's ethics,' the ethics of care give voice to humans (mostly women, and people of color) who are undervalued precisely because they are assigned to activities that have been socially and morally devalored..." (Laugier 226).

¹³⁶ Implicitly a critique of the ways in which Habermas's conception of the public-sphere (discussed below) claims universality while eliding the reality of gendered difference in the participation and formation of social and cultural discourse, Felski defines the feminist counter-public sphere "as an oppositional discursive arena within the society of late capitalism, structured around an ideal of a communal gendered identity perceived to unite all its participants" (9), but also cf. (154-184)

the book she wanted “to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense” (Woolf *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 248). Woolf does indeed depict the “social system” as principally culpable in inhibiting communicative relations between individuals.¹³⁷ The system’s faults are widespread; whether in the symbolic elevation of abstract patriotic values that entrench a hierarchical system of relations in the public sphere, or in the patriarchal structures that exclude or constrain a woman’s participation in discourse, or in the ways in which the welfare state creates violent normative standards for its citizens, Woolf roundly eviscerates the forms of community supposedly possible in modern society.

The entire narrative is underpinned by Woolf’s satire of the conservative, patriarchal system of values that define English post-war society and which dictate the acceptable terms of the speech genres of public discourse. Alongside Dr. Bradshaw’s values of Proportion and Conversion, notions like “duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England,” demand “respect,” and order and organize the functioning of society (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 46). Participation in public discourse is reserved for men—not as a formal proscription, but because the proper language of English society is based in an essentially masculine logic. In order to write a letter to the *Times*, Millicent Bruton depends upon Hugh Whitbread’s fluency, by virtue of his gender, in what Vincent Sherry refers to as the “hegemony of rationalist language” (Sherry *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* 245).

A being so differently constituted from herself, which such a command of language; able to put things as editors liked them put; had passions which one could not simply call greed. Lady Bruton often suspended judgment upon men in deference to the mysterious accord in which they, but no woman, stood to the laws of the universe; knew how to put things; knew what was said; so that if Richard advised her, and Hugh wrote for her, she was sure of being

¹³⁷ cf. Zwerdling, who writes that “the inability to communicate feelings” is a central target of Woolf’s critique (Zwerdling 71).

somehow right. (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 98)

Lady Bruton, who is “derived from the eighteenth century” participates, however limitedly, in the public opinion of the political realm (155): her public voice, interpolated and translated into masculine grammar fit for the newspaper, is purchased in exchange for hosting her luncheons. Anne Fernald has persuasively argued that Woolf’s writing, particularly in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Orlando*, anticipates the feminist criticisms of Jürgen Habermas’s conception of the public sphere, where “the rhetorical openness of the public sphere that Habermas champions a liberal democratic ideal was premised on the practices of exclusion” (Fernald 89).¹³⁸ For Fernald, *Mrs. Dalloway* is a satire of the conservative public sphere, emphasizing the ways in which exclusion is enacted.¹³⁹ She reads Clarissa’s party and Lady Bruton’s luncheon as modern forms of the eighteenth-century *salon*, which Habermas presents, along with British coffeehouses and German *Tischgesellschaften* as the seminal institutions in the formation of the literary public sphere. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas argues that in such spaces, bourgeois individuals and members of aristocratic society convened to engage in open critical debate about culture, and eventually economics and politics, thereby forming a “public sphere,” independent from and counterposed to the political state apparatus. Through participation in public critical debate, individuals related to each other as equals, and from which “public opinion” emerged, a collective public consciousness

¹³⁸ Rita Felski explains that “the possibility of participation in [the discursive community of the public sphere] is predicated upon historically determined factors of gender and class...The bourgeois public sphere is thus characterized by a blindness to the actual and unequal material conditions which render its own existence possible and holds fast to the illusion that humanity is adequately represented by the male property-owning public” (Felski 165). Habermas does in fact acknowledge that the participation was not universal, but nonetheless claims that insofar as cultural products became commodities in the marketplace, “they became in principle generally accessible,” which “established the public as in principle inclusive” (Habermas 36-37). The issue critics have taken with Habermas then is that he takes the *bourgeois* public sphere, is taken to be synonymous with the public in general, when in fact, as Nancy Fraser points out, “not only were there always a plurality of competing publics but the relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual” (Fraser 61). Thus, far from representing actually universally democratic values, the bourgeois public sphere was implicitly an expression of the ideology of its participants.

¹³⁹ In *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*, Melba Cuddy-Keane argues that as a writer Woolf does not reject the public sphere, but engages in it, seeking to change public discourse by “developing an alternative pedagogy outside the educational institutions” (Cuddy-Keane 2).

of the cultural and political norms that defined the bourgeois public sphere. Clarissa's understanding of the sense of her party as bringing individual so-and-sos together in "an offering to combine, to create," (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 109) bears strikingly similarity then, to the bourgeois public sphere, which Habermas describes fundamentally as "the sphere of private people come together as a public" (Habermas 27). However, Fernald indicates that far from a being a locus of democratic rational exchange, "the hope for what a party might achieve gets checked by the reality of triviality, boredom, and personality clashes...people merely gossip; talking is a game" (Fernald 103). In Fernald's view, Woolf shows that not only is the functioning of the public sphere facilitated by women's labor (the hostess, Lucy, Mrs. Walker), but also, through its exclusions and banality, the public sphere actually inhibits true democratic communication.

Woolf's critical rejection of the ubiquity of the patriotic masculine values that pervade the fabric of all public life creates a challenge for constructing an alternative positive project. Woolf's solution, Rebecca Walkowitz proposes, is to develop aesthetic decadence as political resistance: Walkowitz argues that Woolf redirects attention from those objects of concern deemed worthy by institutional norms toward ignored aspects of life that resist instrumentalization into social values—attending to mundane or "quotidian experiences of unsocialized pleasure,"¹⁴⁰ as well as to socially marginalized individuals (Walkowitz 81). Walkowitz implies that Woolf's attention toward marginal characters is *not* meant as an ameliorative corrective toward increased political awareness of those classes, a claim that has startling implications: "Offering only glimpses of servants, immigrants, and others on the margins of upper-class life, Woolf emphasizes the social conditions of blindness rather more than she rectifies invisibility" (ibid). That is, Woolf performatively reenacts society's blindness

¹⁴⁰ This formulation recalls Jane Marcus's notion of Woolf's erotics of chastity, in which she develops Clarissa's celibate marriage as an empowering self-denial of sex, rejecting patriarchal expectation of wifhood to which she cannot relate, in favor of her unactualizable erotic imagination (Marcus 117).

in her own representational narrative strategies—and is arguably complicit in perpetuating social inequality. Providing only "glimpses," Woolf's passing attention suggests that, unlike Clarissa Dalloway, who occupies a respectable station in the upper-class, such figures are *socially* unworthy of protracted narrativization. To be clear, I don't intend this as a criticism. Rather, following Walkowitz's cues, we might say such subjects are *aesthetically* valuable for Woolf precisely because they lack socio-economic or political value. Woolf denies to herself the capacity of an omnipotent author to correctively bestow consummating meaning on a socially maligned individual, performing a purely symbolic political activism that would have no actual emancipatory effect. Instead, acutely grounded within a socio-historic reality, Woolf's modest narratorial modality perceives the other without the pretension to understand him or her. The narratorial gaze, rather than holding the sustained attention to fully enframe the other in consummated meaning, has all the fallibility and capriciousness of any modern subject—overwhelmed by sensory experiences, inattentive, easily distracted.

It would seem then that for Woolf the condition of disconnection is at once the pain of modern existence, and at the same time is a subversive *aesthetic* value of resistance. The trope of the window¹⁴¹ in the novel, through which Clarissa watches and wonders at her neighbor and extolls

¹⁴¹ Emily Dalgarno refers in passing to Clarissa's observation of the old woman going to bed during the party scene with respect to "the possibility that it offers of a mode of communication beyond dialogue" (Dalgarno 76). Dalgarno links Woolf's opaque reference to "Natasha at the window" in her reading notes to *War and Peace* to *Mrs. Dalloway*, writing, "The trope of the window and the possibility that it offers of a mode of communication beyond dialogue figures significantly in *Mrs. Dalloway*" (Dalgarno 76). She points to two pivotal places in Woolf's novel that involve windows: the scene in which Clarissa, having retreated from her party to the drawing room, watches an elderly woman in the neighboring house; and Septimus's fatal defenestration. Despite the anachronism of Woolf's note (dated 1928-1930) that would seem to rule out direct influence, the comparison is appropriate insofar as the trope of the window is an archetypal example of what Bakhtin calls "the chronotope of *threshold*," which he says is typically linked to moments of crisis or breaks in life (Bakhtin "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" 248). The significance of a break in life is rather obvious in Septimus's case, but the instantaneous temporality of the chronotope of the threshold provides the possibility for instantaneous connection and the reconciliation of difference. Along these lines Dalgarno's enticing suggestion that the window offers the possibility "of a mode of communication beyond dialogue," is worth considering, especially because Clarissa's observation of the old woman during her party immediately presages her feeling of connection with Septimus. It is not exactly clear what Dalgarno is referring to as the mode of communication; perhaps she means that the repetition of the window functioned as a *narrative* mode of communication, where like a match cut in film editing, the two scenes are conjoined to suggest thematic or characterological proximity. In the scene in *War and*

“the privacy of the soul,” and through which Peter detects “a sense of pleasure making hidden, but now and again emerging” of young people congregating in their homes, functions as a semi-permeable screen by which lives can be seen without being understood (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 113, 46).¹⁴² If a character’s—particular a minor character’s— aesthetic value depends on maintaining a certain distance from them, we return to the question posed about Woolf at the conclusion of the previous chapter: whether one can understand the other without knowing them. Now, it might seem rather misplaced to consider the aesthetic value of distance for Woolf, who is so prominently considered a major modernist author *because* of her incisive representation of consciousness.¹⁴³ The abyss that lies between characters is so acutely felt in light of the richness we are given of their respective individual experience. So, we might restate the issue thusly: What does it mean to communicate with strangers? In Conrad sympathy and the sympathetic imagination offered a sentimental resistance to political autocracy. As oppressive state power fractured social bonds, sympathy represented an unrealized potential means of reaching “Concord and Justice.” But where *Under Western Eyes* overtly staged the dissolution of social connection as a political conflict, the same oppressive forces in *Mrs Dalloway* are found systemically enmeshed in everyday life and suffuse the narrative itself.

Peace, Prince Andrei stands at a window overhearing the voices of Natasha and Sonya. Having wondered about what was in her mind, Andrei is suddenly privy to the exchange of their “feminine voices,” that he realizes make no mention of him—“She doesn’t care at all about my existence!” Prince Andrei thought all the while he was listening to her talk, for some reason expecting and fearing that she would say something about him” (Tolstoy *War and Peace* 422-21). Far from speaking to a “mode of communication beyond dialogue” the scenes parallel to *Mrs Dalloway* resonates most in the neighbor’s ignorance to Clarissa’s presence. It speaks to the “privacy of the soul,” as both Clarissa and Andrei are pointedly excluded from participation in the life of the subject of their voyeurism. Anne Eakin Moss reads Natasha and Sonia’s friendship in the scene as evoking an ideal utopian paradise that has a transformative effect on Andrei *because* he is removed from it, and can appreciate it as an idealized spectacle (Eakin Moss 61).

¹Rubenstein transcribes Woolf’s elliptical comments on Tolstoy’s novel—what amounts to five lines in total—from Notebook 13, May 1928-August 30; it concludes, “Natasha at the window. Chapter 2. Part VI” (Rubenstein 203).

¹⁴² In the same scene Peter passes couples absorbed in conversation, “as if in the presence of some sacred ceremony to interrupt would have been impious” (146).

¹⁴³ e.g. (Fletcher and Bradbury 408).

Before Mikhail Bakhtin developed the categories of monologism and dialogism in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, in his earlier writings he developed a theory of authorship, consummation (*zavershenie*) and active empathy (*vzhivanie*)—alternative translated as ‘live-entering’ or ‘living-into.’ Although Bakhtin abandons the concepts in his later work, perhaps due to their authoritarian implications, I will attempt to recuperate his theory in order to argue that against the patriarchal forces that structure ordinary experience, Woolf wages her own anti-authoritarian resistance by aestheticizing authority as authorship. Woolf reclaims as author the power to organize interpersonal communication in the narrative structure itself. I claim that the means of empathetic understanding in *Mrs. Dalloway* are relocated from a strictly characterological space (as when we ask whether Mikulin actually sympathizes with Razumov) to the narrative itself, whereby the novel becomes an instantiation writ large of Clarissa’s “transcendental theory.” If the failure of communication and the loss of community represent the departure point for *Mrs. Dalloway*, I argue in this chapter that *Mrs. Dalloway’s* aesthetic project consists in a quasi-dialectical critique of the problem of communication. Successively rehearsing and rejecting different communicative models, Woolf’s novel pursues the possibility of an ideal form of connection between individuals; it seeks, in Montaigne’s words, “a perfect and entire communication” (Woolf “Montaigne” qtd. in 65, my translation).

A perfect hostess; invitation to affinity

The double plot structure of *Mrs. Dalloway* pursues two mutually exclusive lines of communication. If Clarissa’s “transcendental theory” is guided by a principle of *affinity*, in the Septimus plot *acknowledgement* is operative. The two communicative models are fundamentally gendered; that is, the notion of affinity is essentially tied to femininity, whereas acknowledgment bears masculine characteristics. As we will see in the subsequent sections, each mode is constrained

by its gendered attributes, which consequently limit their efficacy in achieving “a perfect communication.” In order to overcome their respective alienated conditions Septimus and Peter both create fictional narratives as a means of imposing coherence and order on the external world. But despite Septimus’s mystical yearning to share transcendent truths— “Communication is health; communication is happiness. Communication he muttered,”¹⁴⁴ he depends upon Lucrezia to actualize communication (84). Similarly, Peter’s cynicism of British society, of women’s passions and his criticisms of Clarissa are checked by “their exquisite intimacy,” and their “queer power of communicating without words” (41, 54). Contrasted with the masculine capacity to actively produce meaning, Clarissa and Lady Bruton’s roles as hostesses facilitate connection between people, but “debarred by [their] sex” are limited in participation as active subjects in public patriarchal discourse (161). Clarissa’s party and the scene of her empathetic connection with Septimus figure as the confluence of these two threads, culminating in a synthesized concept of communication, by which Clarissa’s “transcendental theory” of connection is delimited by its essential fictiveness.

At Clarissa’s party at the end of the novel the two asymptotic threads of the novel, Septimus and Clarissa, are finally brought close enough together for a connection to be sought. Clarissa, having never encountered Septimus in the entire novel, knowing nothing about him, hears passing mention of his death—in fact even less so—she merely overhears that, “A young man...had killed himself” (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 164). The revelation so strongly affects her that she retreats into a private room to reflect on his suicide. Relating the young man’s death to her own life, she ascribes particular motivations to his actions: “Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death” (165). Clarissa’s identification with Septimus would seem to

¹⁴⁴ Septimus’s utterance here is taken from Woolf’s essay “Montaigne,” referenced above.

be an instantiation of her ‘transcendental theory.’ This sentiment of death as a communal embrace situates death as the solution to the problem of life’s finitude. However, earlier in the novel Clarissa conceives of death in a markedly different register:

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived. Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (8)

In this formulation death is co-present with life; the ebb and flow of life that Clarissa envisions is one structured by the thought of death; death occasions the idea of the others that survive after it. There is no embrace in death, but there is also no embrace in life without death. That life survives *without her* is a communion that she can never experience herself. Jean-Luc Nancy expresses much the same idea that death is constitutive of community when he writes, “Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others[...]The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion” (Nancy 15). In other words, Clarissa is able to conceptualize a community in the ebb and flow of life only on the condition of her absence from it.

We find this same formula at play in the conception of parties and gatherings in the novel. For Clarissa parties are her response to “this thing called life,”: “And she felt quite continuously a sense

of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?” (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 109). The work of assemblage or combination is visible in Lady Bruton’s luncheons as well: “they went further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread (since they had lunched with her) which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London” (101). The analogue to death here—that which conditions community in its exclusion—is the hostess.

The bell of St. Margaret’s, which spreads like Lady Bruton’s threads into the hearts of those that hear it, is described as “the voice of the hostess, [who] is reluctant to inflict its individuality” (45). It’s little wonder that Peter identifies the bell with Clarissa, who he had called “the perfect hostess.” At the party, as Peter watches Clarissa greet her guests we overhear her dialogue from his point of view: “‘How delightful to see you!’ said Clarissa. She said it to every one. How delightful to see you! She was at her worst—effusive, insincere. It was a great mistake to have come” (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 149). Taken on its own, Clarissa’s utterance scans as a blandly generic form of greeting, appropriate to her social position; indeed, given the context in which she says it, to each guest as they are announced it is difficult to discern any expressive aspect in the utterance at all. Yet in a sense, Clarissa is speaking not as herself, but performing the lines of the hostess. She thinks to herself later, “Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself...” (152). As with St. Margaret’s, reluctant to inflict individuality, or Lady Bruton gathering together Hugh and Richard, but deferring to them to pen her letter to the *Times*, the hostess renounces (or is preemptively barred from patriarchal convention) her potential position as a present participant in dialogue. Instead, the hostess is “a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to, perhaps...” (33). Thus, the hostess is relegated to be the presence

of loss, providing a kind of communication,¹⁴⁵ but only ever for others.

Motorcars and aeroplanes: participatory affinities?

Clarissa is dialogically compromised, cut off from participating, and reflexively casting doubt on the legitimacy of those that appear able to. Bound to her title as Mrs. Dalloway, her age, marital status and gender are discrete burdens that constrain the sphere of her activity: “She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (9-10). Her social membership is purchased at cost of her individuality. As Clarissa herself she is structurally isolated from fully communing with the social texture of the city. Indeed, when the narration abruptly abandons the putative protagonist of the novel, effectively flattening the hierarchy of narrative attention, the ensuing scenes in which the narrative’s attention is taken over by the progress of first a motorcar and then the appearance of an aeroplane suggest alternative constitutive principles of affinity that potentially solves the “problem” of exclusion. This new communicative model is one guided by contingent rupture.

Absorbed in the act of buying flowers, and on the threshold of some spiritual salvation, the abrupt sensory shock of an apparent gunshot, marked off by an em dash, rips the narrative away from Clarissa’s possession. In sequence we discover that the terrifying violence was misidentified; the so-called gunshot was in fact the blow-out of a car tire. Having disrupted Clarissa’s internal

¹⁴⁵ Although Fernald’s argues that the banality and triviality of the the party undermines its potential to function as a locus of communication, criticizing Habermas’s idealized notion of the public sphere (discussed above), she does concede that: “At its best, Clarissa’s hospitality is symbolized by the act of taking the doors off their hinges to make room for the expected guests; her party will, for a few hours, erase the borders between rooms, between public and private, between the subclasses of the London elite” (Fernald 103).

reflection, and marked off by a section break, the Prime Minister's motorcar acquires the focus of the narration.

Held up in traffic, the car is momentarily a static focus for simultaneous perception: Edgar J. Watkiss, Septimus Smith, Lucrezia, and Mrs. Dalloway (i.e. no longer Clarissa, but one of many) all look at the car. As it begins to move, however, proceeding toward Piccadilly, the narration tracks it, and the rumor that "greatness was passing" progressively infects characterological discourse with the feeling of patriotism.¹⁴⁶ The car thus orients the narrative along its path. Gillian Beer observes that, "the closed car suggests the private passage of loyalty, and becomes the peculiar centre for the comedy of social class...All these briefly named characters respond to 'some flag flying the British breast' and gaze devotedly on the inscrutable vehicle whose occupant is never revealed. the sharp description, as so often in Woolf's representation of the English classes and their rituals, inches its way toward hyperbole" (Beer 160). Clarissa, seeing the motorcar, links the idea of the Queen to the notion of society, "the gentlemen of England" that she will expect at her party and stiffens appropriately:

The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors' shops on both sides of Bond Street...Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fulness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailors' shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire...For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound. (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 16)

¹⁴⁶ The presence of the Prime Minister at Clarissa's party recalls the same organizing function as the motorcar—"this majesty passing; this symbol of what they all stood for, English society" (154).

Beer reads the profundity of the reaction as satiric, as it “mocks the self-esteem which expands from individual to nation, and which clusters upon an invisible and yet over-signifying personage inside the car” (Beer 160). While the sentimentality does seem derisively represented, we should take the “common emotional appeal” seriously as an affective—albeit problematic—catalyst of civic unity. The abstract and idealized values it elicits: the dead, the flag, Empire, recur later when Peter observes “Boys in uniform, carrying guns...on their faces an expression like the letters written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 46).

Crucially, the power of the motorcar to unite strangers in a “common emotional appeal” is initiated by *contingency*, the gunshot sound that drew attention to it. This phenomenon would seem to prime our expectations for the constitutive logic of this narrative mode: moments of chance function to uncover “profound truths,” in this case the common resonance of the aftermath of the Great War, and the continued importance of the British Empire.¹⁴⁷ Alternatively, one could expect such themes to be developed through dialogue or in the actions and conflict of a novel’s protagonists. But in breaking from Clarissa’s interiority Woolf de-individuates the narrative to enable the representation of a simultaneous common feeling unmoored from the hierarchy of emplotted narrative¹⁴⁸. That this disruption is initiated by the sensory shock of a presumed gunshot, and then identified with the modern technology of a motorcar suggests a link between the traumatic condition of modern experience and the availability of collective or common feeling. In lieu of dialogic communication, the mechanism of communion must be sought elsewhere. Here it would seem, it is only chance, which here takes the form of violent mechanical interruption, that can provide a

¹⁴⁷ Clarissa’s *overhearing* the Bradshaws discuss Septimus’s death at the party is yet another interruptive moment of contingency.

¹⁴⁸ cf. discussion of Woloch below.

vehicle—literally—to be the site of some affective communication among the individuals who experience it in the public sphere.

This is a rather elegant inversion of the traumatic associations of modern experience. The rupture initiated by the gunshot/motor car turns out not to destroy or shatter the integrity of the narrative, but instead become its constitutive logic. The sudden interruption is a rupture in the regulated objective time of minutes and hours and fills this temporal gap with the simultaneity of experience. Clock time, although social and public carries with it its own violence: “Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks...counseled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion” (92).¹⁴⁹ An event like the blowout breaks into and shatters the regular beat of time.

Mary Ann Gillies has argued that the temporality in Woolf’s literary aesthetics is heavily indebted to Henri Bergson (Gillies 108). To be sure, the Bergsonian concepts of *l’entendu* (clock time) and *durée* (pure duration) appear apposite for this interruptive temporality. In his philosophy of time, *durée* describes an individual’s constantly changing, heterogenous fluid inner experience of time: “...pure duration might well be nothing but a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity” (Bergson 116). This temporality is opposed to *l’entendu*, clock time, which is ordered, stable, homogenous external social experience of time. The latter, which is the abstraction of *durée* into discrete parts and subdivisions, is the necessary form of common social life. To access *durée* requires retreating from the homogenous medium of social time into the “deep-seated self” (135). In *Mrs. Dalloway* Gillies sees Woolf’s tunneling process as a way to recover *durée* in the present moment.

¹⁴⁹ For more on clock time and how the ringing of Big Ben and St. Margaret’s link the private and public see (Hagen 545-48) and (Banfield 142-46, 357 et passim).

She suggests that “an incident sparks off a memory of the past which, in turn, brings about a fresh understanding of the present” (Gillies 115).

Bergson’s notion of *durée* isn’t historicized, but its loss in modern experience echoes in Georg Simmel’s account of the “...the metropolitan type—which takes on a thousand individual modifications—creates a protective organ for itself against the profound disruption with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it. Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it” (Simmel 12). Thinking along similar lines, Ilya Klinger argues that the Bergsonian notions of *durée* and *mémoire*, along with Walter Benjamin’s concept of *jetztzeit*, provide a model of modernist temporality that emerges in resistance to oppressive temporal conditions of modern experience. Klinger situates Bergsonian temporality as a modern update of the Kantian *Schema*, where *durée* as unconscious memory, replaces Kant’s transcendental realm (Klinger *The Narrative Shape of Truth: Veridiction in Modern European Literature* 185). In moments of shock, i.e. “the experience of an event that, due to the lack of sufficient preparation on the part of consciousness, cannot be made sense of at the time it happens,” the event becomes a memory without being perceived (Klinger *The Narrative Shape of Truth: Veridiction in Modern European Literature* 184). *Durée* thus functions as a kind of metaphysical recuperative ideal, safeguarding the loss of reality amid the oppression of modern industrial spatialization. However, Klinger paraphrases Walter Benjamin’s persuasive critique of Bergson, that, “*durée* serves as a cheap metaphysical comfort for the loss of genuine experience in modernity and thus testifies to a still more profound estrangement from the collective history” (186).

Woolf’s idea of the aura left by the motorcar in the suspended moment of its passage as creating an opportunity for recuperative experience seems similarly susceptible to Benjamin’s criticism. However, a crucial aspect of the much-discussed aeroplane scene radically re-situates the

narrative logic once more.¹⁵⁰ When “the sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd,” it seems to be a structural repetition of the intervention of the motorcar (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 18). The sensory and associative echoes of violence between gunshot and warplane would seem to effect the same interruptive force in the progress of normal time to create an opportunity of communal participation in a suspended moment. Following Beer, the aeroplane, with its unlimited range and commercial accessibility would afford an even freer access for the public to be united by it. But curiously, unlike the motorcar, the latter interruption is *not* the ominous whine of the aeroplane: “Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky. The sound of an airplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Every one looked up” (18). “Suddenly,” according to Bakhtin, characterizes the chronotope of adventure-time. “Suddenly,” he says, interrupts “the normal, pragmatic, and premeditated course of events...and provides an opening for sheer chance, which has its own specific logic” (Bakhtin “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” 92). “Suddenly” initiates its own temporality, breaking in and marking the beginning of an event that was always already going to be there anyway. In *Petersburg*, Bely’s narrator describes the “inexorable suddenly” as the unwelcome feeling of anticipation, “it begins to precede you, producing in an observer the impression that you are screened from view by

¹⁵⁰ See e.g. (Beer 160), who reads the aeroplane as a democratizing rebuke to the overdetermined signification of the motorcar; Sherry proposes that Woolf proffers the rhythm and “material character of language” as a response to the collapse of logical—and ideological rationalist language in the Great War. The texture of language, which he identifies with “l’écriture féminine” can readily be seen in the aeroplane scene, which restages the historical conditions for the linguistic displacement. Sherry notes that “the airplane remains in the early 1920s as an emblem of the eventualities as shocking as the consequence this instrument wrought, in the new airborne campaigns on civilians in the Great War....The linkage between the recently ended war and the enterprise of skywriting was in fact well established already in 1922....the Air Ministry, which argued that skilled pilots could be kept thus in training, and at no cost to the state” (Sherry *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* 265); Saint-Amour insightfully seizes on the narrator’s perspective from within the cockpit, and provocatively expands the narrator’s airborne range to at once stitch together the narrative’s linkages, while also holding them under the potentially violent threat of uniformity: “the narrator’s command of particularities leads, chillingly, not to the fortification of discreteness but to its erosion. The sensitive apparatus through which Septimus and Clarissa are observed ends up fusing even the interior language of combatant and noncombatant, threatening to violate the very “privacy of the soul” on which the novel appears to insist” (Saint-Amour 112-18).

an invisible cloud” (Bely *Petersburg* 23-24). Thus in the aeroplane it is the ‘Suddenly,’ not the sensory shock of the plane, that initiates the narrative transition.

So why, then, is it not “Suddenly the sound of an airplane boomed ominously?” The irruptive suddenly is located with Mrs. Coates. “Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up.” Certainly, we can understand that Mrs. Coates probably looked up because she heard the sound of the aeroplane. But if we attend carefully to how the narrative discloses the sequence of events appears ever stranger. The narrator, interrupting, draws our attention to the sight of Mrs. Coates looking. Then we hear the plane, and only *then* do we see it. This is a complete inversion of the sensory shock of the gunshot. In the first instance, the sound attended by the arresting em-dash halts Clarissa mid-thought. Then as a matter of practical orientation, the narrator identifies the ‘actual’ cause of the sound. But with Mrs. Coates, we are already primed for the next moment, we are ready to read the smoke words before they appear.

If we entertain the possibility that the shared play of interpreting the aeroplane represents in the novel an achieved form of communal affect, the narratorial displacement of the “suddenly” from the plane itself onto Mrs. Coates’ attention radically alters *what* is occasioning this shared event. Bakhtin insists that the event in the adventure genre has “no essential ties with any particular details of individual countries, with their social or political structure, with their culture or history” (Bakhtin “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” 100). Rather, “the event is determined by chance alone[...]. The adventure chronotope is thus characterized by a *technical, abstract connection between space and time*” (ibid). He reasons that if, to the contrary, events were tied to particular social and local contexts, the possibility of adventure to effect would be limited by the rules of a given setting. In this case, we wonder whether the aeroplane has a special capacity, i.e. fulfills certain rules, that would enable it to initiate this moment of shared participation. While we can of course look to its various technological and historical significance that would make its appearance in the London sky

of 1923 notable for those who saw it, the linkage between the aeroplane's specific characteristics and the interruptive event as transformative seems rather dubious. Surely the claim here is not that the only means of recuperating public spaces in metropolitan modernity would be through the chance arrival of a highly specific event that, through various concatenations of social-historical characteristics (e.g. recalling in the collective memory the recent war, commanding public attention through its unique presence in that sky at that time), would collectively disrupt the ordinary progression of the day. Rather, the “suddenly” strips the aeroplane of privileged characteristics; rather it is the narrative itself that creates the fantasy of this communal affect. As such it stakes a claim to the power of the narrative. It, not the aeroplane, provides the form in which its characters could equally participate in a common space.

An immortal ode to Time; acknowledgment and mis-recognition

If the quasi-cooperative idle play of characters attempting to make out the aeroplane's letters figures as a possible counter-public sphere,¹⁵¹ the inoperative work of a community, Septimus Smith swiftly eviscerates its constitutive potential. In what may be the funniest exchange in the novel, responding to Lucrezia's exhortation for her husband to look at the aeroplane, “For Dr. Holmes had told her to make her husband[...]take an interest in things outside himself,” Septimus blithely observes: “So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signaling to me” (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 19). Effortlessly Septimus transforms the external world into an inner reality. The social and dialogical significance of the experienced content is utterly inconsequential, incoherent to Septimus. More

¹⁵¹ See fn. above on Beer's interpretation of the aeroplane,. Also, Jane Marcus: “...every Woolf text suggests that other oppressed voices of race and class, of difference and colonial subjectivity, are beginning to syllable themselves, like the Kreemo, Glaxo, Toffee or KEY spelled by the mysterious sky-writing airplane in *Mrs. Dalloway*...” (Marcus 11).

precisely, his perception of the “exquisite beauty” of a language he could not yet read works to negate the emerging democratizing capacity of the smoke words by claiming their significance for himself. He apprehends the experience in the very phenomenality of its address. And it is only in the latter terms that meaning exists in the world for Septimus.

That immediately after Septimus’s revelatory joy in the transcendent beauty of the letters, we find that the ‘content’ of the letters is nothing but a toffee advertisement, the force of Septimus’s translation is all the more grounded (or elevated, as it were). In something so trivial and so thoroughly exemplifying the banal mode of everyday human speech as advertising script, Septimus recasts the phenomenon to have a transcendent meaning, one appropriate to the scale of the technological magnitude of the letters’ deployment. When the nursemaid tells Rezia what the letters “really” mean, what Septimus experiences is the sensuality of the voice itself: “...and Septimus heard her say “Kay Arr close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshoppers, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A marvelous discovery indeed—that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life!” (20).

Moreover, it is only in this engagement with the natural world, or the sensual/phenomenal world rather, that Septimus discerns language occurring and life taking place. The aeroplane seems to open a conduit to this alternate reality for him: “He waited. He listened. A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words...from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death” (20). The meaning he receives from nature yields an insight into an unrecoverable past; the birds call to him in Greek, a language socially extinct, remaining vital only as a literary relic and artifact of human history. However, his hearing of the beauty of the world

comes at the expense of communication with others, most importantly with his wife.

Although isolated from the social world, Septimus apparently retains the patriarchal privilege of dictating the norms of discourse. Lucrezia's efforts to speak with him are cast as impertinent intrusions: "Interrupted again! She was always interrupting" (22)¹⁵². Unlike the irruptive paradigm-shifting events of the motorcar and aeroplane, a wife's interruption can go unheeded—or in Septimus's case, treated as yet more raw material to be processed in his ecstatic vision of reality: "'Look,' she implored him, for Dr. Holmes had told her to make him notice real things, go to a music hall, play cricket[...] 'Look,' she repeated. Look the unseen bade him, the voice which now communicated with him who was the greatest of mankind[...]" (23).

Their miscommunications highlight both the creative potency of Septimus to create private fictions in order to process trauma, and at the same time the problematic failure to acknowledge the other. The following exchange is illustrative:

"It is time," said Rezia.

The word 'time' split its husk¹⁵³; poured its richness over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable, words, and flew too attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time[...]

[...]

"The time, Septimus," Rezia repeated. "What is the time?"

¹⁵² In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf suggests that women's books need to be shorter and concentrated in order to contend with the inevitability of interruption in a woman's life (Woolf *A Room of One's Own* 57).

¹⁵³ Relevant here is Bely's metaphor of symbolic creation of living words as bursting forth from the dry husk of dead words, that I discussed in the Sologub chapter (Bely "The Magic of Words" 97).

[...]

'I will tell you the time,' said Septimus, very slowly, very drowsily, smiling mysteriously at the dead man in the grey suit. (63)

Folded into this wonderful translation of Lucrezia's desire for *l'entendu* into Septimus's idiosyncratic *durée*, we see that even Peter Walsh (the man in the grey suit) has been fictionalized into Evans' ghost.

And yet, as with Tekla and Razumov, Lucrezia and Septimus's relationship exemplifies a potential alternative ethics located in the space of the ordinary. Contra Clarissa's assertion that "there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf," (107), in its most ideal state *their* marriage demarcates a space of private intimacy: "Not for weeks had they laughed like this together, poking fun privately like married people. What [Lucrezia] meant was that if Mrs. Filmer had come in, or Mrs. Peters or anybody, they would not have understood what she and Septimus were laughing at" (128). Their ultimate reconciliation is achieved decisively in the realm of ordinary life, in a shared attention to the hat Lucrezia is trimming for Mrs. Peters: "It was wonderful. Never had he done anything which made him feel so proud. It was so real, it was so substantial, Mrs. Peter's hat" (129). Their final scene avers an idealized feeling of intimate unity ("They were perfectly happy now, she said suddenly, putting the hat down. For she could say anything to him now"), that is defiantly impervious to the encroachments of Dr. Bradshaw as the embodiment of the social system: "Bradshaw said they must be separated[...] Even if they took him, she said, she would go with them. They could not separate them against their wills, she said" (130-2); "It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him now). Even Septimus's writings, which to that point had epitomized the distance between his imagined reality and the social world, are acknowledged as having value for Rezia, "Some were very beautiful, she thought. She would tie them up (for she had

no envelope) with a piece of silk” (132). Pointedly, she consummates their beauty with her own *techné*, with a piece of silk, emphasizing their cooperative roles in achieving communication.

However momentous their reconciliation appears, its fragility and impermanence are even more insistently stressed. While Septimus is generally unaware of how he appears to the outside world, Lucrezia is acutely sensitive to the risk that their privacy be exposed to others:

“People must notice; people must see. People, she thought, looking at the crowd staring at the motor car; the English people, with their children and their horses and their clothes, which she admired in a way; but they were ‘people’ now, because Septimus had said, ‘I will kill myself; an awful thing to say. Suppose they had heard him?’” (14)

The ambiguous modality of “must notice,” “must see” wonderfully points to the double-bind of their situation. Within the public sphere, individuals are transformed into “people” with whom contact is a threat of exposure to judgment; in this sense “must notice” conveys her shame of being seen: “Suppose they had heard him?”; “failure one conceals” (ibid). But in the same moment, “she wanted to cry out to butchers’ boys and women. Help!” (ibid). In this intonation “must” becomes an obligatory demand for acknowledgment. Lucrezia desires communication with particular others, or at least with specific classes (butchers boys, women), but that dynamic cannot be isolated from the oppressive anonymity of “people.”

Peter Walsh’s repeated tragicomic mis-recognitions of the couple point to the inability for their intimacy to inculcate a counter-public sphere insulated from external interference. Passing the couple in Regent’s Parks at the height of their mutual despair, Peter essentially reconstructs them into a fictional narrative consistent with his own worldview “And that is being young[...]lovers squabbling under a tree; the domestic family life of the parks” (64). Even more pointedly, immediately following Septimus’s suicide, a tragic response and act of resistance to Dr. Holmes’ and

Bradshaw's—and implicitly to British society's—failure to care for or empathize with its war veterans and its vulnerable population, Peter's responds to the sight of the ambulance bearing the corpse taking it to be, “One of the triumphs of civilisation,” appreciating it as the symbol of the “communal spirit of London” (135). Janice Ho astonishingly reads Peter's reaction not as one might expect, as Woolf's ‘hidden polemic’ regarding the failure of acknowledgment of a stranger, but rather, she keys upon the ambulance's capacity to elicit Peter's “sympathetic identification” with unknown others, and suggests that the ambulance is “a literal and synecdochical representation of the social welfare state,” and how institutions of social welfare generate “abstract relations of social citizenship” that supplant intimate personal relations (Ho 74-81). It would probably be unfair to demand that Peter stifle an affective response, not to mention one which was conducive toward fostering a feeling of affinity with strangers, on the grounds that he was ignorant of the particularities of the victim's situation. At the same time, it is undeniably troublesome from the reader's perspective—who does enjoy the privilege of a detached ironic perspective—that Peter's sentimental universalizing of “some poor devil” is a negation of Septimus's repudiation of participation in precisely that social community. Ho reasons that Peter's identification with an unknown stranger through the “recognition that all persons experience a collective exposure to the risks of accidents” offers a model for shared connection in a common social body (77). But it is precisely this idealized “communal spirit of London” that is imposed by patriotic values, orienting and demanding legitimacy while eliding the existence of those that do not conform to its terms.

Fictional affinity?

When Clarissa interpolates Septimus's death at the party, these discrete modes of communication come to a head. The novel's dénouement challenges the reader to contend with its

central philosophical claim: in this moment Clarissa appears to understand and empathize with Septimus; though complete strangers to each other, Clarissa's affective relation to Septimus would align her transcendental theory with the structure of the novel as a whole. If death is an attempt to communicate, in gathering the disparate characters' threads together, the novel offers a divine perspective, a glimpse into the afterlife, affirming a spiritual community transcendent to lived individual existences.

However, readers of the novel have long debated whether Clarissa's response to Septimus's death does in fact mark a spiritual communion between the two characters, or if we ought to be more hesitant to endorse her feeling of connection, and instead approach it critically.¹⁵⁴ Clarissa concludes that, "She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living" (166). To lay the matter out simply, her declaration of identification presents the reader with three general ways of interpreting the claim: that either 1) Clarissa's feeling of communion is *true*, it affirms her 'transcendental theory,' that she has "odd affinities with people she has never spoken to," and that there is an "embrace in death"; or that 2) Clarissa's feelings about Septimus are *wrong*, that she does not or cannot understand him, and her feeling of communion with him should be read satirically. As a result, those "odd affinities" become nothing more than her egocentric projections, and Clarissa's idealistic worldview problematically appropriates another's alterity in order to give shape to her own narrative, flaunting the hard-won and all too easily lost intimacy of acknowledgement between Septimus and Rezia; or

¹⁵⁴ See e.g., J. Hillis Miller, whose deconstructive interpretation of the scene views Clarissa's recognition of Septimus in concert with the act of reading enacts a resurrection of the dead (Miller 97-100), or Makiko Minnow Pinkney's psychoanalytic reading of Clarissa as a bereaved mother embracing Septimus as her deceased son (Minnow-Pinkney 79). Gillian Beer and Janice Ho both argue that Clarissa's identification with Septimus reflects the novel's abstraction of kinship relations (Beer 55-56). Ho argues that the terms of social citizenship mediate the connections between strangers, such that filial relations are subordinated to remote affiliations. She observes that the welfare state, embodied in part by Dr. Bradshaw, enables and structures the connection between Clarissa and Septimus (Ho 59-82). Arguing against these endorsements of Clarissa's sympathetic response to Septimus's death, Trudi Tate reads Clarissa as a satiric subject of novel's indictment of the ruling-class's ethical failures in regarding the suffering of others (Tate 164-70).

3) that Clarissa's feelings about Septimus are *wrong* intersubjectively, but sufficiently *meaningful* for her. Clarissa might instrumentalize a stranger's suffering to give meaning to her own experience, and though unfaithful to Septimus is nonetheless productive for affirming her life. To modify Makiko Minow-Pinkney's formulation that, "What is crucial is not how Clarissa deciphers Septimus's suicide, but that she deciphers it, that a relation is established between the two figures," this third reading would conclude that what is crucial is not whether a reciprocal relation is established between them, but that Clarissa *feels* a relation to Septimus (Minow-Pinkney 79). In this light, the 'truth' of Clarissa's insight about Septimus is 'true' insofar as it is Clarissa's—it would be true for her.

If Clarissa's transcendental theory of communication were taken to be co-extensive with the aesthetic claims of the novel as a whole, the consequences for the viability of interpersonal, characterological communication become rather dire. If communication, the means of effecting communality between disparate selves, is only possible in death—for which the authorial consciousness of the novel would metaphorically stand as a transcendent authority to affirm—access to that communicability would be structurally withheld from individual speaking subjects in all cases. The ethics of such a worldview would abrogate individual responsibility or answerability to each other. It appears then that grasping Woolf's aesthetic project hangs on how we read the novel's penultimate scene. To reject Clarissa's identification with Septimus would radically alter the supposed final unity of their character arcs (not to mention the unity the novel's aesthetic structure), and thereby re-situate the novel's critique of communication in a more ambiguous light.

That we expect the novel's constitutive formal features or narrational strategies to correspond to any determinate position about interpersonal communicative relations should not be taken for granted. Adopting a curious quasi-formalist approach, Molly Hite's recent study argues that "tonal cues"—various narratorial techniques that instruct a reader how to evaluate a given passage, scene, or character—are either withheld from Woolf's novels or indicate contradictory attitudes, leaving the

reader uncertain how to determine the values of the fictional world, and leading to multiple irreconcilable interpretations of the text (Hite).¹⁵⁵ Similarly concerned with a distinction between aesthetic value and social political value, Rebecca Walkowitz provides a compelling account of narratorial ambiguity in Woolf. Walkowitz argues that Woolf, in her critique of euphemistic or generalized language, which normalize and evade confrontation with problematic social realities, at the same time deploys those same stylistic strategies, recognizing how they can also enable productive alternative values (Walkowitz 81-105). Woolf interrogates the problem of narrative form as co-extensive with her aim “to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense” (Woolf *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 248). In “The Russian Point of View,” an essay published in 1925, the same year as *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf observes:

Society is sorted out into lower, middle, and upper classes, each with its own traditions, its own manners, and, to some extent, its own language. Whether he wishes it or not, there is a constant pressure upon an English novelist to recognise these barriers, and, in consequence, order is imposed on him and some kind of form; he is inclined to satire rather than to compassion, to scrutiny of society rather than understanding of individuals themselves. (Woolf “The Russian Point of View” 180)

No doubt including herself among those English novelists, she finds in the Russians a thrillingly alien alternative. In Dostoevsky, she says, “the soul is not restrained by barriers. It overflows, it floods, it mingles with the souls of others” (ibid).¹⁵⁶ The soul, which she deems “the chief

¹⁵⁵ The idea of tonal cues is essentially a simplification for signifying authorial discourse in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. And indeed, Hite aligns Woolf’s project with Bakhtin’s concept of the polyphonic novel (58). The relationship of Woolf’s aesthetic project to Bakhtinian polyphony is an overarching question in this chapter, one that Hite resolves rather reductively. She relies on an excessive conception of authorial narration to which she opposes Woolf, seeming to demand clear detachment between characterological and narratorial discourses as proof of authorial values.

¹⁵⁶ Dostoevsky was on Woolf’s mind as she wrote about *The Hours*. In the same June 19, 1923 entry, quoted above,

character in Russian fiction,” serves as a currency of equal exchange among individuals. The “common suffering” of the Russians “produces the sense of brotherhood” that transcends social differences (175). If the stratification of English society constrains the narrative form of the English novel, Woolf imagines the Russian novel to be liberated from those divisions and as such, potentially represents an alternative form of social relations. Whether the Russian “sympathy for the suffering of others” could be translated into an English model for communicative relations in *Mrs. Dalloway* remains to be seen, but the influence of Russian literature on Woolf provides essential insight into what could counterpose the ‘social system’ (Woolf “Modern Fiction” 153).

A Russian Point of View of *Mrs. Dalloway*: Monologic and Polyphonic Dalloways

Where Joseph Conrad’s experience under the thumb of the Russian Empire motivated his antipathy for Russian literature, Virginia Woolf, like many British writers at the beginning of the twentieth century, had a profound admiration and enthusiasm for Russian culture.¹⁵⁷ Woolf read widely and wrote on Russian literature in translation, attended Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*, and even fitfully attempted to study the Russian language in order to assist in the translation and publication of several works for the Hogarth Press.¹⁵⁸ She famously testifies to the esteem in which she holds Russian literature in her essay “Modern Fiction” where she remarks that, “The most elementary

she writes, “One must write from deep feeling, said Dostoevsky. And do I? Or do I fabricate with words, loving them as I do? No I think not” (Woolf *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 248). Around the same time that she was writing the short stories that became the basis for *The Hours*, Woolf collaborated with Samuel Koteliensky on a translation of a chapter from Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, published in 1922 as “Stavrogin’s Confession.” Yelena Furman finds intertextual resonance between Septimus and Nikolai Stavrogin (Furman 1088-95).

¹⁵⁷ For a survey of Russian culture’s wide-ranging impact in Britain see (Beasley and Bullock).

¹⁵⁸ To say nothing of her proximity to Roger Fry’s Russian-centric *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, or her political sympathies visible in her affiliation with The Society for Cultural Relations between the British Commonwealth and the USSR. The extent of Russian literature’s influence on Woolf can be seen in (Rubenstein), (Reinhold), and (Protopopova).

remarks upon modern English fiction can hardly avoid some mention of the Russian influence, and if the Russians are mentioned one runs the risk of feeling that to write any fiction save this is a waste of time” (Woolf "Modern Fiction" 153). Admittedly, the qualities that she extols in Russian literature are often colored by broad cultural stereotypes, e.g. “it is the soul that is the chief character in Russian fiction,” that “it is common suffering, rather than common happiness, effort, or desire that produces the sense of [Russian] brotherhood” (Woolf "The Russian Point of View" 178, 75);¹⁵⁹ or that, “The conclusions of the Russian mind, thus comprehensive and compassionate are inevitably perhaps of the utmost sadness. More accurately indeed we might speak of the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind”¹⁶⁰ (Woolf "Modern Fiction" 153). Though a marked departure from Conrad’s animosity toward the Russians, Woolf is hardly alone in finding in Russian literature an idealized model of sincerity and human compassion. Beasley and Bullock note that the “deliberately uncritical, even anti-critical, approach to Russian culture—literature in particular—is a component in the generalization typical of British enthusiasm about Russian culture” (Beasley and Bullock 5). To some extent, Woolf seems aware of the generalizations she and English readers have of the Russians, as she acknowledges that a literature received wholly in translation is bereft of style and nuance, yielding only the coarsest version of its essence; she thus regards translated Russians as if “they had lost their clothes[...in some terrible catastrophe” (Woolf "The Russian Point of View" 174). While Woolf does tend to use generalizations of Russian literature as broad counterpoints to the deficiencies she observes in contemporary British letters, the individual attention she gives to Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov in particular are acutely felt, and noticeably influential on her formation as a novelist

¹⁵⁹ See also in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”: “The Russian would piece through the flesh; would reveal the soul—the soul alone” (Woolf *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* 10).

¹⁶⁰ Regarding the inconclusiveness of the Russian mind, Woolf satirically ascribes such an attribute to the Russian Princess Sasha in *Orlando*: “But Sasha who after all had no English blood in her but was firm Russia where the sunsets are longer, the dawns less sudden, and sentences often left unfinished from doubt as to how best to end them” (Woolf *Orlando: A Biography* 42).

and critic.¹⁶¹ Scholars have argued that the formal structure of her 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway* was principally informed by and a response to the double-plot of *Anna Karenina*.¹⁶² As with Anna and Levin in Tolstoy's masterpiece, the parallel plots of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith challenge the reader to understand how the two are related to each other, and in doing so thereby discern the formal logic of the novel, the unity of its construction. Following Robert Belknap, Emily Dalgarno argues that Tolstoy's narrative structure is a forerunner of modernist narrative in that the double plot "averts moralizing by assigning the power of judgment not to the narrator but implicitly to the reader" (Dalgarno 76). Dalgarno suggests that Woolf, in adopting the double-plot structure, "problematizes the aftermath of World War I in the civilian population" by juxtaposes Clarissa's domestic drama with Septimus's narrative of shell shock (ibid). The meaning of the novel and its ethics are contained not in the resolution of a singular plot but in the reader's ability to grasp the connection between the two.

For Roberta Rubenstein, the double-plot of *Mrs. Dalloway* bears the imprint of Dostoevsky rather than Tolstoy. She cites the characterological doubling of Golyadkin in *The Double*, of Raskolnikov and Porfiry in *Crime Punishment*, Myshkin and Rogozhin in the *The Idiot*, etc. as prefiguring the relationship between Septimus and Clarissa. She takes up Bakhtin's concept of dialogism that develops in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, where he accounts for the frequency of doubles in Dostoevsky by arguing "that out of every contradiction within a single person Dostoevsky tries to create two persons, in order to dramatize the contradiction and develop it

¹⁶¹ Woolf had limited exposure to the Russian Symbolists, however she did offer a lukewarm appraisal of Valery Bryusov's *The Republic of the the Southern Cross and Other Stories* in a review for the Times Literary Supplement in 1918. Bryusov, who was effectively the institutional leader of Russian symbolism, served as the editor of the Symbolist journals *Vesy* and *Skorpion*; in the latter first published Bely's *Petersburg*. In her review, Woolf considers a central tenet of Bryusov's symbolism, "that there is no fixed boundary between the world of reality and that of the imagination" (Woolf "Valery Brusoff" qtd. in 317). She generously understands it as serious intellectual position rather than as "emotional mysticism," and although unimpressed by its artistic merit, appears to admire a vision of reality that seriously questions the distinction between the rational and irrational. "Who is to decide," she asks, "after all, which things are real, which are unreal, what constitutes sanity and insanity" (319).

¹⁶² See: (Dalgarno) and (Knapp).

extensively” (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 28). Rubenstein thus implies that Septimus and Clarissa function thematically and structurally as the split contradiction of a single subjectivity (Rubenstein 41-43).¹⁶³ She notes that in the introduction to the second American edition of the novel, Woolf writes that, “...in the first version [of the novel] Septimus, who later is intended to be her double, had no existence; and that Mrs. Dalloway was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party...” (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 357). This idea that Septimus and Clarissa are doubles has traces in Woolf’s early notes on the text: on October 14, 1922, she writes in her diary “Mrs. Dalloway has branched into a book; & I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side—something like that. Septimus Smith?—is that a good name?” (Woolf *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 207). Two days later, she refines their relation as two sides of the same coin of “truth”: “Suppose it to be connected in this way: Sanity and insanity. Mrs. D. seeing the truth. S.S. seeing the insane truth” (Woolf *Virginia Woolf's "the Hours": The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway* 412 B153). Rubenstein enumerates the shared features of the two characters, and ultimately argues that “through the death of her double, [Clarissa] completes an inner dialogue with her deeper self and affirms the value of her own life” (45). What is significant in her interpretation, though, is that the novel’s thematic and structural idea inheres in “character” rather than in Tolstoyan emplotment.

That these scholars discern traces of the twin giants of the 19th century Russian novelistic tradition in *Mrs. Dalloway* is well founded. Woolf is at the height of her interest in Russian literature in the period leading up to the *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the “The Russian Point of View” is published in the same year as the novel. It is ironic, though, to say the least, that these interpretations link the same thematic issue, the question of the doubled relation between Septimus and Clarissa (either in

¹⁶³ Cf. the figure of the *homo duplex* in Conrad discussed in the previous chapter.

character or plot), to the influence of two writers who have traditionally been seen as diametrically opposed in matters of narrative form and character. Mikhail Bakhtin, of course, describes the difference as that between monologic and polyphonic novels. Tolstoy's world, he writes, "is monolithically monologic" (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 52). For Bakhtin, the characters of Tolstoy's novels exist in a unified world, the "objective authorial world" from which the unity and meaning of the novel is seen from the "fixed external position, a fixed authorial field of vision," (ibid). By contrast, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel "is constructed not as the whole of single [authorial] consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (18). From this synoptic distinction between the two novelistic forms, it still is not immediately apparent to which *Mrs. Dalloway* has the greater affinity. Dalgarno and Knapp's readings of the unity of the novel as a coordination of the double plot structure appears consistent with the Tolstoyan monologic paradigm. If, on the other hand, we regard the multiplicity of consciousnesses that inhabit the novel as progressively generating its form through their dialogic interaction and articulation of their respective voices, then Rubenstein's polyphonic Dostoevskian framework would seem more apt.

That said, Dalgarno and Knapp are careful to note that in her reading notes on *Anna Karenina*, Woolf actually criticized Tolstoy's double-plot structure: "What seems to me is that the construction is a good deal hindered by the double story. It offends me that the book ends without any allusion to Anna. She's allowed to drop out; never comes into Levin or Kitty's mind again" (Woolf "Reading Notes on *Anna Karenina* (J)" 201). Knapp persuasively argues that by having Clarissa reflect upon Septimus's death at the party, Woolf avoids the structural pitfalls she had perceived in Tolstoy, refusing to let Septimus "drop out." Acknowledging that Clarissa and Septimus never directly interact throughout the novel, Knapp finds the basis for an "emotional unity" for the

double-plot structure in Woolf's much discussed "tunneling process, by which [Woolf] tell[s] the past by installments" (Woolf *A Writer's Diary* 60). Through this tunneling process, Woolf describes "how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humor, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment" (59). Knapp suggests that the tunnels "seem to provide a means of drawing [Septimus and Clarissa] together in the dimension of Clarissa's consciousness for long enough for Woolf to formulate the question that hovers over both this novel and *Anna Karenina*: What does the suffering of others have to do with me?" (Knapp 213). Knapp situates the problem of the suffering of others within the structure of the novel itself. Precisely because Septimus and Clarissa never meet, Knapp argues, the tunneling process leads the reader to recognize "the interrelatedness of human lives at stake in [Woolf's] double story" (220). Following Paul Ricoeur, Knapp argues that the communication between Septimus and Clarissa "depend on hidden, labyrinthine structures beneath the surface of the plot" (212-13). She maintains that this communicative structure enables Woolf to pose the question: "What does the suffering of others have to do with me?" (ibid). However, by suggesting that characters' interrelatedness is essentially found within or beneath the narrative structure itself (and therefore removed from characterological consciousness or discourse), Knapp's reading inadvertently reveals the inability for the monologic narrative to address precisely that question.

Given the assertion that Clarissa's reflection on Septimus denotes the "emotional unity" of the novel's double plot structure, it remains unclear how the interrelation of Septimus and Clarissa is anything other than asymmetrically unidirectional. Because the form of the "connection" between the two characters occurs entirely within Clarissa's interior consciousness, the suffering of Septimus becomes the suffering of the most abstract other, the other incapable of response or ethical reciprocation. As a result, Clarissa's reflections are somehow bereft of consequence. Caught between

ascribing to a universal categorical imperative that would make no requirements on Septimus's reciprocation or to an individual ethical answerability that regards a particular event in confrontation with an other,¹⁶⁴ the labyrinthine monologic unity chooses neither. By this logic, "[w]hether her response amounts to empathy or whether it merely 'appropriates' and 'romanticizes' his death" remain undeterminable for Knapp, open to critical debate; its open-ended meaning is simply "in accordance with the laws of modernist double-plot" (215). I would instead suggest that the ambiguity of Clarissa's relation to Septimus is less endemic to modernist open-endedness than to the monologic conception of the novel that situates interrelatedness beyond the domain of intersubjective accountability.

To be sure, Woolf's notes on the composition of the novel hardly indicate indeterminate openness at its conclusion. She writes that "the pace is to be given by the gradual increase of S's insanity, on the one side; by the approach of the party on the other," where eventually, "All must bear finally upon the party at the end; which expresses life, in every variety & full of conviction: while S. dies" (Woolf *Virginia Woolf's "the Hours": The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway* 412/B153, 415). Although the formulation of Woolf's note does extend the possibility of an open-ended ambiguity in the stark juxtaposition of life's manifold triumph with an almost comically understated "while S. dies," the novel seems to synthesize the life/death opposition into a decisively unified revelation. Clarissa's reflections are intent on resolving the unwelcome presence of death (e.g., "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought") into her affirmation of life rather than let it spoil the party: "She felt glad that he had done it: thrown it away while they on living...But she must go back. She must assemble" (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 164, 67). Accordingly, Clarissa's apparently successful suspension of her fear of death here would actually

¹⁶⁴ As in Bakhtin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, reviewed in the Bely chapter.

appear to sanction Septimus's premature disappearance from the novel à la Anna in *Anna Karenina*, rather than be preserved in Clarissa's consciousness.

While Woolf views Anna's "dropping out" of *Anna Karenina's* double plot structure as contributing to a problematic "diversion of power," Ilya Klinger's reading of Tolstoy's "irreconcilably dualistic" narrative offers a useful conceptual apparatus for examining the Clarissa-Septimus double plot (Klinger *The Narrative Shape of Truth: Veridiction in Modern European Literature* 150-67). In Klinger's reading, Anna and Levin's plots have competing narratological and thus *veridictory* shapes: Anna's is *sjuzhet*-oriented, the narrative of emplotment; Levin's is fabulaic, the narrative of disemplotment. The truth of the narrative of emplotment is the truth of the whole, the Hegelian Absolute, as Anna's death completes the tragic totality of her life, orienting the events of the narrative around it. Levin's narrative of disemplotment or decomposition is by contrast governed by a principle of negation in which the meaning of his life and his narrative is continually frustrated and remade. As the narrative of emplotment is the veridictory narrative of the eighteenth century, Klinger argues that the falling out of Anna's plot, and the narratorial refusal for Vronsky, by example, to utilize her death in his analogous chivalric discourse is a reflection of "a tireless critique of veridiction by emplotment, a dismantling of the alliance between truth and time[...]The narrator is no longer—as he is in the eighteenth century—the guarantee of significance for the episodic narrative[...]Rather, he is the agent of disemplotment" (164). In short, Klinger argues that Tolstoy's narrator endorses the veridictory narrative Levin represents over and against the emplotted truth of the whole. By way of comparison, as we have seen, the form of interpersonal communication articulated in the Septimus and Rezia plot ends with Septimus's death. Though Septimus does not disappear from the narrative to the extent that Anna does, the transformation of his character into a flatly functional reference point for Clarissa could be seen as a narratorial rejection of the ethical claims at play in the Septimus plot. In withholding Septimus's voice, the narrator directs the authority of the narrative discourse to

Clarissa's final revelations.

Viewing Septimus's death as a relatively unproblematic disappearance from the narrative that is in the service of actualizing Clarissa's affirmation of life resonates with Alex Woloch's ingenious account of the "functionalization of minor characters" and their subordination to a narrative's "character-system" in the nineteenth-century novel.¹⁶⁵ Following Woloch's cues, we could read Septimus not as one of the two heroes of a double plot, but as a minor character, whose death is a necessary allocation of the resources of the character-system toward Clarissa's centrality to the narrative's discourse. Woloch introduces "two pervasive extremes of minorness within the nineteenth-century novel: the *worker* and the *eccentric*, the flat character who is reduced to a single functional use within the narrative and the fragmentary character who plays a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot" (Woloch 25). Taking up these terms, we could understand Septimus at first as the *eccentric*, whose attitudes and beliefs are blatantly counterposed to the represented social realities of the narrative, and as a consequence, is marginalized and rejected by them, and ultimately cannot exist within that system. After his death, however, he becomes a flatly functional character in Clarissa's reflection, further deprived of any characterological specificity—the shell-shocked World War I veteran Septimus Warren Smith is reduced to simply "the young man who had killed himself."¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the whole panoply of Septimus's lived experience, Shakespeare and Greek, and the complex network of his relationships with Rezia and Dr. Bradshaw are effectively erased from the perspective of his narrative function as a suicide. The upshot is that within his delimited function in the narrative discourse and viewed from the perspective of the unified discourse of the work as a

¹⁶⁵ Woloch's formulation of the characterological categories of *character-space* and *character-system* are a productive and sympathetic reconception of monologic aesthetics: "*character-space* (that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole) and the character-system (the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure)" (Woloch 14).

¹⁶⁶ It should be noted that Lady Bradshaw does in fact provide Septimus's status as a veteran as the one attendant detail of his suicide: "A young man...had killed himself. He had been in the army"

whole, Septimus-qua-minor character is not necessarily owed the ethical acknowledgment of an actual human being. The nature of minor characters fall into what Woloch calls “an asymmetric structure of characterization—in which many are represented but attention flows toward a delimited center” (30-31). *Mrs. Dalloway* describes two centers: Clarissa conceives of herself as a “meeting-point,” for others—she “drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to, perhaps” (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 33).¹⁶⁷ This is the center that as a hostess she can “assemble.” On the other hand, there is the unattained center, which Clarissa herself lacked “something central which permeated” (28). Clarissa reflects that the same deficiency led Septimus to suicide, “Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically evaded them” (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 165). As Septimus’s death provokes Clarissa’s affirmation of life, the two “centers” converge on the delimited center of the novel’s discourse. Accordingly, from such a resolute monologic perspective, the so-called “functionalization” of Septimus as a minor character would obviate the concern that Clarissa problematically ‘instrumentalizes’ or ‘appropriates’ Septimus as a discrete subject. A reading that locates interrelations in narrative discourse rather than in characterological discourse arguably annuls the ethical concerns at the core of this study. What remains is not a communion of individuals but a distribution of functions in an aesthetic system.

Active Empathy and Consummation

¹⁶⁷ cf. also: “...and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering to combine, to create; but to whom” (109)

Writing like an ordinary language philosopher *avant la lettre*, Bakhtin distinguishes between utterances oriented toward their referential object, as in the case of propositional or descriptive statements, and “double-voiced discourse,” which contains dialogic relationships that are extralinguistic, and as such not reducible to logical or referential evaluations. This “double-voiced discourse,” is discourse that “is directed both toward the referential object of speech[...]and toward *another’s discourse*, toward *someone else’s speech*” (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 185). Discourse essentially implies the existence of independent subjects whose experiences, attitudes, and perceptions are not identical; to speak is not the matter of neutrally describing some state of affairs, but rather is an effort to position oneself against and in response to the speech of others. Reciprocally, self-consciousness is made visible in a dialogic relationship with the world and with other people. For instance, Clarissa’s internal monologue at her party functions as double-voiced discourse,¹⁶⁸ wherein the imposition of Peter’s implied dialogic presence shapes her internal speech:

Oh dear it was going to be a failure; a complete failure, Clarissa felt it in her bones as dear old Lord Lexham stood there apologising for his wife who had caught cold at the Buckingham Palace garden party. She could see Peter out of the tail of her eye, criticising her, there, in the corner. Why, after all, did she do these things? Why seek pinnacles and stand drenched in fire? ... It was extraordinary how Peter put her into these states just by coming and standing in a corner. *He made her see herself; exaggerate*. It was idiotic. But why did he come, then, merely to criticise? Why always take, never give? *Why not risk*

¹⁶⁸ Dorrit Cohn cites Bakhtin’s double-voiced discourse when discussing interior monologue. Arguing that the communicability of monologue depends on its formal proximity to “communicative language,” she observes how instances of “self-addressed chiding, judgment, or interrogation would seem to confirm Freud’s notion that the voice of conscience (the superego) is constituted through the internalization of the parental voice, or the voice of other authority figures (Cohn 89-91).

one's one little point of view? (150, emphasis added)

The form of Clarissa's angst is immediately legible to the reader because of Peter's preceding criticism. Lord Lexham's empty chatter has nothing to do with Clarissa's concerns. Such small talk is the stuff of parties, of course. Rather, Peter's presence induces her to assume an external perspective of herself, "he made her see herself," and in doing so, she is made aware of the artificiality and performativity of her role in facilitating the party. This perspective is conditioned by what Bakhtin, in his early, pre-dialogic work "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity"—written between 1922 and 1924—regards as the "ever-present *excess* of my seeing, knowing, and possessing in relation to any other human being [that] is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world" (Bakhtin "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" 23). Because an individual's experiences and perceptions are restricted to the particular temporal-spatial circumstances of their existence, Bakhtin argues that we each occupy a position of "outsideness" (*vnenakhodimost'*) relative to others, a standpoint that affords the privilege of seeing what the other cannot (*ibid*). The availability of this position is possible, he argues, due to the fact that I can see you in a way you cannot see yourself; I can look into your eyes, I can see what stands beside and behind you, I can see your position in the world.

Discussing the contemplation of a person suffering, he writes: "[The sufferer] does not see the agonizing tension of his own muscles, does not see the entire plastically consummated posture of his own body, or the expression of suffering on his own face. He does not see the clear blue sky against the background of which his suffering outward image is delineated for me" (25). This is the basis of Bakhtin's theory of empathetic relations, to which we will now turn. Peter's criticism is hardly empathetic, to be sure, and points to how easily the other may abuse their excess of vision. His gaze structures Clarissa's introspection, as if *he* were demanding her to account for why she "did those

things.”

It may already be clear how a reciprocal dependency of *seeing* subjects anticipates the interconnected discursive field of *speaking* subjects in dialogic relations. For the early Bakhtin the other’s excess of vision is the key to one his central concepts: *zavershenie*, consummation or finalization—the aesthetic completion of the other by an external consciousness. For Bakhtin, the relationship between the subject and the other shares the same modality as the author and hero; we act as a kind of author of the other, whereby through empathetically relating via our excess of vision we strive to construct a unified whole out of the discrete parts of their existence.

The hero/other cannot discern their own unity; they cannot organize the sum meaning of their existence from within their lived experience. Again deploying a visual metaphor, Bakhtin illustrates that because each individual occupies a unique and unexchangeable position in being, the sense and order in which I organize my experiences proceeds from my inner consciousness outward in space and time; as such, I am on the boundary of the world, but not part of it.¹⁶⁹ There is no perspective from which I can stand and see myself in space and the whole of my life in time. However, from our position on the boundary, we see that the other “is wholly *in* this world; he is the hero of this world; and his life is accomplished totally *in* this world[...]With respect to its total givenness, the world gains positive validity for me only as the surrounding world or *environment* of another” (133-134). The other becomes my axiological reference in organizing the world; from the position of outsideness, the author/subject uses their excess of seeing to consummate the hero, to create an image of completed subjectivity that the hero cannot generate for themselves. This process is enacted through *vzhivanie*—active empathy, literally “living into” the other.

¹⁶⁹ This formulation is strikingly evocative of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*: “The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world”; “Where *in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be found? You will say that this is exactly the case of the eye and the visual field. But really you do *not* see the eye. And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that is seen by an eye” (Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.632-5.33).

Bakhtin describes this empathic contemplative action as a multi-stage procedure in which I must 1) abandon my excessive perspective and project myself into the other: “I must put myself in *his* place and coincide with him, as it were” (Bakhtin "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" 25); 2) “*return* to my own place outside the suffering person, for only from this place can the material derived from my projecting myself into the other be rendered meaningful ethically, cognitively, or aesthetically” (26); 3) from my position as other I can use my excess of seeing to consummate the suffering with “features *transgredient* to the entire object-world of the other’s suffering” (ibid). In the end, consummation concerns the capacity for me—and indeed my obligation—to bestow valuational meaning onto the other that they cannot see themselves, to give unifying form to the fragmentary content of lived experience. What is therefore crucially absent in the encounter between Clarissa and Peter above is Peter’s refusal to “risk one’s little point of view.” Without renouncing his position and communing with Clarissa, the consummating act of his gaze produces a negational evaluation rather than a positive affirmation. By ‘merely criticising’ instead of projecting himself into her position, the image he induces for Clarissa is “exaggerated,” uncharitable, but more pointedly, it *his* image of her. Peter’s critical position is consistent with what I’ve called the masculine narrativization of Peter and Septimus. In Peter’s mouth the meaning of Clarissa being a “perfect hostess” is delimited by his dismissiveness of the banality of parties. Nowhere does it imply an awareness of the coordinating role of the hostess or consider the tragic exclusion that the hostess experiences from the event she engineers. A positive consummation of the other is therefore impossible without momentarily abandoning one’s outsideness and sympathetically co-experiencing (*simpaticeskoe soperezhivanie*) with her.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ For co-experiencing see (Bakhtin "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" 61-92)

Clarissa as Consummating Author

This logic of empathetic understanding is a central component of Bakhtin's conception of the architectonics of human relations. He defines architectonics as "the intuitively necessary nonfortuitous disposition and integration of concrete, unique parts and moments into a consummated whole," which, crucially, "can exist only around a given human being as a hero" (209). By situating architectonics within the complex of the lived life of a person, the production of meaning cannot proceed from a given logical schema, but rather structurally requires the active participation of individuals in each other's lives. For a human to be made into a hero, individuals must act as each other's author, empathizing and then creatively ordering their acts (utterances, appearances, emotions) into a unitary whole.

That a consummated whole of meaning follows from the other's active participation offers a compelling proposal to overcoming the challenge of the atomistic condition of modernity. In that sense, Clarissa's reaction to Septimus, that, "she felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living," could perhaps describe a productive consummatory understanding (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 166-67). Her visceral projective imagination of his plunge from the window, and resultant "feeling like him" could be read as a kind of co-experiencing; and the affirmation of his suicide "while they went on living" indicates the return to her unique place of outsidership from which she can bestow aesthetic value onto him. Indeed, this kind of resolution would affirm the monologizing authority of Clarissa and align the consummation of Septimus's death in Clarissa's understanding with the architectonic whole of the novel. By extension, modernism's aesthetics of autonomy becomes a model for interpersonal relations. Because the author-hero relation is isomorphically related to interpersonal creative understanding, the ideal of an architectonic whole is not reserved for the art-object, but provides a

form for meaning in general. If Clarissa's relation to Septimus is itself an act of consummation, Clarissa functions essentially as an author, creating a unitary image of the world through the aesthetic reevaluation of Septimus's death. Accordingly, Clarissa's compulsion "to combine, to create," ("She must assemble") as a hostess of a party reflects the obligation of the author to unite the discrete parts of the hero's world in an artistically justified whole (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 109, 67).¹⁷¹

However, there are two glaring issues in this account that challenge an empathetic conclusion of the novel. First is the question of whether Clarissa truly co-experiences with Septimus. As I have described, Bakhtin's procedure of *vzhivanie* is conceived as a concrete encounter with the other. He emphasizes the expressive features of the body as providing the directive for projecting into the other. An individual's exterior is *for the other*; it is a component of one's excess of vision. As such, it remains rather dubious to accept that Clarissa has really "seen" Septimus. By this I do not mean to overemphasize the requirements of sensory experience of the other¹⁷²; rather, I wish to indicate the degree of abstraction with which Clarissa is brought into contact with him. To be clear, the issue here is one of proximity; *vzhivanie* is a communicative principle not constituted by dialogic exchange, and indeed there are other instances in the novel that find Clarissa achieving relations of understanding with intimate partners counterposed to their inability to speak to each other: remembering his quarrel with Clarissa at Bourton, Peter notes, "They had always this queer power of communicating without words" (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 54); with Richard, although "he could not bring himself to say he loved her," nonetheless, "She understood; she understood without his speaking" (106). Both

¹⁷¹ Pursuing a sympathetic line of thought, Megan Quigley's analysis of Clarissa's party as "an offering; which sounded horribly vague" (109), argues that Clarissa's desire to unite disparate individuals is a metaphor for the "vagueness of [Woolf's] novel's structure" (Quigley 88). Quigley argues that for Woolf the individual's position in the world is vague, indistinct, constantly shifting, represents that condition in Clarissa's feeling of connection to others.

¹⁷² However, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan seizes on the ocular language to great effect. She insightfully tracks how the "scopic-visual structuring metaphor" of *Author and Hero* gives way to an "auditory-oral frame of reference based on the concepts of voice, polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogicity" in Bakhtin's later work (Erdinast-Vulcan *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject* 78). The visual metaphoric of *Author and Hero*, she explains, underline the transcendent spatial relation the author occupies relative to the hero, whose gaze enframes and constitutes the hero's being with a beneficence recalling divine grace (76-97).

scenes achingly depict a profound moment of connection (or in Richard's, perhaps more the fantasy of understanding) situated in relationships defined by irreconcilable separation: "a solitude; even between husbands and wife a gulf" (ibid). Those moments are not instances of empathetic consummation, to be sure, but do evince a precedent of intimacy for communicative relations. By contrast, Janice Ho regards Septimus and Clarissa as "impersonal strangers" and argues that the novel "subordinates the intimate bonds of family and filiation to more remote affiliations" such as citizens and members of the British welfare state (Ho 80). As a "young man" who "had been in the army," the representation of Septimus available to Clarissa lacks personal specificity, and as such offers little concrete direction into which she can empathetically projecting herself.

The second issue is a problematic aspect with the concept of consummation itself that led Bakhtin to abandon the term in his later writings, namely the violent authoritarian implications present in ceding constitutive knowledge of the self to the other's excess of vision. Alina Wyman explains that "the consummated self did not participate in the act," and the "passivity in the process of consummation, which likened one's aesthetic transformation to a death, became highly problematic in view of such newly embraced values of active (dialogic) communication as *addressivity* and *freedom* in Bakhtin's second, dialogical, period (Wyman 56). In the Bakhtin of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, written in 1929, the subject no longer has an authoritative excess of vision over the other, as the exchange of discourses proceeds in a more equitable field of polyphonic—i.e., unmerged, unreconciled voices. An asymmetric procedure of consummation that positions author over passive hero problematically deprives the consummated individual of any autonomy over their finalization.

Woolf's aim to "criticise the social system" with *Mrs. Dalloway* seems acutely attuned to this danger. In the novel we repeatedly see how the imposition of social norms and patriarchal and patriotic values inflict deleterious effects on individual freedom. In their own ways Septimus,

Lucrezia, Peter, and Clarissa lie outside the prevailing values of the social system, and they strain at the authoritarian forces that challenge their alterity. Accordingly, it is not difficult to read Clarissa's efforts to finalize Septimus as structurally analogous to the coercive diagnoses of Doctors Holmes and Bradshaw. If the novel's task as a critique of the social system does tend toward elevating the freedom of polyphonic voices over monologic authority, why should Clarissa's finalizing efforts be any less abusive to individuality than those institutional ills? On one hand, Woolf's meticulous consideration of the novel's structure seems to align her with the monologic commitments of authorial consummation—as she wrote in her notebook in 1922:

“At any rate, very careful composition. The contrast must be arranged. Therefore how much detail—& digression? The pace is to be given by the gradual increase of S's insanity, on the one side; by the approach of the party on the other. The design is extremely complicated. The balance must be very finely considered. Character must be indicated. (Woolf *Virginia Woolf's "the Hours": The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway* 412 B15)

Her conception of the novel here—even in considering Septimus's insanity as a tonal crescendo—suggests above all an evaluation of the work's “aesthetic objectivity,” which subordinates all other potential ethical and cognitive value to the authorial artistic interest in the work as a whole (Bakhtin “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” 13). This is in stark contrast to the aesthetic disunity that Bakhtin admires in the Dostoevskian polyphonic novel;¹⁷³ as Emerson and Morson explain, “Polyphonic writing relies neither on formulaic plotting nor on pure inspiration [...], but on the

¹⁷³ Strictly speaking, Bakhtin clarifies that there is in fact a unity of the polyphonic novel, but one qualitatively different than the authorial consummated unity of the monologic novel: “The unity of the polyphonic novel—a unity standing above the word, above the voice, above the accent—has yet to be discovered” (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 43). That which stands above individual discourse is the interconnected network of dialogic: a “systemic unity of a referential order” in which individuals' discrete thoughts are given meaning in context with others (93).

identification and provocation of voices whose own potentials for surprising dialogue create the shape of the work” (Morson and Emerson 87). Woolf’s reading notes on Dostoevsky’s *Demons* obliquely anticipate the terms of Bakhtin’s formulation of Dostoevskian polyphony, though fall short of embracing its aesthetic-ethical potential: “Everything was in chaos & agitation & uneasiness—/but this is rather disappointing—/loose—/random—talk talk—but not dialogue/soliloquy” (Rubenstein 167, RN1.14 BC). However, other formal features of *Mrs. Dalloway*, such as the narrative fluidity between consciousnesses and the democratizing inclusion of transient-but-embodied characterological voices, seems deeply committed to the ideology of polyphony.¹⁷⁴ Put differently, the authoritarian features that indict Tolstoyan monologism in Bakhtin’s Dostoevsky book are also Woolf’s critical targets in *Mrs. Dalloway*—in the form of the patriotic, patriarchal hegemonic discourses that she seeks to displace with various narratological strategies that have long consolidated around the idea of l’écriture féminine.¹⁷⁵ How then, we might ask, does a commitment to aesthetic structure, mimetic of hierarchical power structures, which violently finalizes the ethical freedom of its characters square with an apparently contradictory endorsement of a politically emancipatory

¹⁷⁴ Peter Kaye suggests that while Woolf had “an inability to perceive artistic form in Dostoevsky” stemmed from her ignorance of the novel’s traditions and a commitment to disparate stylistic standards, she nonetheless admired the “carnivalized inclusiveness of Dostoevsky’s *subject-matter*,” referencing Bakhtin much discussed concept of societal upheaval (Kaye 88). Similarly, referencing Woolf’s essay “Phases of Fiction,” Rubenstein comments that Woolf admired the extreme emotional intensity of Dostoevsky, but disparaged his unwieldy style—though Woolf qualified her critique, acknowledging the limitations of translation (Rubenstein 49-56).

¹⁷⁵ Toril Moi takes up Julia Kristeva’s foundational post-structuralist argument that feminine writing enacts a deconstruction of the symbolic order, while pushing back against her logocentric notion of politics (Moi *Sexual/Textual Politics* 1-18). Jane Marcus argues that Woolf is an intersectional feminist, as her “language challenges phallogocentrism both from her marginal position within her culture, contradicting the fact of her class position as an inheritor of it its language, and from without, by a conscious alliance with the working class” (Marcus 12). Vincent Sherry proposes that Woolf proffers the rhythm and “material character of language” as a response to the collapse of logical—and ideological rationalist language in the Great War. The texture of language, which he identifies with “l’écriture féminine,” can readily be seen in the aeroplane scene, which restages the historical conditions for the linguistic displacement (Sherry *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* 264-65). Quigley casts Woolf’s valorization of vague language as specifically gendered, though modifies Kristeva’s declaration that Woolf is estranged from language. Rather, she details how the uncertainties implied by vagueness are viewed as threatening or negative to conceptions of masculine identity or positivist theories of language, such as Bertrand Russell’s, while feminine nature is more attuned to the uncertainties of words (Quigley 77-80).

narratological style?¹⁷⁶ In order to address this question, as well as the previous matter of whether we can determine if Clarissa is co-experiencing with Septimus, I offer a reevaluation of Bakhtin's conception of consummation/finalization (*zavershenie*).

Between finalization and final words

My recuperative conception of *zavershenie* for Clarissa owes much to Alina Wyman, who recently engaged in a similar revisionist project in her *The Gift of Active Empathy: Scheler, Bakhtin, and Dostoevsky* (2016). However, our approaches differ in certain significant regards, and it would be worthwhile quickly to indicate those points of divergence. In Wyman's understanding, the early Bakhtin gives too much weight to the other's penetrating excess of vision while discounting the importance of self-knowledge—a concept she finds in Max Scheler's notion of a “sphere of absolute privacy.” By endowing the Bakhtinian self with Schelerian privacy, Wyman imagines that the threat of the other's excess would be curbed, and would preserve a realm for the self's interiority to facilitate a productive dialogic relationship toward self-actualization (Wyman especially 41-63). While Wyman's project usefully elucidates how the ‘I and other’ relationship for Bakhtin is mediated by

¹⁷⁶ In her chapter on Woolf in *Fictions of Authority*, Susan Sniader Lanser articulates the dilemma facing Woolf's writing in similar terms, as a struggle between “fictional aesthetics and overt authoriality” (Lanser 109). Pushing back against critics who characterize Woolf's narratorial strategies as defined by ‘impersonality’ or ‘absence’ or oriented toward “antiauthoritarian communal consciousness,” Lanser provocatively argues that Woolf is in fact committed to “reinstating the authorial voice,” albeit through “submerging” it in the text and “dispers[ing] narrative authority among the characters” (110-114). In *Mrs. Dalloway* she points to techniques of embedding maxims in characterological discourse and repeating particular phrases across different characters in order to infuse characterological with authorial discourse, “collectivizing authoriality without ceding it” (115-119). Lanser's interest is principally focused on the historical context in which a feminine authorial voice had to navigate contemporary gendered aesthetic norms^a—a useful reference when considering the aesthetic-ethical nexus of this present study.

^aEven here Bakhtin provides a useful gloss of Woolf's apparent monologic tendency: “By no means all historical situations permit the ultimate semantic authority of the creator to be expressed without mediation in direct, unrefracted, unconditional authorial discourse. When there is no access to one's own personal ‘ultimate’ word, then every thought, feeling experience must be refracted through the medium of someone else's discourse[...].” (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 202).

Christian agapeistic love, in my view, her overstated criticism of Bakhtin's so-called neglect of the self's interiority (47-49) leads to her revisionist account undermining the productive dependency on the other resulting from that lack.

In Wyman's account of Bakhtinian consummation,¹⁷⁷ the consummator has complete access to some determinate knowledge of the other's interiority, of which the other has none. I would argue that she mischaracterizes the nature of this relationship; the excess of vision in "Author and Hero" does not provide some *prima facie* insight into the other's self—rather, as a fundamentally creative process, the product of consummation does not relate to some extent metaphysical essence, but is a completely novel value-laden representation of the other in the consummator's eyes. Tellingly, Bakhtin refers to the product of consummation as the "image" of the hero or other (*izobrazhenie*), a representation or depiction (Bakhtin "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" 27). He also distinguishes between the soul (*dusha*) and spirit (*dukh*), defining the former as the "artistically given [by the artist] *whole* of the hero's inner life," and the latter as the hero's I-for-myself, "something present in itself as a task to be accomplished" (100, 53).¹⁷⁸ Spirit, in short, is the self's interiority: the perpetually self-negating, forward striving of the ethical subject. Wyman problematically discounts the central function of spirit in the consummating relation as that which guarantees a disjunction between the artist's aesthetic image of the hero, the hero's relation to himself.¹⁷⁹ As Daphna Erdinast-

¹⁷⁷ Wyman alleges that because of the other's excess of vision, the "self is too obviously and, at times, shamelessly displayed before the nearly omniscient consummating consciousness" (47). Consequently, she argues that "denying interiority [i.e. self-knowledge] any place in Bakhtin's system does not only render empathy and dialogue senseless, but also threatens the sanctity of his divine model of communication" (48). She suggests that consummation under these terms "can only be deemed unloving, and essentially un-dialogical," as the consummator would have immediate access to some transparent determinate interior content in the other, and would obviate any need for dialogic relations (*ibid*). In his Dostoevsky book, Wyman argues that Bakhtin overcorrects the power imbalance between I and other to the extreme, noting that he, "seems to endow each subject with an enormous virtually unobstructed field of vision in respect to both itself and the world, which essentially eliminates the need for knowledge-bestowing others" (55). Accordingly, she raises a valid concern that in granting each character such thorough autonomy, polyphonic dialogue seems incompatible with the notion of productive agapeistic communication.

¹⁷⁸ cf. "the soul, as a *given, presently existing* whole, is constituted in terms of aesthetic categories; the soul is spirit the way it looks *from outside*, in the other" (100).

¹⁷⁹ Thus, when in *PDP* Bakhtin remarks, "*In a human being there is always something that only he himself can*

Vulcan incisively reasons, “the inability of the subject to produce a whole representation of itself to itself is not necessarily just a perceptual limitation to be overcome through the prosthesis-gaze of the other; it is also—primarily perhaps—the enabling condition of action and agency” (Erdinast-Vulcan *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject* 38). The ethical subject’s blind dynamism both requires the other to provide an affirmation of meaning, an image of the self, and nonetheless refuses to see itself coinciding with that image.

Wyman’s revision proposes to emend the author’s god-like omniscience over the hero by instantiating a divine transcendent barrier within the consummated self’s interiority—the empathetic consummator becomes aware of an impenetrable limit to the other’s interiority, something only accessible by God, that in turn draws the would-be consummator into continual productive relationship with the other (50-53). While it is difficult to see Bakhtin in this concept of dialogism, explicating the problem of consummation as an anxiety about a lack of definitive divine value helpfully orients what I want to call the *mutual dependency* of I and other in consummation, which provides a link to dialogism in the Dostoevsky book. The stakes are higher for consummation without the presumption of divine authorial value. In “Author and Hero” Bakhtin presents a rather touching dynamic between subjects that speaks to the moral necessity of leaving the last word to the other. Because the ethical subject can only strive and never consummate itself, even the *last* word of one’s life cannot be the *final*, consummating word; my last word “is devoid of any consummating, any positively founding energies; it is aesthetically unproductive” (128).¹⁸⁰ Accordingly, “In my last word” Bakhtin elegiacally relates,

I turn to the outside of myself and surrender myself to the mercy of *the other* (the

reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition” we could argue that this is *not* an invocation of a concept of “absolute privacy” heretofore absent from Bakhtin’s philosophy, but rather a refined definition of “spirit” in *AI* (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 58).

¹⁸⁰ “Мое последнее слово лишено всех завершающих...энергии” (ss. v.1, 198)

ultimate sense of deathbed confession). I know that in the other as well there is the same insanity of not coinciding (in principle) with himself, the same unconsummatedness of life. Yet for me that is not his last word—it is not for me that it sounds: I am situated outside him, and the last, consummating word [*poslednee zavershayushchee slovo*] belongs to me. This last word is conditioned and required by my being situated completely outside the other—by my spatial, temporal, and meaning-related outsideness in relation to the other’s life as a whole, in relation to the other’s axiological posture and responsibility. This position of outsideness makes possible (not only physically, but also morally) what is impossible for me in myself, namely: the axiological affirmation and acceptance of the whole present-on-hand givenness of another’s interior being. (128)

In describing the fragility encompassed in the quintessential moment of human finitude, the perpetually hopeful-and-yet hopeless of one’s individual life, Bakhtin’s narrative seamlessly reverses the I and other relation, from surrendering “to the mercy of the other” to describing the efficacy of consummating the other from my position of outsideness. What’s intimated in the subject-object reversal, of course, is the mortality of both the I and the other, and their correlating mutual dependence on that ground. This moment in which I turn to the other despite recognizing that his relation to himself is not just as non-coincidental as my own is, frankly, a stunning revocation of divine metaphysical authority, but nonetheless the other is my only possible author; the author and hero are interchangeable. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin shifts the emphasis onto individual freedom, and the same sentiment sounds decidedly incomplete without the authorial other: “As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word [*ne shagam svoego poslednego slova*]” (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 59). The last word, of course is no more finalizing than before, and uttering it would not

finalize a person. Even one's ultimate word is not finalizing.

This theory of consummation also addresses the concern that Peter in the scene with the ambulance and Clarissa in her feeling of connection are somehow improperly imposing a meaningfulness on Septimus's life. Septimus's final words, "I'll give it to you," function as a kind of renunciation of control, ceding the authority over his "final word" to an other. The significance of Septimus's death is not the purview of the living subject Septimus, as Bakhtin explains:

...it is impossible for me to *experience* the axiological picture of the world in which I used to live and in which I am no longer present. I can, of course, *think* the world as it would be after my death, but I cannot experience it, from within myself, as a world that is emotionally toned by the fact of my death, the fact of my nonexistence. To be able to do that, I must project myself into the life of another or others, for whom my death, my absence, will be an event in *their* lives. And in making the attempt to perceive emotionally (axiologically) the event of my own death in the world, I come to be swayed, possessed by the soul of a possible other; I am no longer alone, when I attempt to contemplate the whole of my own life in the mirror of history, just as I am not alone when I contemplate my own exterior in a mirror."
(Bakhtin "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" 104-5).

Following Bakhtin here, we could say that Clarissa's feeling of identification with Septimus is the projection into another not to understand his death but her own. To wit, it is the performance of her transcendental theory, that "the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attach to this person or that" (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 137); her visceral experience of the violent moment of his death and her bestowal of axiological meaning on the death (as an attempt to communicate) is the projection of Clarissa into *herself* as other. Septimus functions here as a formal mechanism by which Clarissa can view herself as other. Syncing Bakhtin up with

Clarissa's transcendental theory, the "unseen part" of Septimus "that might survive" attached to Clarissa is not Septimus himself i.e., the living bearer of his own word; it is his after image. That is, what the reader identifies as Septimus is for Clarissa simply a "death[...] that is an event in [her] life." Read this way Clarissa's transcendental theory does not offer reconciliation in death, as I initially suggested. Rather, to recall Jean-Luc Nancy, the presence of death for Clarissa at the party reminds her of the loss that is constitutive of community.¹⁸¹ Accordingly we can read Peter's contact with the ambulance similarly: with Septimus transformed into the "event of death," he survives attached to Peter to the extent that "the world is emotionally toned by the fact of [his] death," providing the opportunity for the appearance of the ambulance which elicits Peter's sympathetic identification.

In a thoroughly secular paradigm of dialogic relations, the stakes of consummation are in my view all the more heightened without the guarantee of authorial confirmation, and the risk of abuse is heightened. But, at the same time, the relationship of subjects to each other is not exclusively or necessarily agonistic. If the other does not possess the capacity to consummate, what would be the motivation to dialogically confront anyone? Consummation is not loving because it bestows normatively positive values, but because it finds any meaning whatsoever in the other. The predetermination of the consummated image, enframing the entirety of the hero's life, even potential visions of it, is nonetheless not dispositive for the hero's life itself, it has no determinative efficacy on the hero's actions. The ethical subject's negation of the self provides a perpetual loophole to remain unconsummated, unfinalized. The emphasis on unfinalizability mistakenly suggests, in my view, an evacuation of the productive function the other provides in their consummating effort. Because the

¹⁸¹ cf. Walkowitz: "If one thinks that the gravity of [Clarissa reacting to Septimus's] death means considering death first and by itself, and not in the middle of a party, and not in the middle of a sentence about a party, then Clarissa's thought may seem insensitive and unsympathetic. But there may be something valuable in a reiterated 'thought' that equates the significance of a party with the significance of death—that places these topics, syntactically and ethically, on the same plane" (Walkowitz 101). That is to say, in order for death—much less the death of someone totally unknown to Clarissa—to disrupt the event one must take seriously the idea of the party as "an offering; to combine, to create" (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 109).

shift in priority swings toward the ethical subject's openness rather than the aesthetic subject's authority, the question of a loving relation between the I and other can be restated in those terms. To be consummated is to lovingly acknowledge the need for another, to admit one's own finitude, and welcome the discourse of the other—even while perpetually contesting its final authority.

Already in "Author and Hero" Bakhtin acknowledges that aesthetic consummation is antithetical to the conditions for ethical action: "For in order to live and act," he writes, I need to be unconsummated[...]I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing makeup" (Bakhtin "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" 13). Because an aesthetic consummation of the hero organizes the entirety of his world into a unified whole, all values are subordinated to that aesthetic unity. Consequently, the purview of ethical freedom for the hero is severely curtailed. Although from the immanent perspective of the novelistic hero's lived experience, he lives ethically—"he orients his actions within the open ethical event of his lived life"—those decisions are thoroughly superseded by and subsumed in the author's aesthetic consummation: "the author knows and sees more not only in the direction in which the hero is looking and seeing, but also in a different direction, in a direction which is in principle inaccessible to the hero himself," namely, the aesthetic unity of his existence (12, 13). Authorial consummation essentially renders ethical decisions moot, imposing an omniscient determinism from without. Consummation then is the act of bestowing meaning by a "free and active" individual for an existence that is essentially "unfree and passive"—an act, Bakhtin insists, that is not cruel, but a loving, beautiful necessity (119). We are led to realize, though, that this dichotomy is not simply reducible to an ontological difference between real author and fictitious character; in fact, Bakhtin reveals that this is the paradoxical condition of intersubjective meaning in general.

The crux of the argument lies in recalling that the ethical subject for Bakhtin is, from its unique and irreplaceable position, always oriented toward a concrete moment of obligation, and

conceives of itself as a task always as-yet-fulfilled. That is, ethical value is only actualized in a particular event, and cannot provide meaning for the whole of the subject's life. Moreover, ethical activity rests on the freedom of the individual to make a decision, and so, the very notion of a total ethical consummation would countersensically turn the subject unfree; instead, an ethical unity is "not the unity of my already-being, but the unity of my not-yet-being. Everything positive in this unity belongs solely to that which is set as a task, whereas that which is already given comprises everything negative" (126). The creative subject enframes the other's whole life in an aesthetic unity; the ethical subject perpetually discomposes its own whole life as essentially not yet existing.

Thus, aesthetic and ethical activity are counter directional movements in the constitution of the self—the form and unity of the self is created from without, by the other, while the inner ethical movement proceeds outward, negating definition, striving to remain open.¹⁸² This struggle between the other's consummating or finalizing activity, and the self's preservation of individual openness comes to a head in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, where authorial consummation is no longer a loving bestowal of value from a surplus of seeing, but an ethical violation of a hero's individuality. Erdinast-Vulcan traces the origin of the shift to the end of "Author and Hero,"¹⁸³ where Bakhtin decries a "crisis of authorship" that she describes as "the awakening of the modernist consciousness, the consciousness of an essentially secular world, where neither the fictional nor the historical subject can refer to an authorial Being—outside and above the self—for comfort and confirmation" (Erdinast-

¹⁸² Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan convincingly applies Bakhtin's later concepts of "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces—introduced in "Discourse in the Novel" (written 1934-1935)—which describe the cultural and historical formation of a unitary language on one side and the decentralizing heteroglossia of parodic and low genres and dialectics—to the modes of subjectivity articulated here (Bakhtin "Discourse in the Novel" 270-74). Bakhtin suggests as much, noting that, "in my lived life, I participate in the communal mode of existence, in an established social order, in a nation, in a state, in mankind, in God's world. In all these cases, I live my life, axiologically, in the other and for others" (121). That is, the world of meaning is a world lived in terms of the other. Erdinast-Vulcan reads Bakhtin as way of the temptation of the aesthetic to provide meaning, and takes ethical subject's centrifugal activity as an act of resistance: "The nostalgia for the culture of boundary lines, the desire to be cocooned and consummated within an authoritative master narrative is checked by the awareness that the aesthetic may get dangerously close to the anesthetic" (Erdinast-Vulcan *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject* 39).

¹⁸³ Cf. (Bakhtin "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" 202-08)

Vulcan *Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject* 36). With the death of God, authorial outsideness is compromised, as the hero “has no faith in the essentialness and kindness of the power that gives form from outside,” (Bakhtin “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” 203).

In the Dostoevsky book, the loss of a beneficent surplus of seeing renders the consummating act without justification. Consummation becomes “*secondhand* truth”: “the truth about a man in the mouths of others, not directed to him dialogically, becomes a *lie*, degrading and deadening him” (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 59). The secondhand word—*zaochnoe slovo*—is truly an inversion of the productive excess of vision, as the etymology of *za-ochnoe* comes from root *oko*—eye, and thus could be understood as ‘beyond the sight of.’¹⁸⁴ The hero must be able to respond to the consummating act, to defend himself. To this point, Bakhtin opposes the “finalizing” word of the authorial other with the hero’s retention of their own “final word”: “As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word” (59).

To respond to another’s speech is to defend the integrity of one’s interiority from someone else’s determinations; as long as one can respond, they preserve the right to say the “final word” about themselves. In the monologic novel the author fails to recognize the dialogism of the world. Instead, the creative vision for the unity of the work circumscribes the final meaning of the character. In a dialogic relationship, in which a character can respond to others, the “truth” of a character is “not predetermined” by the author’s vision, for that would impinge upon a subject’s interiority (54-55). Authorial discourse about a character becomes itself a form of address, “as discourse about *someone actually present*, someone who hears him (the author) and is *capable of answering him*” (63).

¹⁸⁴ In legal parlance, *zaochnoe* is used in the context of a trial in *absentia*. The emphasis once again on the absence of the subject to speak for themselves.

Bakhtin argues that the only truth for the dialogic hero is that which is produced in the dialogic revelation of their self-consciousness. For as long as the hero can speak, any other discourse about the hero, whether it come from the authorial voice or from other characters, can be resisted, considered, agreed to, refuted:

[...]he knows that all these definitions, prejudiced as well as objective, rest in his hands and he cannot finalize them precisely because he himself perceives them; he can go beyond their limits and can thus make them inadequate. He knows that he has the *final word*, and he seeks at whatever cost to retain for himself this final word about himself, the word of his self-consciousness, in order to become in it that which he is not. His consciousness of self lives by its unfinalizability, by its unclosedness and its indeterminacy. (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 53).

Clarissa's relation to Septimus bears the double-edged consequences of the consummating gaze. At once an empathetic embrace of the other, it enables her to see herself enmeshed in the threads of interconnection. At the same time, her interpolation of his death as an "attempt to communicate" is decidedly an articulation of her own attitude toward death, and in ascribing it to an unknown other, participates in the same narrativization of the external world that Septimus and Peter do. Through their eyes it was emblematic of masculine subjectivity that gave form to the contingency of the external world while problematically assimilating others in their consummating vision as "secondhand truth." In a divergence from the role of the hostess, however, in which Clarissa could only facilitate connections for others, but from which she had been unable to participate, her enframing vision of Septimus is for her an emancipatory claim of a masculine authoritarian position. As a confluence of the two gendered modes of communication, in Clarissa's consummation we grasp the antinomial nature of this synthesis: Clarissa *can* experience a feeling of interconnectedness through empathic consummation, but this interconnectedness is necessarily an asymmetrical

authorial invention.

And yet, Clarissa's authorial consummation is not exactly authoritarian; it lacks the unifying certainty of finalization, instead it is forever provisional, keeping the striving of the ethical subject open: "But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter" (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 167). Clarissa's return to life leaves the final word unuttered, thereby avoiding the common failure shared by the other communicative models in the novel: the production of a closed system. Leaving the "unseen part" only provisional, Woolf makes visible the striving activity of *dukh* rather than pronouncing the unified vision of *dusha*. Accordingly, Woolf's novel suggests that the potential for communication is never entire, never perfect; instead it is always open to the next word: "Perhaps, perhaps."

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