Disability and Holy Fools in Russian Literature

By

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Abstract

In this dissertation I investigate the interactions of holy foolery and disability in Russian literature. Drawing from a chronologically varied range of literary texts, this study uses the archetypal figure of the Russian Orthodox holy fool as a vehicle to bring critical disability theory and politics to Russian literary studies in an accessible way. Russian cultural studies and disability studies have remained separate in the last few decades that disability has become a significant field of interest in the English-speaking world. At the present moment, there is some established research on holy fools and (separately) on illness/madness in Russian literature, but the critical framework of disability remains a new approach. Conversely, one of the common current aims of disability scholars is to develop tools of inquiry that can make existing work more useful for regions outside of the Western European and American contexts where it originally developed. I aim to bridge these gaps by finding productive ways for Russian literary studies and disability studies to speak to one another and by theorizing a connection between disability and holy foolery.

The major question of this dissertation concerns how the holy fool fits into the Russian cultural processes of constructing ability and disability through literature. I have found that holy foolery has remained a relevant phenomenon for authors writing about bodymind difference, that it serves the function of protest against social-political processes of normalization and pathologization, and that it demands recognition of the sacred in people marginalized by those processes. The introduction establishes my theoretical approach and provides context for disability studies and the holy fool archetype. Chapter One analyzes Aleksandr Pushkin's play *Boris Godunov* with attention to concepts of pretending, faking, and authenticity. Chapter Two analyzes Fedor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* with attention to pathologization and ideology of cure. Chapter Three analyzes the posthumously published poetry of Sophia Parnok with attention to crip time and futurity. Chapter Four analyzes Sasha Sokolov's novel *School for Fools* with attention to neurodivergence and disability

poetics. Throughout my analysis, I advocate taking up questions of bodymind difference from a justice-oriented perspective.

Note on Translation

Every attempt has been made to provide published translations for texts, literary and scholarly, originally written in Russian; where a translator is not otherwise noted, translations are mine. Transliteration is provided in the Library of Congress system, except where alternate spellings are more commonly accepted (such as Dostoevsky) or to avoid confusion with spellings in a translation (such as Otrepiev).

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Dedicated to Dr. Sheltreese McCoy (1981-2018)

But what kind of idiot am I now
when I know myself
that others take me for an idiot?

Fedor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*

Nothing about us without us!

Disability rights slogan

Introduction

This dissertation is the product of recognition across time and space. I am a person before I am a reader and a reader before I am a scholar, and when I approach a text for the first time, I can only do so as myself: I step in from a highly specific contextual position. I'm white American, a native English speaker, born at the end of the twentieth century into a small Appalachian middle-class family. I and the Soviet Union coexisted in time for only a few months. I'm also multiply disabled: I'm autistic, mentally ill, I have limited mobility and chronic pain, am a survivor of conversion therapy among other destructive psychiatric practices. I organize for disability justice with a small but powerful group in my town, and I'm proud of being disabled. I am and have experienced many other things too: they all come with me into a reading experience because they are not separable from me, nor from any reader.

Many times when experiencing Russian literary texts, I have recognized disability: in characters, authors, poetics, tropes, plots, and ethical-philosophical systems. Anglophone literary scholars have developed a robust vocabulary and theoretical frameworks for thinking about disability as a social-political construction, an embodied experience, a cluster of cultures and political identities, a dynamic of oppression, a source of pride and power, and more. In Slavic studies, the investigation of disability in cultural production is currently a new and exciting avenue of research, and it is my hope that this dissertation will be a starting point for creating many useful models for collaboration between our field and disability studies.

Alongside recognizing disability in Russian literature, I also began to recognize a pattern of alternate interpretation: in many of the places I saw great potential for a reading from disability, other scholars were turning to the Russian Orthodox tradition of holy foolery as an interpretive tool. Four such examples are analyzed in this dissertation; others include Venichka of *Moscow to the End of the Line*, Stinking Lizaveta of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and poets of the Leningrad underground in the 1950s-70s, to name a few. Looking further into this pattern, I likewise recognized many of the values and priorities from disability activism in the holy fool archetype (especially in its literary iterations as opposed to in hagiography). Primary among these is a disruptive insistence on recognizing the value of people deemed by an unjust or immoral society as in some way less than fully human. Thanks to this double-recognition, the literary archetype of the holy fool serves as a very suitable bridge between Russian cultural studies and disability studies.

The guiding question to this dissertation is: how does the literary archetype of the holy fool fit into constructions of normal and abnormal embodiment through Russian literature? Other questions raised include: how has the holy fool's role and relevance in these processes changed over time? How have different authors transformed the hagiographical archetype for their literary purposes? What can a disability studies perspective add to understandings of holy foolery in Russian literature? And how can holy foolery contribute to the relatively recent global turn in disability studies?

To answer these questions, I have selected a wide range of literary texts to serve as case studies, including prose, poetry, and drama; representatives of romanticism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism; authors with a range of experiences of ability, disability, and impairment; suited to a range of approaches and interpretive tools within disability studies; and all of which explicitly invoke holy foolery. I apply this hybrid crip-fool framework to Pushkin's 1831 play *Boris Godunov* [*Борис Годунов*] (originally composed 1825) with attention to faking, authenticity, and embodiment; to

Dostoevsky's 1868-9 novel *The Idiot* [*Идиот*] with attention to pathologization and ideology of cure; to Sophia Parnok's posthumously-published poetry, including the Vedeneeva cycles (1932-33), with attention to crip time and futurity; and to Sasha Sokolov's 1976 novel *A School for Fools* [*Школа для дураков*] with attention to neurodiversity and stigma. Each chapter in this dissertation follows a similar structural progression: they analyze how the holy fool archetype has been understood to operate in the literary text in question in Russian literary scholarship, introduce a core concept from disability studies applicable to that scholarly conversation, and then synthesize both into a close reading of the literary text contributing a disability-informed perspective to the literary interpretation.

Holy foolery as a uniquely Russian cultural form of moral protest has remained a potent and salient literary trope all the way through the rise and fall of the state-atheist Soviet Union and into the present moment. It is also necessarily intertwined with disability; in other words, even in as wide a range of texts as is presented in this dissertation, the questions of interest in and priority toward disability theory are also directly applicable to the paradoxes of holy foolery. Both holy foolery and disability theory are deeply invested in aggressively proclaiming the sanctity (worthiness, inherent value, humanity, dignity) of those deemed defective, degenerate, a burden on society, or worthless because of their bodymind by those with a vested interest in constructing themselves as normal by contrast. While the hagiographical paradigm of holy foolery turned its denunciatory wrath to individual immorality and hypocrisy rather than toward systems of injustice or the status quo, literary writers transformed the holy fool into a denunciator of injustice over many decades and reinventions. In the process of those transformations, the definitional boundaries of the holy fool archetype have also become looser as authors rework the trope according to their artistic and ethical-philosophical needs.

While disability studies provide a rich and productive opportunity for Russian studies, I also consider it a responsibility of scholars in our discipline to become broadly competent in discussing disability. The neglect of disability by our field until recently contributes to the erasure of disabled writers and readers from the Russian canon and cultural life. It harms disabled readers and scholars who are discouraged from recognizing themselves in these deeply valued canonical cultural productions, and it harms scholarship, making it more difficult and more unlikely to think about disability with compassion and nuance. The way we think, talk, and write about disability in fiction reflects and influences how we think, talk, write about, and treat disabled people in life; therefore, it is our ethical and moral responsibility to take up the topic of disability from a perspective that builds toward disability justice rather than further harm, stigmatize, and alienate disabled people in life – including our readers, subjects, and colleagues. It is my aim that this research will honor the presence of disability in Russian literature so that we can understand disabled writers and readers as part of cultural production. In addition, I hope that this work can serve as a model for other Russian cultural scholars to take up critical questions of disability with respect so that disabled people can fully participate in our discipline.

Holy foolery

The holy fool is a striking archetype that remains recognizable through all the settings and transformations in which they have appeared throughout the centuries, but whose many paradoxes entangle efforts to briefly and simply define. In this section, I will trace a range of scholarly definitions and approaches to understanding holy foolery, and I establish the framework of holy foolery used in this study.[1]

[1] As this dissertation focuses on holy foolery in its literary recreations rather than in hagiography, the introduction will only briefly touch on the extensive history of canonized holy fools; for information on the hagiographical tradition, see Ivanov, Kobets, Likhachev and Panchenko, and Thomson.

The full name for a practitioner of the phenomenon is 'fool for Christ's sake' [юродивый Христа ради], alluding to Paul's message to the Corinthians:

> For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.[2]

Holy fools deliberately embody this vision of apostledom in a literal, rather than metaphorical, sense. Many of the key elements of the paradigm, including as it developed in secular literature, are already present here: spectacle and witness, paradox and inversion of social values, deprivation, and abjection. Priscilla Hunt interprets the specification 'for Christ's sake' in two ways: the holy fool acts for Christ's sake "first, to commune in the sacrificial humility exemplified on the Cross; and second, to bring others back to Christ by confronting them with a shocking holy foolish instantiation of the Cross."[3] Svitlana Kobets, co-editor with Hunt on the same volume, later reflects that definition: holy fools "feign madness in order to provide the public with spiritual guidance yet shun praise for their saintliness and attract abuse in imitation of the suffering of Christ."[4] Hunt further writes, "The fool's behavior thus places the spectator on an epistemological boundary between truth and the lie, reality and appearance, self-awareness and self-deception. Its purpose is to make the hypocritical Christian uncomfortable enough with his unexamined faith to begin to recognize and honor Christ in the person of the holy fool."[5]

[2] 1 Cor. 4:9-13. See also 1 Cor. 1:18: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." New Revised Standard translation used for all Biblical quotations.

[3] Priscilla Hunt, "Holy Foolishness as a Key to Russian Culture," in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, ed. Priscilla Hunt and Svitlana Kobets, 1-14 (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2011), 2.

[4] Svitlana Kobets, "Lice in the Iron Cap: Holy Foolishness in Perspective," in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, ed. Priscilla Hunt and Svitlana Kobets, 15-40, 15.

[5] Hunt, 4.

S.A. Ivanov, author of *Блаженные похабы: культурная история юродства* (translated by Simon Franklin as *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*), focuses his definition less on that paradox of foolishness and wisdom in 1 Corinthians and more on the interaction between fool and spectator. In Ivanov's words, the term holy fool refers to "a person who feigns insanity, pretends to be silly, or who provokes shock or outrage by his deliberate unruliness."[6] However, of course not just any unruly behavior indicates a holy fool; such behavior qualifies as foolish "only if those who watch it assume that what lies beneath is sanity and high morality, even pious intent."[7] Ivanov is careful to distinguish holy fools from heretics, religious reformers, or mystics. And even here, a combination of outrageous behavior and Christian context is not enough to make a holy fool. Ivanov adds that holy foolery "always, in our view, involves aggression and provocation."[8] He defines provocation as "the deliberate manipulation of a situation such that somebody is forced into an otherwise undesirable action which the provocateur can foresee" and aggression as "an activity whose purpose is to disrupt the status quo in personal relations and which is perceived as hostile by the person at whom it is directed."[9]

Historically, the phenomenon of holy foolery migrated into Rus' as part of Eastern Orthodoxy's inheritance of Byzantine Christianity. The origin of the Russian word for 'holy fool' [юродивый, *iurodivyi*] and 'holy foolery,' 'holy foolishness' [юродство, *iurodstvo*] is found in the Church Slavonic root *urod-*, indicating some form of congenital defectiveness or abnormality.[10] Synonyms for holy foolery include the ancient Greek *salos* (as with Nikola Salos), sometimes glossed in early Bulgarian translations of Byzantine holy fools' vitae as *ourod*, as well as Church Slavonic

6 S.A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, trans. Simon Franklin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 9.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 246.

translations of *nemyslen* (unintelligent), *bogolish* (Godforsaken), and *pokhab* (obscene, filthy) along with variants.[11] The Slavonic root is preserved in the contemporary Russian word урод (*urod*), an invective meaning monster, degenerate, freak, deformed person, etc.

There are a few scattered vitae with fleeting holy foolish elements through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, including perhaps most famously St. Avraamii of Smolensk (d. 1221 or 1224) who took up holy foolery as a form of asceticism borrowed from his reading of saints' lives. Other saints who were said to play the fool include Prokopii of Ustiug in the thirteenth century, Zakhariia of Shenkursk, Nikolai Kachanov ('The Cabbage'), and Fedor of Novgorod in the fourteenth century, and Vasilii of Spaso-Kamensk, Leontii and Ioann of Ustiug, and Isidor Tverdislov of Rostov in the fifteenth century.[12] Again, these vitae may name their respective saints as fools or invoke the Byzantine tropes of foolery, but they include few specifics of what that means, and the hagiographical genre of holy foolery was codified only in the late sixteenth century during a period of significant popularity for the fool's form of asceticism.

The paradigm for Russian holy fools is set by St. Andrei the Fool [юродивый] of Constantinople, whom Ivanov names "by far the most famous Orthodox holy fool" and whose vita set not a monastic tradition but an urban setting for holy foolery.[13] The vita is Byzantine in origin, first written in Greek, and was later translated into Old Church Slavonic. The author sets the action in fifth-century Constantinople (although scholars have dated the vita to the mid-tenth century).[14] His story is written in eight full manuscripts and six fragments from the fifteenth century, sixteen manuscripts and eighteen fragments from the sixteenth century, and thirty-four manuscripts and

[11] Ibid., 247.

[12] Ibid., 255.

[13] Ibid., 156. Ivanov references the translation by Lennart Rydèn, ed. and trans., *The Life of St Andrew the Fool*, Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 4:2 (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 1995): 151– 7.

[14] Iibd., 157.

twenty-seven fragments from the seventeenth century.[15] This explosion of popularity in the sixteenth century also resulted in some saints with affinity for foolery, asceticism, or prophecy being retroactively granted more overtly foolish qualities. For example. St. Mikhail of Klopskii (d. 1471) in early vitae was described as a hermit with a gift for prophecy, but later reworkings of his vita added that he made himself out to be a *pokhab* and would show humility by taking up foolery. Ivanov writes, "Such were the later interpretations of those passages in the early versions of the vita where Mikhail displays non-standard behaviour; even his appearance at the monastery is shrouded in mystery. What was perceived as enigmatic in the fifteenth century, by the early sixteenth century had been labelled holy foolery."[16] By this time, holy foolery had become a viable interpretation of at least a particular set of unusual behavior. Svitlana Kobets goes even further in stating that holy foolery "became a byword designating a type of secular behavior, which derived its traits (e.g., presumed hidden holiness, grotesque self-humiliation, play-acting) from the behavioral paradigm of holy foolish asceticism and the model of saintliness."[17]

The holy fool as a saintly paradigm maintained a minor presence in the hagiographical landscape of Old Russia, but its heyday coincided with the rise of Russian autocracy. In Ivanov's estimation, "This is more than a coincidence: apparently society regarded *iurodivye* as a form of divine control over the state authorities. The close though ambiguous relations between Russian holy fools and their secular rulers is a distinctive feature of *iurodivye* by comparison with their Byzantine predecessors."[18] Tsar Ivan the Terrible famously had a deep reverence for holy fools, and styled himself as a paradoxical quasi-secular autocratic fool: "If holy foolery is extreme self-abasement

[15] Ibid., 263.

[16] Ibid., 270.

[17] Svitlana Kobets, "Lice in the Iron Cap: Holy Foolishness in Perspective," 16.

[18] Ivanov, *Holy Foolery in Byzantium and Beyond*, 285.

which conceals phenomenal power, then one could hardly imagine a clearer embodiment of this explosive mixture than Tsar Ivan himself."[19] In many folk legends, including that of Nikola Salos examined in more detail in the first chapter of this study, it is precisely Ivan the Terrible whose destructive wrath against fellow Christians is shamed by a fool's word.

Following this apogee in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, holy foolery as a legitimized religious-cultural institution was targeted for persecution during Peter the Great's project to build an Enlightenment-order, European-style empire state. "Henceforth, in order to be identified as a holy fool one no longer had to meet any standards: canonizations were terminated, and if one was suspected of being a 'pseudo-holy fool' (the authorities used the prefix 'pseudo' so as to avert possible accusations of blasphemy) police measures were immediately taken."[20] This era of polarizing change also introduced clinics and hospitals for the mentally ill in Russia, and interpretations of holy foolish behavior shifted in congruence with them.[21] Holy foolery became a symptom of something else – madness, illness, social disorder – treatable and, in Foucauldian terms, governable.[22]

By the time of the Romantic era, when the first literary text of this study was written, what had previously been an institutionalized form of protest had become a symbol, referring back to something that had more or less disappeared from liturgical legitimacy. This is when the holy fool was taken up as a literary archetype, in addition to occasional saints in life, as scattered as they had been before the fifteenth century. Russian Romantic "freedom-lovers" looked back on holy foolery as an expression of unfettered freedom."[23] Even so, the signifying potential of the paradigm

19 Ibid., 285-6.

20 Ibid., 347.

21 Ibid., 351.

22 Foucault's theorization of the history of 'the population' as a measurable and therefore governable object can be found in *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

23 Ivanov, *Holy Foolery in Byzantium and Beyond,* 351.

remained rich and compelling among secular writers, with attitudes ranging from nostalgia to contempt to reverence. The archetype remained salient and continues to remain salient. To explain its continued popularity, Ivanov reasons, "Insofar as one can speculate at all about why *iurodstvo* should have acquired its peculiar resonance in Russia, one might link it to Russian culture's preoccupation with the Absolute concealed behind reality's deceptive façade. Inner truth can only be revealed to one who inhabits the 'other' world, and hence he is bound to appear strange to inhabitants of 'this' world."[24] Kobets also supports the claim made by scholars such as S.A. Ivanov, Mikhail Epstein, Mark Lipovetskii, and others, that "the whole of Russian cultural as well as the Russian people's collective sense of self, has been markedly influenced by this phenomenon."[25]

One highly influential development in the study of holy foolery came in the form of D.S. Likhachev and A.M. Panchenko's 1976 *The 'World of Laughter' in Old Russia* [*'Смеховой мир' древней Руси*], later republished with an addition by N.V. Ponyrko as *Laughter in Old Russia* [*Смех в древней Руси*]. This study is semiotic in orientation, with a primarily Bakhtinian theoretical foundation; the authors de-emphasize the religious aspects of the tradition and read it as a ritualized folk-cultural 'language' of social protest built on codified gestures and spectacle. In the state-atheist context of Soviet scholarship, they took pains to caution their readers against confusing "inborn foolishness" with foolishness for Christ's sake and made the case that holy foolery did in fact constitute a "viable form of intelligent and intellectual critique."[26] It's ironic that the authors evidently felt the need to couch the holy fool's validity in terms of intelligence in order for their reader to take it seriously: the assumption that salient critique could only come from someone with 'normal' mind and behavior,

[24] Ibid., 358.

[25] Kobets, 16.

[26] D.S. Likhachev and A.M. Panchenko, "Laugher as Spectacle," in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, 44, 51.

and furthermore that normality is characterized by intelligence, is the exact attitude that both holy foolery and disability studies protest against.

Likhachev and Panchenko's Bakhtinian analysis of holy foolish laughter is divided into two parts: laughter as spectacle, and laughter as social protest. Drawing on the vitae of prominent holy fools such as St. Avvakum and St. Vasilii Blazhennyi (the Blessed), they argue that "in the holy fool's performance, the viewer's role is no less important than that of the main character."[27] The vita of Avvakum codified the stereotype of the holy fool who prays only at night and never in the presence of others, on the model of Matthew 6:6: "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." And the hagiographers of St. Vasilii the Blessed likened the fool to a professional actor, so prominent were "theatrical aspects" of his life such as "transformation, performance, and sham."[28] The holy fool operates in a symbiotic relationship with their viewers or spectators: "Because of this special relationship, the observer becomes an active participant in the show and even a performer. Understanding this symbiosis – this close interdependency of the roles allotted to the *iurodivyi* and the crowd – is evidently key to understanding holy foolishness as spectacle."[29]

Furthermore, the authors identify two paradoxes in this fool/crowd relationship of spectacle. In the "viewer's paradox," the people in the crowd should recognize Christ in the fool and be called to virtue by his disruptions, yet they invariably mock and torment him; in the "performer's paradox," the holy fool's ascetic feat requires that he lead others to virtue, yet he does this by knowingly leading people into temptation and confusion through his performance.[30] That tension is

[27] Ibid., 60

[28] Ibid., 56.

[29] Ibid., 60.

[30] Ibid., 65.

a large part of what makes the holy fool such a fascinating figure in religious and artistic tradition, and Likhachev and Panchenko argue that it is a foundational feature. Priscilla Hunt, following in this interpretive line, reformulates the paradox slightly between crowd and hagiographer (in our case, literary author): "Holy foolishness exists at the center of a clash of viewpoints, in this case, of the hagiographer, who sees the fool as a 'valiant sufferer,' and of the crowd, which fails to differentiate the fool from a street entertainer despite seeing him with both 'carnal' and 'intellectual' eyes."[31] No matter who is at either end, Likhachev and Panchenko see such paradox as "an end in itself" and "an esthetic dominant" in depictions of holy foolery.[32] They even propose understanding holy foolery itself as "a single enigmatic and paradoxical gesture."[33]

Much of the holy fool's spectacle, they also argue, is non- or quasi-verbal, encompassing a wide range of communication which they name 'gesture.' They observe from vitae and non-liturgical or folk legends of holy fools that "the holy fool did not have to make his presence known through denunciations or by offending the public's sense of decency: as soon as he appeared in the streets, he was easily recognized by his costume, much as a jester is identified by his dunce's cap and donkey ears, and a *skomorokh* [jester] by his pipe."[34] That costume was most commonly nakedness, but could also consist of a hair shirt, iron cap, or chains. Linguistic aspects of the holy fool's 'costume' often included silence, glossolalia or other incomprehensible mutterings, and riddles.[35] The strange costume and strange 'speech' added together to produce provocative and aggressive incomprehensibility perceived as ugliness or lowliness. And just as crip theory celebrates the bodyminds deemed ugly, defective, or unviable, that ugliness is the locus of the fool's sanctity.

[31] Priscilla Hunt, "Holy Foolishness as a Key to Russian Culture," in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, 1.

[32] Likhachev and Panchenko, 83

[33] Ibid., 95.

[34] Ibid., 71.

[35] Ibid., 72-3.

"Though the holy fool is ugly and naked, the crowd should understand that within the earthly vessel [of his body] there resides an angelic soul. [...] Since *iurodstvo* polemically targeted conventional, 'philistine' behavioral norms, its public display of bodily ugliness implied the pursuit of spiritual and moral goals."[36]

In the second major section of their study, Likhachev and Panchenko argue for the understanding of holy foolery as "in institutionalized form of protest" in medieval Rus'.[37] That protest could manifest in a variety of ways: reproach of material wealth through their nakedness and homelessness, silence as a form of reprimand as Jesus was silent before Herod and Pilate, provocative denunciation of wickedness, or the kind of mockery or nuisance-making as expressed in the verb *шалѣть* used extensively in the vita of Avvakum.[38] As semiotic scholars in the Bakhtinian tradition, Likhachev and Panchenko find this mocking protest the most compelling of all, and structure their study around the communicative functions of mocking laughter. Here they address perhaps the most iconic holy foolish protest-spectacle: the fool's mocking denunciation of the tsar. Noting that the numerous and famous tales and legends of holy fools denouncing tsars make drawing out historical fact from fictional embellishment nearly impossible, they write:

> If the fool's protest allows for no exceptions, and he makes no distinctions about whom he exposes, then he must include the tsar. Moreover, he must chastise the tsar more often and more severely, since a ruler's crimes are highly visible and more terrible in their consequences. Under such circumstances, a protest that is by nature moral acquires maximum social significance. [...] it is not only possible but even inevitable that the holy fool come into direct contact with the tsar.[39]

Likhachev and Panchenko continue that "Because the holy fool protests in the name of humane values, he condemns violations of Christian morality rather than flaws in the social structure, not the

[36] Ibid., 96.

[37] Ibid., 143.

[38] Ibid., 101-6.

[39] Ibid., 121.

status quo but persons; therefore, in principle, it makes no difference to him whether he is exposing a beggar or a magnate."[40] In this way, the tradition of social protest in holy foolery as described by the authors sharply diverges from parallels recognized in disability studies and crip politics: the holy fool may chastise the tsar, but they are ultimately not a serious threat to the autocrat's power (and thus are permitted to live), whereas crip protest condemns precisely the structural status quo and those 'flaws in the social structure' that produce injustice.

That *The 'World of Laughter' in Old Russia* produced an almost immediate paradigm shift in scholarship on holy foolery is apparent by the responding article by Iuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii the following year in the journal *Issues in Literature* [*Вопросы литературы*]. Even as they brought forth some significant critiques of Likhachev and Panchenko's argument, they called the book "a real achievement of scholarship, which future scholars one way or another cannot avoid taking into consideration" [реальное достижение науки, с которым так или иначе не смогут не считаться будущие исследователи].[41] The breakthrough of the book, they write, is that its "object of study is not the [source] texts themselves, but the texts as part of a common cultural stratum, inseparably linked to behavior" [объектом изучения здесь являются не тексты как таковые, а тексты как часть общекультурной толщи, неразрывно связанные с поведением].[42] They see the book's value, furthermore, in its posing a whole new series of questions which future scholars will be compelled to address.

For answering those questions going forward (and, of course, raising new ones), Lotman and Uspenskii propose a few clarifications and directions. As a first step, they recommend clarifying the terms 'world of laughter' [смеховой мир] and 'culture of laughter' [смеховая культура]. Specifically,

[40] Ibid.

[41] Iuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, "Novye aspekty izucheniia kul'tury Drevnei Rusi," *Voprosy Literatury* 3 (1977), 165. Translation mine.

[42] Ibid., 151.

"it would be worth differentiating the concept of 'culture of laughter' in this form, as it takes shape in Western European sources, from the specifically Russian phenomena described by the authors" [следовало бы разграничить понятие "смеховой культуры" в том ее виде, как она обрисовывается на западноевропейском материале, от специфически русских явлений, описываемых авторами].[43] In other words, Bakhtin's theories of carnival laughter are based in French (Catholic) medieval folk culture as depicted by François Rabelais; if it is indeed applicable in whole or in part to Russia (Orthodoxy), more groundwork needs to be done so that such application isn't taken for granted. This concern parallels my own reasoning for using the holy fool as a central archetype for this study as a way to determine what from disability studies is applicable or useful in the Russian literary context, rather than taking for granted that a scholarly discipline developed in Western Europe and North America can be applied wholesale to the Russian literary canon. For the same reason, in this study I am judicious in applying Likhachev and Panchenko's Bakhtinian framework only where mocking laughter is especially salient, rather than as a whole.

Lotman and Uspenskii recommend such a clarification on laughter because they have concerns about the congruence of laughter and sanctity in Orthodox Rus'. Likhachev and Panchenko themselves note that "Christianity generally and Orthodoxy in particular have always had an ambiguous relationship to laughter. The line of thought that considers laughter sinful has always predominated in Orthodoxy."[44] In Lotman and Uspenskii's view, that relationship is more antagonistic than ambiguous. They write that "The definitive 'forms of laughter' operant in the medieval Russian cultural system contain no manner of ambivalence and are not located outside the realm of official medieval ('serious') culture. […] Saintliness allows for ascetic austerity and a serene, gracious smile, but excludes laughter" [Определенные "образы смеха", активные в системе

[43] Ibid., 152.

[44] Likhachev and Panchenko, 106.

русской средневековой культуры, не несут в себе никакой амбивалентности и не находятся вне мира официальной средневековой ("серьезной") культуры. [...] святость допускает и аскетическую суровость, и благостную улыбку, но исключает смех].[45]

One facet of this objection is that codified Orthodox forms of sanctity make less room for laughter than Catholic models. Another is that the more strictly binarized culture of medieval Rus' would understand such laughter not as a third-space 'anti-culture' as in the Bakhtinian model, but as the direct opposite of holy: Satanic or demonic. "If the 'Bakhtinian' laughing person found himself outside of medieval values – wasn't saved and didn't perish, but lived – then that laughing blasphemer was still within the medieval world. Plunging into the abyss of death, renouncing God, he did not renounce the idea of God. Moving to the side of Satan, he switched locations within the hierarchy, but did not negate its existence" [Если "бахтинский" смеющийся человек был вне средневековых ценностей - не спасался и не погибал, а жил, то хохочущий кощун - внутри средневекового мира. Ринувшись в бездну гибели, отвергнув Бога, он не отверг идеи Бога. Перейдя в стан сатаны, он переместился в иерархии, а не опроверг факт ее существования].

Finally, and most seriously in my view, the outrageous, aggressive, and provocative behavior of the holy fool nevertheless does not match Bakhtinian laughter closely enough to merit application of that theory unequivocally. The holy fool, contentious though that tradition has been throughout the history of the Orthodox Church, is all the same *not* regarded as Satanic because he is not quite a laughing figure; their provocation and its stakes are deadly serious. "Of course, Old Russian consciousness allotted play to a sharply circumscribed and comparatively narrow sphere. The world of serious, especially religious values was omitted from the sphere of play [...] In relation to the above, it is doubtful that the holy fool's behavior would have been understood in the context of

[45] Lotman and Uspenskii, 152-3.

play" [Известно, что древнерусское сознание отводило игре четко очерченную и сравнительно узкую сферу. Мир серьезных, а тем более религиозных ценностей был из сферы игры изъят. [...] В связи со сказанным возникает и сомнение в том, что поведение юродивого воспринималось в контексте игры].[46] In light of each of these compelling critiques, and further nuanced reworkings of the Bakhtinian view on holy foolery, this study utilizes largely the concepts of holy foolery as spectacle and protest and does not incorporate the aspects of carnival laughter except where play is especially salient. For the most part, although they may incorporate elements of laughter in moments, the texts analyzed in this study from a disability justice lens are also (after)life-and-death serious in tone.

Each of the definitions and frameworks for holy foolery overviewed above have their slight variations, but together create a picture of Old Russian or hagiographical foolery with clear core elements. As literary writers began to take up the archetype of the holy fool for literary purposes, the criteria of what makes a holy fool became progressively looser over time. To ensure the integrity of the fool/crip synthesis posed in this study as an interpretive tool, my choice of literary source material is limited to texts that both explicitly reference holy foolery by name and meet each of the following common criteria in their invocation of holy foolery: 1. the abjection, othering, or characterization of the holy fool figure's bodymind as in some way defective, abnormal, or deficient; 2. a prominent element of disruption or protest against immorality and/or injustice; 3. characterization of the holy fool figure as in some way connected to or channeling a higher or divine truth; and 4. positioning of the holy fool figure against some kind of normative spectator, whether in narrative or involving the reader themselves as spectator.

[46] Ibid., 160-1.

Occasionally and in passing, scholars have connected holy foolery to conditions under the purview of disability studies, but without pursuing that connection further and without acknowledgement of the dynamics of oppression that link impairment to abjection. For instance, when Kobets summarizes that the holy fool "has been viewed as a religious type, as a historical reality, a socio-cultural phenomenon (sometimes under these auspices as a mental case), and as a literary creation," she does not pause to examine what she means by the phrase 'a mental case,' or what it means for her to uncritically reproduce such stigmatizing language in a professional scholarly context.[47] Additionally, Sergei Ivanov writes that "It would be legitimate, for example, to study holy foolery in the context of a history of psychiatry (that is, to look at medieval descriptions of holy foolery and consider which currently known mental disorders they may fit)," but his book does not pursue such an approach.[48] As will be shown in this dissertation (especially in Chapters One and Four), holy foolery and psychiatry represent fundamentally oppositional approaches to bodymind difference, and this suggestion to study holy foolery through the lens of psychiatry elides the intensely active role psychiatry has played in the construction of the 'normal' and 'defective' mind and in the oppression of those deemed the latter. Furthermore, the task of 'diagnosing' literary characters based on the psychiatric categorizations of defect is not widely considered a useful or valuable approach to research. Ivanov also reproduces stigma elsewhere in his book, writing that "a holy fool is someone whose behaviour is no different from that of any madman (or, more broadly, than any other trouble-maker or delinquent)," and that definitions of holy foolery "could therefore be applied to a cripple, or to a madman."[49] The hybrid crip-foolish framework posed in this dissertation – one that would find uncritically calling a person *a mental case*, *a madman*, or *a cripple*

[47] Kobets, 16.

[48] Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, 3.

[49] Ibid., 7, 246.

ethically unthinkable – is largely experimental, though it does build on a wide range of other models of bodymind difference.

Disability studies

The primary intervention of this dissertation is to analyze the holy fool's function in Russian literature through the lens of disability studies. At the present moment, disability studies is a new and promising direction for Russian literary studies, and we are fortunate to have excellent models for literary studies with a disability focus in literary studies of other languages and traditions. As Alice Hall writes in *Literature and Disability*,

> Disability perspectives can transform understandings of structure, genre and narrative form. These perspectives can destabilise established theoretical paradigms in literary criticism and provide a fresh, often provocative approach to analyzing all literary texts. Literary representations of disability open up discussions about some of the most pressing issues of our age: about austerity, empathy, minority status, social care and citizenship. They provide creative opportunities for close reading, but they can also initiate a re-imagination and a re-writing of literary and cultural history.[50]

The following section will provide a brief overview of literary or cultural disability studies as I will use it further in this study, including the development of models for understanding disability as a social and political, but still embodied, phenomenon.

Disability studies has its roots in activism and campaigns for social change by and for disabled people. For that reason, again as with other critical studies of identity, an ethos of disability justice and a push for positive change for living disabled people – what Ato Quayson calls the "ethical core" of disability studies – is a foundational element of disability scholarship, and one that I aim to model in this dissertation as an example of what politically engaged disability scholarship can look like in Slavic studies. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the scholarly discipline of disability studies was therefore focused mostly on the social sciences, oriented toward projects like informing policy,

[50] Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

improving healthcare outcomes, counteracting stigma, etc. Scholars in the humanities then began taking up disability as an object and lens of study in the late 1980s and 1990s, with scholars such as Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Lennard Davis, David T. Mitchell and Susan L. Snyder, and Michael Berube using literary texts and other cultural products such as film, television, advertising as sources for their investigations into social constructions of the 'normal' body, the operation of disability as metaphor, and other questions of importance to this dissertation.[51]

Alice Hall identifies a "first wave" of cultural or literary disability studies, similar to earlier projects of feminist studies and queer studies, "focused on revealing and recuperating this wealth of works by disabled authors and intellectuals, and on analysing fictional characters and existing works of literary or cultural theory that engage with disability."[52] That project still has great value, especially in Russian literary studies where that work is just now beginning, but Hall emphasizes that disability studies has the capacity for much more in addition. She identifies several key debates in contemporary Anglophone disability studies, including the role and potential of empathy or affect in literature around disability; the status of disability as metaphor in literary texts and the ethical considerations around metaphors of disability;[53] and productive intersections between cultural disability studies and fields such as feminism, queer theory, postcolonial theory, gender studies, etc.[54] Another ongoing need for disability studies Hall identifies is to put pressure on the "idea of a unifying language, identity or disability culture" by investigating disability in a global context, beyond the Western European and North American contexts in which it was originally developed.[55] It is my

[51] For more detailed histories of disability studies as an academic field, see Garland Thomson, "Disability Studies: A Field Emerged" and Davis, "Crips Strike Back."

[52] Hall, 32.

[53] Susan Sontag famously writes on metaphorization of tuberculosis and cancer (and, in an updated edition, AIDS) in *Illness as Metaphor*.

[54] Ibid., 31-4.

[55] Ibid., 7.

intention to contribute to this necessary development by investigating which tools of disability studies operate in synchronicity with Russian literary contexts.

The first major question to be decided here is what the term disability means, as this word at times refers to a theoretical model, standpoint of knowledge, social category situated differently in different times and places, political identity or coalition, object of study and more, or any combination of these. As with holy foolery, every scholar can give definitions with slightly different nuances and areas of focus, though taken together an overlapping core emerges: disability is produced by some combination of social, environmental, and bodily conditions, and it is a cultural-political identity rather than a purely medical phenomenon or individual trait. In the entry "Disability" for their co-edited volume *Keywords for Disability Studies*, Rachel McAdams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin acknowledge that "the meanings we attribute to disability are shifting, elusive, and sometimes contradictory."[56] They continue:

> Disability encompasses a broad range of bodily, cognitive, and sensory differences and capacities. It is more fluid than most other forms of identity in that it can potentially happen to anyone at any time, giving rise to the insiders' acronym for the nondisabled, TAB (for temporarily able-bodied). [...] Disability brings together people who may not agree on a common definition or on how the category applies to themselves and others.[57]

That same range and fluidity that makes disability and disability communities difficult to define, furthermore, are qualities that make disability "such a rich concept for scholars, activists, and artists."[58]

Definitions of disability in its many forms often refer to a contrast of 'the medical model,' 'the social model,' and other proposed theoretical models. These first two models will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, but I will briefly review them here for definitional purposes. The medical

[56] Rachel McAdams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, "Disability," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel McAdams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, 5-11 (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5.

[57] Ibid., 5-6.

[58] Ibid., 6.

model of disability predates the disability rights movement and disability studies as a field; Tobin Siebers writes in *Disability Theory* that disability "has been a medical matter for as long as human beings have sought to escape the stigma of death, disease, and injury."[59] In the medical model, disability is understood as "an individual defect lodged in one person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capacity of a human being."[60] In *Introducing Disability Studies*, Ronald J. Berger describes the medical model as "an essentialist approach that defines disability as a property of the individual body rather than the social environment and that is concerned with matters related to the etiology, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments."[61] Pushing back on this model as reductive and harmful, disability activists and scholars have instead shown disability to be a result of injustice rather than defect.

British disability activists in the 1970s campaigned for a social-constructionist understanding of disability, which posits that "it is not an individual's impairment or adjustment but the socially imposed barriers – the inaccessible buildings, the limited modes of transportation and communication, the prejudicial attitudes – that construct disability as a subordinate social status and devalued life experience."[62] In 1976, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) called for a distinction between impairment, which they defined as "lacking all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ, or mechanism of the body" and disability, which they defined as "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities."[63] This social model of disability was then

[59] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 3.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ronald J. Berger, *Introducing Disability Studies* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 2013), 26.

[62] Ibid., 27.

[63] Colin Barnes and G. Mercer, *Disability* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 11.

theorized by scholars such as Irving Kenneth Zola, Mike Oliver, and Susan Wendell in the mid-late 1980s and early 1990s.[64] According to the social model, impairment is located in the body as a functional limitation; disability is created through a social process, in which an ableist society disables individuals through exclusion, discrimination, and barriers to access. The social model has proven to be a powerful political tool for the disability rights movement: Tom Shakespeare argues that its impact can be seen in the creation of disability rights and justice movements, in its emphasis on the need for societies to remove barriers to access instead of 'fix' individual bodies, and in the psychological shift that facilitated the development of a shared identity among people with a wide range of impairments.[65] However, scholars such as Mark Osteen, Bill Hughes, and Kevin Patterson began to critique its Cartesian dichotomy of impairment/physical and disability/social and the overall limits of social-constructivist definitions of disability. Those limits include a difficulty theorizing phenomena such as pain, embodied knowledge, and disabilities that do not fit neatly into the impairment/disability distinction such as cognitive and learning disabilities, chronic illness and fatigue, mental illness, etc.

Since the development of the social model, many theorists have posed modified, updated, or alternative models of disability, which have "rejected splits between mind and body, and between the medical and the social."[66] Just a few will be briefly listed here. Sociologists Bryan Turner and Collin Samson write of a "phenomenology of the body" in *Medical Power and Social Knowledge*, in which he both acknowledges "the body itself as the product of cultural practices" and that "body pain, for

[64] For Oliver's own reflections on how the social model has been (mis-)understood and critiqued since its introduction, see Oliver, "The Social Model of Disability: Thirty Years On," *Disability & Society*. 28, no. 7 (October 2013): 1024–1026.

[65] Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability," in *The Disability Studies Reader*. 2nd edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 197-204 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 199.

[66] Hall, 27.

example, cannot be properly understood as only socially constructed."[67] They argue that foundationalism and constructionism can coexist in understandings of the body. In *Disability Theory*, Siebers poses a theory of 'complex embodiment' that "raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body, but it emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability, such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body" and "views the economy between social representations and the body not as unidirectional as in the social model, or nonexistent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal."[68] Tom Shakespeare calls his theoretical approach "interactionist," focusing on the mutual interactions of individual bodyminds and social environments.[69]

One theoretical framework that is especially well-aligned with this project is crip theory, coined by Robert McRuer in his 2006 *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* and further developed by theorists such as Alison Kafer, Ellen Samuels, Sami Schalk, and others. McRuer blends elements of queer theory (especially Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuailty and Judith Butler's concept of 'critically queer') with disability studies' critique of normalcy, such as in Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland Thomson's work. He argues that able-bodiedness masquerades as nonidentity just as heterosexuality has been already shown to do, and that strategies for resistance can also be built on intersections of queerness and disability. He coins the term 'compulsory ablebodiedness,' "which in a sense produces disability," and argues that it "is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness: that, in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory ablebodiedness, and vice versa."[70]

[67] Bryan Turner and Collin Samson, Medical Power and Social Knowledge, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 1995), 24.

[68] Sibers, 25.

[69] Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability," *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed., 197-204. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 201.

[70] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

To contest this compulsory system that masquerades with the appearance of choice, McRuer draws on Butler's distinction in "Critically Queer" between 'virtually queer' and 'critically queer' to propose a cultural-political position of critically or "severely disabled', or 'crip,' an identity term reclaimed from the derogatory 'cripple' already in use in some disability communities:

> Everyone is virtually disabled, both in the sense that able-bodied norms are 'intrinsically impossible to embody' fully and in the sense that able-bodied status is always temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough. What we might call a critically disabled position, however, would differ from such a virtually disabled position; it would call attention to the ways in which the disability rights movement and disability studies have resisted the demands of compulsory able-bodiedness and have demanded access to a newly imagined and newly configured public sphere where full participation is not contingent on an able body.[71]

Furthermore, McRuer argues that both critical queerness and severe disability are about "collectively transforming (in ways that cannot necessarily be predicted in advance)—about cripping— the substantive, material uses to which queer/disabled existence has been put by a system of compulsory able-bodiedness, about insisting that such a system is never as good as it gets, and about imagining bodies and desires otherwise."[72] For a 2017 conference, "Breaking Silences, Demanding Crip Justice" at Wright State University, Julie Williams summarized crip theory as a perspective which "considers disability to be a viable identity variable to be recognized, acknowledged and celebrated" and "recognizes the importance of the intersectionality of one's disability identity with all other identity variables."[73] In her vision of crip justice, she writes that "the presence of disability need not be viewed as negative; something to be pitied, feared, hated or devalued. Rather, disability should be seen as a valued aspect of human diversity bringing value to the world. Crip justice is a call for action from within, rather than passivity."[74] In other words, a crip position echoes holy foolery's

[71] Ibid., 30.

[72] Ibid., 32.

[73] Julie Williams, "Crip Theory," Wright State University, https://www.wright.edu/event/sex-disability-conference/crip-theory

[74] Ibid.

aggressive provocation to rethink and counteract a corrupt status quo: now, however, not an individual's moral hypocrisy according to a Christian framework, but social-political systems that produce injustice and exclude disabled people from full participation in society.

In this dissertation, I follow the example of many contemporary disability scholars in using these latter models that recognize the combined roles of social and embodied conditions in theorizing disability. As with definitions of holy foolery, instead of choosing a single one of these models to use, I will implement their general strategy of integrating social-political and embodied factors in theorizations of disability and take up their differentiating nuances as they become especially relevant. For example, the importance of lesbian identity to Sophia Parnok's poetry makes crip theory, designed at the intersections of queer and disability theory, a particularly apt theoretical approach.

Also following the example of disability studies, as well as other critical fields of identity, this dissertation affirms the value of participatory scholarship. This perspective holds that a reader's own position in social networks of power is relevant to the experience of a text. In standpoint theory, this is connected to the ideas of situational knowledge and situational imagination. That is not to say that members of any social group automatically and uniformly see the world in a particular way because of their social position; such a position does a disservice to people of marginalized groups by flattening the complex realities of their lives and intersections of identity and experience.[75] Rather, as feminist epistemologist Nancy Hartstock wrote in 1997, "standpoint is a project, not an inheritance; it is achieved, not given."[76] That is, it is a political and ethical decision to prioritize certain knowledge and experience and to give them the authoritative weight of fact. It is relatively commonplace in

[75] For an overview of debates on positionality and standpoint, see Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination," *Feminist Theory* 3, no. 3 (December 2002): 315–33.

[76] Nancy C.M. Hartsock, "Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited'," *Signs* 22, no. 2 (1997), 372.

critical studies of identity to incorporate life-writing and autoethnography as legitimate sources of knowledge (for two powerful examples used later in this study, see Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time" and Schalk, "Coming to Claim Crip"), and this dissertation follows this methodological model by incorporating in some places my own experience as a disabled reader as it applies to literary analysis from a disability perspective. This dissertation prioritizes disabled readers of Russian literature and values the contributions of our perspectives in scholarship.

Finally, it is my intention for this dissertation and for all future work that stems from it to deliberately keep in mind what Ato Quayson calls the "ethical core" of disability studies. The stakes are always high for work in disability. As Siebers writes in *Disability Theory*, "Here too I am concerned with the forms of violence that injure human beings by creating categories or ideas that risk depriving them of rights in political and psychological contexts."[77] Critical understanding of and competency addressing disability in respectful and compassionate ways is necessary to counteract the entrenchment of ideas that deprive disabled people of full participation in literary and other cultural production, including criticism. Quayson reflects on this necessity in the conclusion to *Aesthetic Nervousness*, reflecting on a public discussion of disability, rights, and representation: "I kept asking myself both then and afterward: what is the relation between *Aesthetic Nervousness* and an occasion such as this, between a discussion of the representation of disability in literature and the condition of the lives of disabled persons on the streets of the city where I grew up? What, in short, is *the* point?"[78] Quayson argues that the ethical core of disability studies can only be fully realized when scholars (including and especially outside of the specialty of disability studies itself) practice "a rigorous set of reading practices alive to the implications of disability."[79] As part of that rigorous set

[77] Siebers, 7.

[78] Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 207-8. Emphasis original.

[79] Ibid., 208.

of reading practices, Quayson charges readers to remember that in taking up questions of disability in the literary aesthetic domain, we also always necessarily take up disability as part of a totality of textual representation, as a "threshold that opens up to other questions of a textual and also ethical kind."[80]

In other words, disability is never isolated to the literary aesthetic realm; when we write and speak about disability in literature, we're also writing and speaking about disabled people in life, and we have an ethical responsibility to honor the full humanity of disabled people. We must be diligent to the political implications of our analyses of even the smallest aesthetic details and fully internalize the reality that disabled people are also readers, writers, creators, participants in cultural production, and sacred.

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[80] Ibid.

No one believes this body.
Kay Ulanday Barrett, "Constant Dissonance: Our Noise Is Dangerous"

I. Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*

A stepping stone from hagiographical to literary formulations of holy fools and disability is formed by Pushkin's play *Boris Godunov* dramatizing the historical Time of Troubles [Смутное время], the contentious interregnum between the death in 1598 of Tsar Fedor I Ioannovich (son of Tsar Ioann Groznyi or Ivan the Terrible), last of the Rurikid dynasty, and the accession in 1613 of Tsar Mikhail I Fedorovich, first of the Romanov dynasty. Specifically, it dramatizes the challenge to the reign of Tsar Boris Fedorovich Godunov, regent and then first non-Rurikid tsar from 1585-1605, by Grigorii Otrepiev, historically known as the first of three False Dmitriis [Лжедмитрий I] or pretenders to the throne, who ruled as tsar from 1605 until his death in 1606.[81] Pushkin's play, published in its final, censored version as *Boris Godunov [Борис Годунов]* in 1831 but originally written as *A Comedy about Tsar Boris and Gishka Otrepiev [Комедия о Царе Борисе и о Гришке Отрепьеве]* in 1824-25, is based on the historical research on this period presented in Nikolai Karamzin's 12-volume *History of the Russian State* [*Истории государства Российского*, 1803-26]. It depicts the very era in which the hagiographical and legendary holy fool figure was at peak popularity and includes a famous scene dramatizing an encounter between a holy fool, Nikolka, and Tsar Boris Godunov. At the crux of both versions is a moral crisis that drives Boris's characterization: his alleged murder of the true Tsarevich Dmitrii, last living son of Ivan the Terrible.

Always connected with literary depictions of Russian holy fools, as I argue in this dissertation's introduction, is a complex negotiation of disability and normalcy, and *Boris Godunov* is no exception. At the surface, there does not seem to be much in the play *about* disability, but

[81] The fictionalized character based on Otrepiev in Pushkin's play is alternately named in the text as Grigorii Otrep'ev, Grishka [Otrep'ev], the False Dmitrii, and the Pretender [Самозванец]: all refer to the same person.

disability is a spectre that haunts the story just as the dead tsarevich haunts Tsar Boris. It is present not only in the holy fool scene, but also in questions of pretending (to the throne and to other things), authenticity, and the locus of truth in the body. Consistent across both versions of the play are the converging narrative functions of disability and holy foolery: they represent potential to destabilize normative perspectives and structures (although this does not mean they automatically do so) and call attention to tensions of truth and pretending in discourse and in embodiment.

Which Boris Godunov?

There are two major threads in scholarship on *Boris Godunov* that, while they are not the direct subject of this study, do have an impact on how the play is interpreted through other lenses. For that reason, it is worth briefly overviewing them here. The first question concerns which version of the text to grant primacy: the published but censored 1831 *Boris Godunov*, or the original 1825 *Comedy about Tsar Boris and Gishka Otrepiev* unpublished in Pushkin's lifetime. The second issue, contingent on the prior question of which text to consider primary, is what genre to read it in: cases have been made for tragedy, comedy, historical tragedy in the vein of Shakespeare's histories, historical comedy, tragicomedy, and combinations of these.

On the question of which version to read, Chester Dunning has published the most robust scholarship arguing for consideration of the 1825 *Comedy* alongside the more canonically familiar 1831 *Boris Godunov*. Pushkin himself considered the *Comedy,* which he wrote in internal exile on his family's estate, to be his magnum opus, calling it his "favorite work" in correspondence to Peter Alexandrovich Pletnev in late October 1830 and to Nikolai Ivanovich Krivtsov in February 1831 and calling it "the one of my works which I love the most" when he sent a copy to Petr Iakovlevich

Chaadaev in January 1831.[82] Upon finishing it, he wrote to Petr Viazemskii on November 7, 1825, "My tragedy is finished; I reread it aloud, alone, and I clapped my hands and shouted, 'at a boy, Pushkin, at a boy, you son of a bitch!'"[83] The original play was met with great enthusiasm when read to peers in Petersburg salons, but Pushkin encountered many roadblocks to publishing, and the version made available to the public was considered a mixed success at best.[84] It was met with disappointment and confusion by contemporaries and later scholars who found it challenging if not impossible to effectively stage, given its awkward structure and lack of an expected unifying idea. The famous concluding line, "The People are silent" [Народ безмолвствует], sits at the center of much of the critical reception. It's not entirely clear whether this line is meant to be spoken or as a stage direction, how to stage such silence as the ending note of a play, where and how this silence positions the Crowd or the People as a potential historical actor in the Time of Troubles, and how readers are encouraged to parse the crowd's moral authority.

In the same letter to Viazemskii cited above, Pushkin also writes of some of the play's more subversive or provocative elements, "Although it is written in good spirit, there's no way I could hide my ears completely under the pointed cap of the holy fool."[85] In fact, most of the changes between versions seem small both in number and scope, but together they have a significant impact on the potential interpretations of the play. Often in later published editions, the changes would be noted in appendices or endnotes to the 1831 text. The *Comedy* was not published independently of *Boris Godunov* until Sergei Fomichev's annotated edition in 1993. In his chapter in *The Uncensored Boris*

82 Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, *The Letters of Alexander Pushkin*, translated by Thomas J. Shaw (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 434, 458, 449. Cited in Chester Dunning, "Rethinking the Canonical Text of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*," *The Russian Review* 60, no. 4 (2001): 569.

83 Pushkin, *Letters*, 261.

84 Dunning, "Rethinking the Canonical Text of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*," 570.

85 Pushkin, *Letters*, 261.

Godunov, "The World of Laughter in Pushkin's *Comedy*," Fomichev lays out the changes in chronological order:

In the original *Comedy*:

1. There is a different title, *Komediia o tsare Borise i o Grishke Otrep'eve*.
2. There is no dedication to Nikolai Karamzin.
3. There are three scenes that were omitted from the 1831 edition: scene 3 ("Maiden's Field. Novodevichy Convent"), scene 6 ("Monastery Wall"), and scene 13 ("Maryna's Dressing Room").
4. Scene 11 ("The Tsar's Place") is slightly longer, and scene 12 ("Cracow. Wisniowiecki's House") is significantly longer.
5. In scene 9 ("A Tavern on the Lithuanian Border"), Varlaam begins to sing the song "You walk past my cell, my dear one…").
6. Scene 18 ("Square in front of the Cathedral, Moscow") precedes scene 19 ("A Plain near Novgorod-Seversky").
7. The play ends as follows:

People
Long live Tsar Dmitry Ivanovich!
End of the comedy in which
the leading person is Tsar Boris Godunov
Glory be to the father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost,
AMEN.[86]

The changes fit in a neat list, but they completely change a reader or viewer's experience of the narrative. The title, for instance, guides our attention to the most important figure: either to Boris Godunov alone or to the equally weighted comparison of Tsar Boris Godunov and the Pretender Grishka Otrepiev. And the ending is not the baffling silence, but an equally challenging expression of support from the crowd, often read as the popular figure of a moral anchor, for a fraudulent pretender to the throne who is implied to have just murdered the tsar's wife and child. Regarding the order of scenes in Fomichev's point 6, placing the scene with the holy fool encounter (Scene 18, "Square in front of the Cathedral, Moscow" [Площадь перед собором в Москве]) immediately after Scene 17, "The Tsar's Council" [Царская дума], gives "the shade of the murdered young Dmitrii" a stronger presence than in the 1831 version, which moves Scene 19, "A plain near

[86] Sergei Fomichev, "The World of Laughter in Pushkin's *Comedy*," in *The Uncensored Boris Godunov* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 153.

Novgorod-Seversk" [Равнина близ Новгорода-Северского] in between Scenes 17 and 18, breaking that connection.[87]

Fomichev is not the first critic to take an interest in the original version, however: when documents were released in the 1880s indicating the extent of Pushkin's struggle with imperial censors to publish the play in any form, an interpretive tug of war began over not just the play, but also the poet. Fomichev writes:

> Publication of those documents also helped transform Pushkin's reputation in the minds of many people from that of a privileged, somewhat frivolous poet to a liberal champion of greater freedom and civil rights for the Russian people. The image of Pushkin as a champion of the *narod* [the people], however, made supporters of the increasingly reactionary imperial government so nervous that conservative scholars launched an all-out campaign to rescue "their" Pushkin – "Russia's national poet" – from the radicals. The result was an officially sanctioned portrayal of Pushkin as a conservative supporter of autocracy. Among other things, that required rejection of the 1825 version of *Boris Godunov* in favor of the less provocative 1831 edition.[88]

It might then seem easy to unequivocally elevate the *Comedy* above *Boris Godunov* as an original text, as purer and more authentic in comparison to the "compromised" text of the latter, as does Sergei Fomichev in his final assessment.[89] But there are more complicating questions concerning the issue of authorial intent. Pushkin in the 1830s was not the same exiled, rebellious Pushkin of the earlier 1820s, and the political atmosphere had changed as well; it is possible that over time he rethought and changed some details of his own accord.

Based on Pushkin's preference for the *Comedy* and his lack of surprise at *Boris Godunov*'s cool reception, Dunning names the published *Boris Godunov* "more the product of censorship, fear, and

[87] Ibid., 149.

[88] Ibid., 572.

[89] Sergei Fomichev, "The World of Laughter in Pushkin's *Comedy*," 154.

political correctness at the imperial court than it was the product of free artistic revision."[90] Another factor is Zhukovsky's revisions and influence on the publication. Dunning reminds us that

> It is important to remember that gaining permission to publish the play was a sort of accidental collateral benefit, a by-product of the tsar's protection of Zhukovsky from scurrilous, unwarranted attacks. The fate of Pushkin's *Comedy* provides another example of cultural policy by *proizvol* [arbitrariness] and of why it is so difficult to reconstruct the process of creating artworks in authoritarian systems – because tyrants don't even follow their own rules but are often swayed instead by nonsense, neuroses and weird dependencies.[91]

Altogether, it is difficult to say for sure which changes to the *Comedy* in the six-year process of cyclical revision, censorship, and rejection came from Pushkin himself, Tsar Nikolai himself, other censors, Zhukovsky, or other pressures. With all this in mind, both Dunning and Caryl Emerson recommend reading both versions side by side: "Optimally, the play could have two canonical versions. Both versions are masterpieces (although we argue that the one less assaulted by outside forces is more masterful). Both are biographically as well as artistically significant. But this significance attaches to different junctures in Pushkin's brief, driven life."[92] In this study, I will follow that advice: I will keep both versions in mind for my reading, and I will note where the changes made for publication make a significant impact on interpretation.

The other major debate in scholarship of both versions is what genre to read them in. In *Russian Drama from Its Beginnings to the Age of Pushkin*, Simon Karlinsky reads *Boris Godunov* in the tradition of Shakespearean drama:

> In honor of Shakespeare, Pushkin dispensed with the unities of time, place, and (though he denied it) action, something that only the Empress Catherine had the audacity to do before in Russia. The violation of the unity of style, a unity previously taken for granted in Russian drama, is flaunted by mixing scenes in blank verse, rhymed verse, and prose. The central conception, however, is a profoundly eighteenth-century one, because *Boris Godunov* is an

[90] Dunning, "The Tsar's Red Pencil: Nicholas I and Censorship of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*," *Slavic and East European Journal* 54 No. 2 (2010), 240.

[91] Ibid., 243. Brackets included in original. The "unwarranted attacks" refer to Faddei Bulgarin's campaign against Zhukovsky.

[92] Dunning and Caryl Emerson, "Concluding Remarks: *Boris Godunov* and the Russian Literary Canon," in *The Uncensored Boris Godunov*, 234.

> instance of "adaptation to our customs" of Shakespeare's historical plays just as Kniazhnin's *Vladimir and Iaropolk* was of Racine's *Andromaque*.[93]

Caryl Emerson encourages readers approaching any version of the play to follow a Bakhtinian definition of genre as conceptual rather than medium-dependent, which Bakhtin renamed a "chronotope"; a "shorthand for the conviction that the very structure of narrative carries within itself laws of causality and plausibility."[94] The author of any work forms a chronotope by making concrete assumptions about the laws of time and space in the fictional world, determining what kinds of people and events are possible in that world. The chronotope thereby forms the causality of a narrative world and sets parameters by which the work can be interpreted. In his 1825 correspondence with Viazemskii, Pushkin himself called the work a "Romantic tragedy" and at other times referred to the work alternately as comedy and tragedy.[95] Even keeping its genre ambiguity in mind, the chronotope associated with the play has an impact on its interpretive possibilities.

The original version was named a comedy [комедия], although the chronotope associated with that word has changed dramatically over time.[96] In Pushkin's era, the Russian term reflected European developments in comedic drama, encompassing a wide range of non-tragic and non-epic theatre. Emerson observes a pattern in Pushkin's characteristic genre-blending: after 1825, as Pushkin revised and reworked the play, the appellation comedy gradually transitioned to an assertion of tragedy. There is no shortage of comic behavior in the *Comedy*, but one of the innovations of the play is to attribute to comic activity the weight of historical significance and agency. Emerson writes that comic characters "have the right to be inept as historical agents, indifferent to destiny, addicted

93 Simon Karlinsky, *Russian Drama from Its Beginnings to the Age of Pushkin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 322.

94 Caryl Emerson, *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 5.

95 Pushkin, *Letters*, 261.

96 For more on the transformation of dramatic genres, see Karlinsky.

to simple pleasures, cynical toward the workings of justice."[97] Similarly, nineteenth-century European comedy as a genre is "a terrain, a tempo, a worldview for processing events and responses to events that is intrinsically hostile to pomposity and heroic self-absorption."[98] While maintaining that hostility toward neoclassical pomposity, Pushkin's comedy also grants comedic behavior historical agency: while the crowd's comic activity may or may not provide catharsis, it does pass serious judgment on power and is actively involved in the process of interpreting history.

In looking for language to describe the parallel operations of comedic and historical genre elements in the play, Emerson briefly considers "historical comedy" as a point of contrast to historical tragedy. She writes:

> To test the comedic-history hypothesis, one would have to take a piece of tragic history (say, Karamzin's account of the Fall of Boris) and recast it so as to reduce the distance, demote the language, focus on the present moment, refrain from prophetic authorial asides, allow intimate access to the loftiest heroes not only in their eloquent moments but also in their morbidly embarrassed ones, strive to make conspirators, tyrants, and martyrs look a bit ridiculous, and make the audience laugh. Most importantly, the playwright must make it seem as if chance events really mattered, perhaps even made all the difference.[99]

It's this last point that Emerson finds the most compelling argument for reading *Boris Godunov* in a genre of historical comedy: Pushkin's belief in chance as a tool of providence to shape events on a personal and historical scale.[100] However, on its own, Emerson also finds that historical comedy lacks some of the elements of seriousness or consequence necessary for conveying historical knowledge.

Emerson ultimately decides on a triple hybrid genre, a combination of historical tragedy and historical comedy: tragicomedy of history. Tragicomedy as it was known in Pushkin's time involved

[97] Emerson, "Tragedy, Comedy, Carnival, and History on Stage," in *The Uncensored Boris Godunov*, 158

[98] Ibid., 160.

[99] Ibid., 173-4.

[100] For more on Pushkin's changing attitudes toward chance, providence, and religion, see Felix Rashkolnikov, "Pushkin and Religion," *Russian Studies in Literature* 42, no. 1 (2006): 7-35.

"the interspersing of comic scenes throughout what is otherwise a tragedy, a display of elevated protagonists in domestic or private settings, and an ending designed to evoke a muted audience response: not punitive toward individuals, not cathartic via pity and terror, but also not set up for the happy marriage."[101] The ending of a tragicomedy is "compassionately suspended, sympathetic to the ambivalent, often compromised situation in which all parties find themselves," a description which Emerson finds particularly appropriate for the ending cheer on behalf of the Pretender in the original *Comedy*.[102] Bringing this hybrid genre to the tradition of the historical play offers a greater range of possible audience response and makes room for subtlety, paradox, and ambivalence in the interpretation of a period in Russian history with no shortage of those traits.

Carnival

Even with the abundance of genre blending evident in *Boris Godunov*, its original title makes it clear that its comedic elements are a vital factor in its success both as a text and as a staged performance. The scene "Square in front of the cathedral, Moscow" [Площадь перед собором в Москве], depicting an encounter between Tsar Boris and Nikolka the holy fool, especially invites us to read comedic elements in a Bakhtinian carnival mode. There exists some debate in scholarship as to the extent of carnival's utility as an interpretive tool for *Boris Godunov*; for the purposes of this study, it is worth identifying some useful points of analysis, especially regarding the liberatory potential of disruption, with which disability scholars and other scholars of critical theory deeply concern themselves.

Sergei Fomichev argues for reading *Boris Godunov* through the lens of carnivalization, identifying the carnivalesque elements of the *skomorokh* (a traveling minstrel of Russian folk culture)

[101] Ibid., 181.

[102] Ibid.

and the holy fool, "the two stock-in-trades of the medieval Russian comic world," as important factors in the success of the *Comedy* in its titular genre.[103] He writes that "in the course of working on the play Pushkin was to give these figures their genuine value, and not merely use them as assumed masks," claiming an interpretive significance for these comic figures beyond comic relief or even a momentary carnivalesque relief.

Carnival as Mikhail Bakhtin described in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* [*Проблемы поэтики Достоевского*, 1963] and in *Rabelais and His World* [*Творчество Франсуа Рабле и народная культура средневековья и Ренессанса*, 1965] is a phenomenon derived from analysis of medieval European popular festival traditions, in which the established hierarchies, rituals, and ethos of a given society are briefly dissolved through performances of laughter and the grotesque which invert the established cultural structure. Bakhtin calls carnival "life turned inside out" or "the reverse side of the world"; "what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it – that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)."[104] Bakhtin writes of carnival less as a specific historical phenomenon but more as a sensibility best exemplified by such medieval festivals, especially in the act of mock crowning a carnival king (thereby briefly and symbolically de-crowning the true monarch). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin delineates several categories of carnival sensibility: the "free and familiar contact" among people who ordinarily would not enjoy such contact on equal footing; eccentricity, or the open embracing of behaviors that may be natural but unacceptable in ordinary circumstances; *mésalliance* in which the rigid hierarchical binaries of medieval life are brought together (for example, Heaven and hell, the peasant and the

[103] Fomichev, 138.

[104] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122-3.

King); and the profanation of the sacred or the proper in favor of celebrating the obscene, grotesque, bodily, or even blasphemous.[105]

According to Bakhtin, carnival sensibility, rooted in the body and embodiment as it is, cannot be completely verbalized or rendered into language. Carnival is not written; it is performed through laughter. It can, however, be "transposed into the language of literature," bringing elements of that carnival sense of the world to written culture.[106] The concept of transposition is especially relevant for this chapter: as Pushkin transposes the historical Time of Troubles as written in Karamzin's *History of the Russian State* (itself a transposition of Old Russian chronicles and other prior sources into a national history) into literary text, he also transposes elements of the carnivalesque 'anti-culture' of medieval Russia. Bakhtin calls this transposition the *carnivalization* of literature [карнавализация] and argues that François Rabelais and Fedor Dostoevsky are exemplary writers of carnivalization. He even includes *Boris Godunov* as the final illustrative example of *Rabelais and His World*, posing the question,

> Let us imagine Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* without the scenes involving the massed people; such a conception of Pushkin's drama would be not only incomplete but distorted. Each character in the play expresses a limited point of view. The authentic meaning of the epoch and its events is disclosed in these crowd scenes, where Pushkin lets the people have the last word.[107]

The crowd's last word, however – at least in the 1831 *Boris Godunov* – is silence; how can we decipher silence as the authentic meaning of the epoch, and how does silence fit into carnival sensibility? If the holy fool is understood to speak for a silent people, is his word also the last word?

Bakhtin's study of carnival was primarily centered in medieval Europe, especially France; the work of analyzing similar cultural forms in medieval Russia was taken up and continued by

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid, 122.

[107] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 474.

Likhachev, Panchenko, and Panyrko in *Laughter in Old Russia,* as discussed in this dissertation's introduction. In defining laughter as a phenomenon that "contains within itself the destructive and the creational simultaneously" [заключает в себе разрушительное и созидательное начала одновременно], they follow Bakhtin's theoretical model of laughter.[108] In many ways, they find, holy fools in hagiography and folk tales do align with the European modes of carnival laughter as exemplified in Rabelais. Their model of analyzing Old Russian culture, including and especially its holy fools, through a carnival lens became very popular in both Russian and Western scholarship.[109] However, they find that the role of the grotesque, which disability scholars often find compelling, is more pronounced in European carnival than in parallel phenomena in the South and East Slavic Middle Ages.[110] In "Laughter as Spectacle" [Смех как зрелище], Panchenko argues that holy fools occupy an intermediate position in the binaries of Bakhtinian culture/anticulture or the Old Russian world of laughter [смеховой мир]/world of the Church:

> One could say that without minstrels and jesters, there would not have been holy fools. [...] At the same time, holy foolishness could not exist without the Church: it finds moral justification in the Gospels and takes its characteristic distinction from the Church. The holy fool balances on the divide between the risible and the serious, embodying a tragic aspect of the world of laughter. Holy foolishness is, in a way, a "third world" of Old Russian culture.[111]
>
> [Можно сказать, что без скоморохов и без шутов не было бы юродивых [...] Но юродство невозможно и без церкви: в Евангелии оно ищет свое нравственное оправдание, берет от церкви тот дидактизм, который так для него характерен. Юродивый балансирует на грани между смешным и серьезным, олицетворяя свою трагический вариант смехового мира. Юродство – как бы "третий мир" древнерусской культуры.][112]

[108] Likhachev, Panchenko, and Ponyrko, *Smekh v drevnei Rusi*, 3.

[109] Emerson, "Tragedy, Comedy, Carnival, and History on Stage," 163.

[110] Likhachev, Panchenko, and Ponyrko, *Smekh v drevnei Rusi*, 5.

[111] A. M. Panchenko, "Laughter as Spectacle," trans. Priscilla Hunt, Svitlana Kobets, and Bethany Braley, in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2011), 41-2.

[112] Ibid., "Smekh kak zrelishche," in *Smekh v drevnei Rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), 72.

Bakhtin's theorization of European carnival does not allow for such a third world; one is either laughing or serious, performing the ordinary cultural order or the topsy-turvy anticultural inversion. The moment one begins to laugh, the transition is made. No one lives in-between. The holy fool, though, can both "unify the world of laughter and the world of pious solemnity" [объединяет мир смеха и мир благочестивой серьезности] and "balances on the edge of the comic and the tragic" [балансирует на рубеже комического и трагического]. For this reason Panchenko calls the holy fool a "grotesque figure" [гротескный персонаж].[113]

The World of Laughter in Old Russia, Likhachev and Panchenko's first version of the study without Ponyrko's additions, was reviewed by Iuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii in the journal *Issues in Literature* [*Вопросы литературы*]; they offer a different perspective on the application of carnival theory to holy foolery. Their summary of Bakhtinian laughter separates it completely from matters of faith and state:

> Laughter in the framework of medieval culture as created by Bakhtin lies outside of the strict religious and ethical confines imposed on people's behavior at that time. Bakhtinian laughter, in its vulgar, rebellious, and debased nature, reverses the socio-ethical hierarchy of the Middle Ages; it is non-religious and non-national in essence.
>
> Смех в концепции средневековой культуры, построенной М. Бахтиным, начало, лежащее вне религиозных и этических суровых ограничений, наложенных на поведение человека той поры. Своей народной, мятежной и обесценивающей природой смех, по Бахтину, отменяет социальноэтические иерархии средних веков, он безрелигиозен и безгосударствен по существу.[114]

Under this reading of carnival, in contrast with that of Likhachev and Panchenko, 'playing' the fool for Christ's sake takes on a different social role than the playful mode of carnival. I would argue that a reversal of hierarchies does not destroy or remove those hierarchies, even temporarily; as seen in the characteristic crowning of the King of Fools, carnival inversion is still based on the social

113 Ibid.

114 Iuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii. "Novye aspekty izucheniia kul'tury Drevnei Rusi." *Voprosy Literatury* 3 (1977), 152.

structure that it rebels against. And even that satirical role reversal is understood by participants to have no lasting effects: the monarch is not truly threatened by the King of Fools, merely mocked for a moment.

Lotman and Uspenskii also doubt that the kind of play holy fools perform is analogous enough to the kind of play Bakhtin has in mind with carnival to fit well into the framework: "In connection with the above, a doubt arises that the holy fool's behavior was understood in the context of play. The holy fool's behavior is linked to the hierarchy of medieval evaluations of humanity." [В связи со сказанным возникает и сомнение в том, что поведение юродивого воспринималось в контексте игры. Поведение юродивого связано с иерархией средневековых оценок человека.][115] The distinction is made on two parts: that holy foolery is a part, even if a controversial one, of the Orthodox tradition (whereas carnival is anti-culture, anti-Church), and that the disruption of established order is not for the holy fool a temporary inversion, but a permanent and serious state of being. They write:

> "Therefore 'for his own sake' he performs not playful, but unambiguous and serious behavior. One can surmise that the real behavior of Old Russian holy fools oscillated between these two possibilities depending on whether he internalized the perspective of his audience or, on the other hand, compelled his audience to take his own position."
>
> [Поэтому "для себя" он реализует не игровое, а однозначное и серьезное поведение. Можно предположить, что реальное поведение древнерусских юродивых колебалось между этими двумя возможностями в зависимости от того, усваивал ли он себе точку зрения своих зрителей или, напротив, заставлял аудиторию принять его собственную позицию.][116]

On the whole, they write in conclusion that "defining such phenomena as 'comical' requires at a minimum additional argumentation" [определение этих феноменов как "смеховых" нуждается по крайней мере в дополнительной аргументации].[117]

[115] Ibid., 161.

[116] Ibid., 162.

[117] Ibid., 165.

Caryl Emerson summarizes Lotman and Uspenskii's objections to the Likhachev-Panchenko picture of carnival in the Russian Middle Ages: "In traditional Muscovite consciousness, the behavior of holy fools was neither magic (a contractual relationship, reliable and comforting), nor was it comic or incipiently democratic; it was strange and specular, meant to strike terror or awe in the audience."[118] Her own reservations about applying carnival theory to *Boris Godunov* follow similar lines. The first concerns poetics: carnival performance has its own semiotic system, but is decidedly extra-literary; she reads Pushkin's witty verbal and stylistic comedy as an obstacle to the crude, bodily, and gestural poetics of carnival. The second concerns guilt: the stain on Tsar Boris's conscience must be satisfactorily addressed by any interpretive system, but "carnival is not weighed down by the burden of memory, so essential for conscience."[119] She clarifies that "the fact that the present tense is sufficient for carnival is a major source of its strength and resilience," but the temporal and emotional landscape of *Boris Godunov* is quite different.[120] The third concerns history, a key element of Emerson's hybrid chronotope of 'tragicomedy of history': "Carnival – and even more, 'carnival laughter' – cannot be made historical."[121]

I agree with Emerson that since Bakhtin's carnival was created to analyze a Renaissance author writing about his own time, applying it to a historical play, written in the nineteenth century about the sixteenth, requires further justification. While it may be applicable to certain moments or aspects, Bakhtin's utopian laughter is not best suited as the primary theoretical approach to a text as historically grounded as *Boris Godunov*. There are undoubtedly moments in the text where carnivalesque laughter is at play, especially where the crowd as a collective character is concerned,

118 Emerson, "Tragedy, Comedy, Carnival, and History on Stage," 164.

119 Ibid., 167.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.

but the holy foolish element is too sacred and too serious in my view to be interpreted primarily through carnival.

Nikolka the Fool in the Iron Cap

The adjacent but not perfect applicability of carnival laughter to the disruptive potential of holy foolery and disability is fully evident in the scene "Square in front of the Cathedral, Moscow" [Площадь перед собором в Москве]. There, Tsar Boris and his attending boyars emerge into the public square and are confronted by Nikolka the holy fool, who only appears in this brief scene. The scene opens on a crowd gathered outside the cathedral, waiting for Boris to emerge and professing that Grigorii Otrepiev is the tsarevich ("Eternal remembrance for the living! They'll catch it for that, the godless scoundrels"[122] [Вечную память живому! Вот ужо им будет, безбожникам]).[123] While they are waiting, the introduction of the fool prepares us for a carnivalesque inversion:

> Third. Shh! There's a noise. It might be the Tsar.
> Fourth. No, it's the holy fool.
> (Enter holy fool wearing an iron cap hung with chains, surrounded by boys.)[124]
>
> Третий: Чу! шум. Не царь ли?
> Четвертый: Нет; это юродивый.
> Входит юродивый в железной шапке, обвешанный веригами, окруженный мальчишками.[125]

The initial confusion of the tsar and the fool by the crowd, the 'authentic meaning of the epoch' as Bakhtin writes, momentarily places them on equivocal standing, foreshadowing the encounter to come.

[122] A. S. Pushkin, *Comedy About Tsar Boris and Grishka Otrepiev,* trans. Antony Wood, in *The Uncensored Boris Godunov: The Case for Pushkin's Original Comedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 401.

[123] Ibid., *Komediia o Tsare Borise i o Grishke Otrep'eve, 1825,* introduction by Sergei Fomichev (Peterburg: Notabene, 1993), 162.

[124] Ibid., *Comedy*, 401-403

[125] Ibid., *Komediia*, 162.

The boys following Nikolka tease and mock him, and are chastised by an old woman nearby, who tells them to "Leave the blessed one alone, you little devils."[126] [Отвяжитесь, бесенята, от блаженного].[127] She asks Nikolka to pray for her, a sinner; he asks a kopek in exchange, which she readily gives. The fool prays for the old woman, and the boys in turn steal his coin. As Nikolka weeps, the Tsar emerges from the cathedral and the boyars distribute alms to the poor outside the cathedral. Nikolka runs up to them:

> *Holy Fool.* Boris! Boris! The children have insulted Nikolka!
> *Tsar.* Give him alms. Why is he crying?
> *Holy Fool.* The little children have insulted Nikolka… Have their throats cut, as you cut the young Tsarevich's.
> *Boyars.* Away with you, old fool! Seize the fool!
> *Tsar.* Leave him alone. Pray for me, blessed fool. *(Exit.)*
> *Holy Fool (after him).* No, no! No-one must pray for King Herod – The Mother of God forbids it.[128]
>
> Юродивый: Борис, Борис! Николку дети обижают.
> Царь: Подать ему милостыню. О чем он плачет?
> Юродивый: Николку маленькие дети обижают... Вели их зарезать, как зарезал ты маленького царевича.
> Бояре: Поди прочь, дурак! схватите дурака!
> Царь: Оставьте его. Молись за меня, бедный Николка. *(Уходит.)*
> Юродивый: *(ему вслед)* Нет, нет! нельзя молиться за царя Ирода — богородица не велит.[129]

The fool calls to the tsar with his Christian name, both denying the supreme authority of his title and appealing to him as an individual with his own conscience rather than as the embodiment of the state. Use of the tsar's Christian name calls into question his divine right to rule and thereby his divine authority; Godunov, after all, was not a dynastic ruler but an ascended regent. Nikolka also brings Godunov down to his level through use of the informal second-person address *ty*, speaking to him as if to a peer.

126 Ibid., *Comedy,* 403.

127 Ibid., *Komediia,* 162.

128 Ibid., *Comedy*, 405.

129 Ibid., *Komediia*, 164.

The fool's use of his own Christian name in the third person also makes this first address strange; Nikolka does refer to himself in first person elsewhere in this scene (for instance, "I've got a kopek"[130] [А у меня копеечка есть][131]), but not in his conversation with Godunov. His parallel use of Christian name for both himself and the tsar further establishes their carnivalesque leveling (but not reversal) of social standing. Whereas the fool's use of 'Boris' brings the tsar down to an individual level, his use of 'Nikolka' removes him from his own individual voice, as though he were speaking from outside himself. 'The children have insulted [обижают: hurt, wronged, taken advantage of] *me*' may sound more like a petty, personal offense, but 'the children have insulted *Nikolka*, a poor and innocent fool' is an injustice that merits intervention from a good Christian. The call to act on injustice is externalized through this rhetorical means, as though it may come from the Crowd, or from God, or from Godunov's own conscience.

For his own part, Godunov recognizes his role in this codified exchange and accepts the fool's rebuke. The boyars do not; they react with indignation and move to punish the fool, whom they call *durak*: a non-sanctified idiot. Godunov, brought down to a human level, parallels the old woman's request for a prayer, but unlike the pious woman he does not offer alms. And unlike the pious woman, he is not granted a prayer: he is instead compared to King Herod of Judea, who in the Gospel of Matthew (2:16-18) orders the execution of all male infants in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus's birth. This is Nikolka's second accusation against Godunov for ordering the execution of tsarevich Dmitrii, who is himself sanctified by the comparison to the Holy Innocents. This time, he has no opportunity to respond, deny, or defend himself, as the accusation is made after Godunov has left the stage. Like the crowd at the end of the play, Nikolka has the last word in declaring Godunov's fall.

130 Ibid., *Comedy*, 403.

131 Ibid., *Komediia*, 402.

This literary holy foolish encounter is entirely in accordance with hagiographical and folk cultural tradition. In fact, it strongly parallels the legend of Ivan the Terrible encountering Nikola Salos [the Fool] of Pskov, which S. A. Ivanov calls "the most famous episode in the history of Russian *iurodstvo*."[132] In *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, Ivanov traces the development of the legend from its first telling, based on the devastation in Novgorod and Pskov in 1570. The first account of the event, by German participant Heinrich Staden, includes an episode in which a rich peasant Mikula (Pskov dialect version of Nikola) told the Grand Prince that the violence had gone on enough and to go back whence he came. The Mikula in this account may have already been a legendary figure. This story – which originally does not contain enough elements to recognize Mikula as a holy fool – is transformed as it is retold in the *Pisarevskii Chronicle*, where Mikula is first named as a holy fool but still without many of the characteristic traits. Then the narrative began to take shape into its currently recognizable form through the 1572 accounts of Ivan the Terrible's courtiers Johan Taube and Elbert Kruse, the 1573 narrative by English envoy Jeromey Horsey, and the 1589 account by Giles Fletcher.[133] "Ivan the Terrible's encounter with the holy fool," Ivanov writes, "acquired such mythical 'resonance' that it was reproduced several times in the vitae of other saints" – including Arsenii of Novgorod and Vasilii the Blessed.[134] Soviet scholar N. Granovskaia proposes that Pushkin's most likely source for this legend is volumes 10 and 11 of Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*, which contain material on historical or legendary holy fools Vasilii the Blessed, Nikola Salos, and Ioann of the Iron Cap.[135] In that sense, Pushkin's Nikolka, like Nikola Salos himself, is more a mashup of holy foolish tropes than a reference to any particular saint in life.

[132] S. A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, trans. Simon Franklin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 291.
[133] Ibid., 292-7.
[134] Ibid., 299.
[135] N. Granovskaia, "Iurodivyi v tragedii Pushkina," *Russkaia Literatura* 2 (1964), 92-3.

The modeling of this brief scene on vitae and legends of medieval holy fools guides an interpretation to do the same. Very little is needed to convincingly establish this character as the holy fool archetype: the appellation by the fourth crowd member as a fool and his costume of iron cap and chains is enough to evoke the rest. We don't see in what other ways his foolishness manifests in his life, or anything else about his life outside of this scene. He is a one-dimensional fool, more of a narrative device than a complex character. Later iterations of holy fool types in literature, including all the ones in later chapters of this study, often blend holy foolery with some other form of disability (some currently recognized and some not): epilepsy, chronic illness, schizophrenia, addiction, autism, hysteria, madness, and others. In *Boris Godunov*, Pushkin still follows more of the hagiographical and folk cultural model in which the interior life or psychology of the fool character matters very little; what matters is the effect produced in the confrontation of the fool and the 'normal' but sinful person in power, with an audience of onlookers to receive the moral message.

While it may be intuitive to read this scene with carnival in mind, the scene is missing some of the key attributes that make a carnival performance. It does take place in a crowd, but the inversion of power is on an individual rather than a collective scale; and while it is provocative, it holds what Emerson calls the weight of guilt or responsibility – it's more likely to elicit a gasp of shock than a laugh. What makes carnival an alluring interpretive tool for such holy foolish encounters is the element of speaking truth to power, which can echo the liberatory potential of a carnival moment and is at the core of most holy foolish legends. That speech act of confronting power is what gives this moment its significance, but the capacity to read this encounter as the holy fool speaking for the people depends on which version is being read. In the original *Comedy*, with the ending of "Long live Tsar Dmitri Ivanovich," the holy fool cannot be speaking for the people in accusing Tsar Boris of murdering the tsarevich – for it cannot both be true that Boris had Dmitri Ivanovich murdered and that Dmitri Ivanovich comes to power. In the published *Boris Godunov*

there is also a discrepancy, in which the certainty with which the holy fool accuses Boris does not match the ambiguous silence of the ending scene. Of this paradoxical logic, Fomichev writes:

> It turns out that in the chaotic consciousness of the people, there is overall no such thing as logic. If the Tsar is a murderer, then there is no Dmitry in this world. How then is it possible to sympathize with the purloiner of Dmitry's name – for him to be supported by "popular esteem"? There is no logic here. However, a higher truth may be dimly (chaotically) sensed.[136]

That higher truth dimly sensed also lies in the speech act of confrontation. What matters less is whether Nikolka is correct in his accusation than that Boris's uneasy conscience is brought to the surface and exposed and that his authority is destabilized. And Boris himself appears to recognize the script of the encounter: he stays the boyars who would punish the fool for his transgression and recognizes the fool's role in this inversion by requesting that Nikolka pray for him. That he exits the scene before Nikolka refuses may reflect his unwillingness at this point to face the guilt weighing on his heart.

Narrative embodiment

Even aside from the ever-present implications of disability in the holy fool archetype, disability is simultaneously widely present and conspicuously absent in the *Comedy* and *Boris Godunov*. Caryl Emerson's side-by-side analysis of transpositions of the Fall of Boris narrative in historical documentation, Karamzin's *History*, Pushkin's play(s), and Mussorgskii's opera shows where the narrative possibilities – including the very premise – of *Boris Godunov* rest on a foundation of disability and able-bodiedness. First, with Tsar Ivan the Terrible's death in 1584, there were two claimants to the throne: the two-year-old Dmitrii Ivanovich, whose untimely death so plagues Boris in Pushkin's play(s), and Fedor Ivanovich, Boris's brother-in-law. Fedor Ivanovich was crowned as Tsar Fedor I, ruling between 1584-98, but was considered feeble-minded and therefore unfit to rule,

[136] Fomichev, "The World of Laughter in Pushkin's *Comedy*," 151.

and Boris Godunov served as regent and de facto ruler during that time. Dmitrii Ivanovich was epileptic; in fact, the official cause of death declared for Dmitrii Ivanovich is attributed to his epilepsy, in which the tsarevich had a seizure while holding a knife and accidentally cut his throat.[137] Boris Godunov rises to the position of regent and then tsar himself precisely in consequence of these disabilities: the unfitness and the death of the two remaining heirs. Tsar Ivan the Terrible himself is surrounded by an aura of violent madness, evoked in such passages as Afanasii Mikhailovich Pushkin's rhetorical questions to Prince Shuisky:

> Well, serve him [Tsar Boris] right! He rules us like Tsar Ivan
> (Whose name should never be pronounced at night).
> What if we have no public executions?
> What if, before the people's eyes, we sing
> No hymns to Jesus on the bloodied stake?
> What if we're not being burned on the public square,
> On coals the Tsar himself stokes with his rod?[138]
>
> И поделом ему! он правит нами,
> Как царь Иван (не к ночи будь помянут).
> Что пользы в том, что явных казней нет,
> Что на колу кровавом, всенародно
> Мы не поем канонов Иисусу,
> Что нас не жгут на площади, а царь
> Своим жезлом не подгребает углей?[139]

The entire succession crisis leading to the Time of Troubles can be attributed to Ivan the Terrible's murder of his son Ivan Ivanovich, as vividly portrayed by Ilya Repin in the 1885 painting *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16, 1581* [*Иван Грозный и сын его Иван 16 ноября 1581 года*] and popularly explained by a mad fit of violence. Such an explanation for the tsar's sudden murder of his son likely would have been found for Pushkin (as for Repin and other portrayals) in the ninth

[137] Emerson, *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme*, 11-12.

[138] Pushkin, *Comedy*, 325.

[139] Ibid., *Komediia*, 84.

volume of Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*. Karamzin narrates the murder as a momentary but characteristic fit of irrational, jealous rage:

> During the peace talks, heart suffering for Russia, seeing the sorrow on the boyars' faces – hearing, perhaps, the general rumblings of unrest – the Tsarevich was filled with noble envy and went to his father to insist on being sent with the troops to drive out the enemy, liberating Pskov, and restoring Russia's honor. Ioann, in an uproar of wrath, cried, "Mutineer! You and the boyars wish to dethrone me!" and raised his hand. Boris Godunov moved to stay him: the Tsar gave him a few wounds with his cruel staff and powerfully struck the Tsarevich with it on the head. The unfortunate man fell, bleeding heavily. Suddenly Ioann's rage vanished. Pale from horror, in shock, in a delirium he cried out, "I've killed my son!" and threw himself on him, embracing and kissing him; he held back the blood flowing from the deep wound; he wept, sobbed, and called for a doctor; he prayed to God for mercy and to his son for a forgiveness. But Heavenly Judgement was passed!
>
> Во время переговоров о мире страдая за Россию, читая горесть и на лицах Бояр - слыша, может быть, и всеобщий ропот - Царевич исполнился ревности благородной, пришел к отцу и требовал, чтобы он послал его с войском изгнать неприятеля, освободить Псков, восстановить честь России. Иоанн в волнении гнева закричал: "Мятежник! ты вместе с Боярами хочешь свергнуть меня с престола!" и поднял руку. Борис Годунов хотел удержать ее: Царь дал ему несколько ран острым жезлом своим и сильно ударил им Царевича в голову. Сей несчастный упал, обливаясь кровию. Тут исчезла ярость Иоаннова. Побледнев от ужаса, в трепете, в исступлении он воскликнул: "Я убил сына!" и кинулся обнимать, целовать его; удерживал кровь, текущую из глубокой язвы; плакал, рыдал, звал лекарей; молил Бога о милосердии, сына о прощении. Но Суд Небесный совершился![140]

Finally, on a wider historical scale, one of the major exacerbating factors of the social unrest and succession challenge depicted in *Boris Godunov* is widespread debilitation due to the 1601 famine. This famine, the first in conjunction with Tsar Boris's 1597 declaration binding the majority of Russian peasantry in full serfdom, resulted in the death of a third of Muscovy's population and disabled a large proportion of the survivors.[141]

None of the figures marked by disability above – mad Tsar Ivan the Terrible, feeble-minded Fedor Ivanovich, or epileptic Dmitrii Ivanovich – appear in their bodies on stage. The debility of the

[140] Nikolai M. Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva rossiiskogo*, tom 9. Библиотека Максима Мошкова, last modified Jan. 6, 2017, http://az.lib.ru/k/karamzin_n_m/text_1090.shtml.

[141] For more on institutional and legal developments of Russian serfdom, see T. K. Dennison, *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant In Russia: From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

peasant population due to famine and serfdom binding them to one location also is not directly brought to the reader's attention, although the censors of the original version noted and objected to the subtext of Tsar Boris's implementation of full serfdom as a reason for the people's support of the Pretender.[142] However, the conflict between the two primary figures, Boris Godunov and Grigorii Otrepiev, neither of whom are marked by disability, would not be narratively possible without disability framing the succession crisis. Although representational analysis of disabled characters is a significant and important part of disability scholars' work, the reach of disability studies as an analytical tool is not limited to analysis of disabled characters.

Disability scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder examine what they call literature's "*discursive dependency* upon disability" in their influential book *Narrative Prosthesis*.[143] *Narrative Prosthesis*, in response to David Will's earlier study *Prosthesis*, theorizes the vast proliferation of disability in literature (specifically Anglophone, but applicable to many literary traditions) as a dependency on the part of authors to mark their narratives with tangible representations of abstract difference or deviance. They argue that disability, and thereby disabled people, serve a two-fold function in literary discourse: "disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device."[144] As a consequence, "disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight."[145] Their primary criticism of this approach to representations of disability is that narrative prosthesis, the discursive dependency on disability, does not necessarily (or indeed almost ever) lead to recognition of a complex disabled subjectivity – they

[142] Dunning, "The Tsar's Red Pencil," 243.

[143] David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 51. Emphasis original.

[144] Ibid., 47.

[145] Ibid., 49.

"rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions."[146] The holy fool Nikolka is narratively functional due to his difference, but is not written with the same complex humanity as Godunov or Otrepiev.

Mitchell and Snyder focus their comparative analyses in the book on canonically prominent representations of disability, including Oedipus, King Richard III, and Captain Ahab. The critique of a discursive dependency on disability for meaning-making, however, has applications beyond the representational modes that Wills outlines in *Prosthesis*, including for *Boris Godunov*. Partially in response to *Narrative Prosthesis*, Ato Quayson argues in *Aesthetic Nervousness* that discursive dependency on disability goes even beyond what Mitchell and Snyder propose. He writes:

> Unlike [Mitchell and Snyder], I will be trying to show that this prostheticizing function is bound to fail, not because of the difficulties in erasing the effects of disability in the real world, but because the aesthetic domain itself is short-circuited upon the encounter with disability. As mentioned earlier, disability joins the sublime as marking the constitutive points of aesthetic representation. Aesthetic nervousness is what ensues and can be discerned in the suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of the hitherto dominant protocols of representation that may have governed the text.[147]

Even if holy foolery is not immediately recognizable to us today as a form of disability, it unequivocally falls into that category of deviant or abnormal embodiment that serves as an "excessive" sign inviting interpretation, with a large degree of symbolic or metaphysical potential, relying on discourses of normalcy.

The question of how depictions of embodiment operate as signs, and upon what those depictions depend, is relevant not just for the holy fool, but for other characters who are not themselves marked with disability. It is especially relevant for a drama which, at least in its original version, was written to be performed: embodied on stage by actors, with their own bodily and social

[146] Ibid., 48.

[147] Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 26.

relationships to disability and able-bodiedness. For *Boris Godunov*, a narrative built around discourses of pretending, rumors, lies, and confessions, a critical concern is the locus of reliable truth.

Truth and pretending in the word and body

Caryl Emerson writes of various transpositions of the Boris Godunov narrative, "events matter less than rumors about events and everyone with a story to tell is aware of the power of storytelling."[148] Kevin Moss follows up on this description with his article "The Last Word in Fiction: On Significant Lies in Boris Godunov," a semantic study of pretending [*притворство* and *самозванство*]. Moss writes, "Far from presenting a final version of the historical facts, the play is a collage of versions, rumors, stories; no appeal can be made to any fixed value. [...] The utterance and the language take center stage in Pushkin's play, and the plot is less a drama of action than a dialogue among versions, a struggle between stories, each vying for the status of truth."[149] Moss argues that both senses of "pretending," *притворство* as in playing a role or a part ("playing pretend") and *самозванство* in the narrower sense of pretending to the throne are mirror structures in the play, with many characters, including Tsar Boris, engaging in various forms of pretending, and with truth in speech jeopardized both by intentional misleading on the part of the speaker and by misinterpretation on the part of the addressee. He reads the ending of *Boris Godunov*, with the people's silence, as a refusal to signify:

> The root *molv-*, which means roughly 'speak', directs our attention again to the function of speech and language in general in the play, which is constructed of lies: pretending and reinterpretation of history—mirror-image semiotic structures which serve to undermine the semiotic process itself. In a sense the culprit is neither Boris, as the people believe at the beginning, nor Grigorij/Dimitrij, as they begin to suspect at the end, but signification, the

148 Emerson, *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme*, 140.

149 Kevin Moss, "The Last Word in Fiction: On Significant Lies in Boris Godunov," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 32, no. 2 (1988): 187.

> word itself. The real last word in fiction— in *Boris Godunov*, at any rate, is a rejection of last words *as* fiction.[150]

Building on the scholarly consensus of speech as an unreliable locus of truth in a play built on pretending and the recursive reinterpretation of narratives, including history, I argue that the body is presented as an alternative and more reliable source of truth: not just in characters like Nikolka marked by excessive signification, but in all bodies.

A simple instance of locating truth in embodiment can be found in the scene "The Tsar's Council" [Царская дума], in which Tsar Boris consults with the boyars and the Patriarch on how to quell the rumors spread by Otrepiev as part of his challenge to the throne. Tsar Boris speaks with confidence: "but we need / No foreign help, we have men of our own / To put to flight the traitors and the Poles. / I have declined"[151] [Но не нужна нам чуждая помога; / Своих людей у нас довольно ратных, / Чтоб отразить изменников и ляха. / Я отказал].[152] However, when the tsar exits, the boyars themselves begin to whisper. One, sotto voce to the others, asks, "Did you see the Tsar turn pale just now, / Did you see his face break out in a sweat?"[153] [Заметил ты, как государь бледнел / И крупный пот с лица его закапал?][154] When Tsar Boris's words and body speak to two contradicting internal states, the sweat of his brow is weighted by the author, the characters, and likely the reader as well as truer or more authentic, revealing the deception in his words.

That logic of embodied truth serves as the underpinning of entire scenes in places. In the comedic scene at the tavern on the Lithuanian border, when several guards burst in on the revels of Grigory Otrepiev's camp with an edict of arrest including a physical description of the Pretender, the

[150] Ibid., 196.

[151] Pushkin, *Comedy,* 391.

[152] Ibid., *Komediia*, 146.

[153] Ibid., *Comedy,* 399.

[154] Ibid., *Komediia*, 152.

comedy of the scene only succeeds if every character and the audience or reader is operating under the same logic. The guards themselves are illiterate, but they have been given the physical description of the accused. After wrongly accusing Misail of being the Pretender, they hand the edict to Otrepiev, the only literate person in the room, to read aloud.

Unreliable language proliferates in this scene, densely packed into even small exchanges. Otrepiev reads from the edict, "The unworthy monk Grigory of the Chudov Monastery, from the Otrepiev family, has fallen into heresy and, instructed by the Devil, has had the audacity to distress the holy brotherhood by all manner of incitements and iniquities. According to reports, the accursed Grishka has fled from the said monastery and is making for the Lithuanian border–"[155] [Чудова монастыря недостойный чернец Григорий, из роду Отрепьевых, впал в ересь и дерзнул, наученный диаволом, возмущать святую братию всякими соблазнами и беззакониями. А по справкам оказалось, отбежал он, окаянный Гришка, к границе литовской…][156] One of the guards, looking to Misail, asks, "So 'ow's this not you?"[157] [Как же не ты?][158] Otrepiev continues,

> Grigory. "– and the Tsar decrees that he be seized –"
> Guard. And 'anged.
> Grigory. It doesn't say "hanged."
> Guard. Oh yes it does. You 'ave to read between the lines as well. Read it out proper: "Seized and 'anged."
> Grigory. "... and hanged. [...][159]

> Григорий: «И царь повелел изловить его...»
> Пристав: И повесить.
> Григорий: Тут не сказано повесить.
> Пристав: Врешь: не всяко слово в строку пишется. Читай: изловить и повесить.
> Григорий: «И повесить...[160]

[155] Pushkin, *Comedy*, 313.

[156] Ibid., *Komediia*, 75.

[157] Ibid., *Comedy,* 313.

[158] Ibid., *Komediia*, 75.

[159] Ibid., *Comedy,* 313-4.

[160] Ibid., Komediia, 75-6.

The assertion that you have to read between the lines – more literally translated, "You're lying: not every word is written into the text" – is a comedic moment encapsulating just one facet of the slipperiness of language in this text and characteristic of Pushkin's work.[161] Also encapsulating the tragicomic genre blending are the permanent, life-or-death consequences for the character in question. Furthermore, there is no reason for the audience to trust Otrepiev's word any more than the officer's: without seeing the text of the edict ourselves, either in textual form or staged, we cannot know for sure what it actually says. The Pretender, of course, would have reason to omit that word from his reading, and the officers both have their own interest in arresting the Pretender (whoever that may be) and are also relying on others' word on what is written in the edict they cannot themselves confirm.

Otrepiev is shown to be lying for certain in the next moment, when he reads aloud a description of the accused. After he acquiesces "to hang," he reads, "The said criminal Grishka is… (*looking at Varlaam*) over fifty years of age. He is of medium height, bald at the front, has a grey beard, a fat belly...."[162] [А лет ему вору Гришке от роду... (*смотря на Варлаама*) за 50. А росту он среднего, лоб имеет плешивый, бороду седую, брюхо толстое…][163] This, of course, describes Varlaam's body, as indicated in print and on stage by the glance in his direction, and which (at least on stage) the audience can also see. The guards immediately move to arrest him, delighted to have found the Pretender so quickly; they don't hesitate to take the evidence of the body, unlike evidence of the word, to be true.

But Varlaam himself is suspicious, and he snatches the edict from Otrepiev. He used to be able to read but is out of practice, and the scene ends with the following:

[161] Translator Antony Wood explains the translator's notes that this statement on the literal level alludes to the diacritic *titlo* written above or below the line of text in old Russian manuscripts.

[162] Pushkin, *Comedy,* 315.

[163] Ibid., *Komediia*, 76.

Varlaam. (snatches the Decree) Just a minute, you sons of whores![164] What sort of Grishka am I? What did you say? Fifty years of age, grey beard, fat belly! All right, my young friend, you can make jokes about me if you like. It's a long time since I read anything, and I can hardly make it out, but I'll make it out this time, since it's the noose we're talking about. *(Reads out syllable by syllable:)* 'And – he – is … twenty – years of age.' What's this, my friend? Where does it say fifty? Look here – 'twenty.'
Second Guard. Yes, I remember now, it *was* twenty. That's what they said.
First Guard (To Grigory). Now my friend, what are you playin' at?
(During Varlaam's reading Grigory has been standing with bowed head, his hand tucked into his shirt.)
Varlaam (continues). 'He is short of stature, broad-chested, has one arm shorter than the other; eyes blue, hair ginger; he has a wart on one cheek and another on his forehead.' Now doesn't that sound more like you, my friend?
(Grigory suddenly draws a dagger; everyone backs away from him, he makes a dash for the window.)
Guards. 'old 'im! 'old 'im!
(Everyone rushes about in confusion.)[165]

[Варлаам: *(вырывая бумагу)* Отстаньте, блядины дети! что я за Гришка? — как! 50 лет, борода седая, брюхо толстое! нет, брат! молод еще надо мною шутки шутить. Я давно не читывал и худо разбираю, а тут уж разберу, как дело до петли доходит. *(Читает по складам.)* «А лет е-му от-ро-ду... 20». — Что, брат? где тут 50? видишь? 20.
Второй пристав: Да, помнится, двадцать. Так и нам было сказано.
Первый пристав: *(Григорию)* Да ты, брат, видно, забавник.
Во время чтения Григорий стоит потупя голову, с рукою за пазухой.
Варлаам: *(продолжает)* «А ростом он мал, грудь широкая, одна рука короче другой, глаза голубые, волоса рыжие, на щеке бородавка, на лбу другая». Да это, друг, уж не ты ли?
Григорий вдруг вынимает кинжал; все перед ним расступаются, он бросается в окно.
Приставы: Держи! держи!
Все бегут в беспорядке.][166]

The officers' memory of the accused, for instance whether he is twenty or fifty years of age, shifts with the suggestion of speech. What all regard as stable and elevate to primacy is evidence of the body: medium versus small stature, grey versus red hair, etc. The audience or reader has privileged knowledge that Otrepiev is the Pretender, but in principle there is nothing more reliable about Varlaam's reading than Otrepeiv's lie. Varlaam also now has a hanging matter's motivation to deflect suspicion from himself. In this jumble of confusion, accusation, misdirection, and lies, the only thing

164 In *Boris Godunov*, this invective was slightly softened to "sons of bitches" [сукины дети].

165 Pushkin, *Comedy,* 315-17.

166 Ibid., *Komediia*, 76-7.

taken to be stable is the evidence of the body. That shared assumption of a stable truth in the body is the foundation on which the humor in this scene is built.

Returning to the public square in front of the cathedral in Moscow, Nikolka the holy fool is also a pretender in his own way, pretending in the sense of *притворство* to be mad for Christ's sake, though he fits into the pattern of truth being more reliable in the body than the word in a more ambiguous way. Godnuov's pretending is profane; it tortures his conscience and spurs his cruelty. Nikolka's pretending, on the other hand, is sacred. Instead of hiding or denying truth, the holy fool's ruse grants him the position to speak with holy authority. As mentioned above, Nikolka's accusation may or may not be accurate; what matters more is that through pretending he speaks on behalf of the divine, reaching directly to Godunov's conscience. In this scene, Nikolka subverts some of the patterns discussed so far: narrative prosthesis or the simultaneous presence and absence of disability, and the location of truth in embodiment rather than language.

Unlike the characters mentioned above whose disability is their narrative function (Tsar Fedor Ivanovich and others), Nikolka the holy fool does appear onstage in his extraordinary embodiment. *Iurodivyi* is his central characteristic, the first thing we learn about him whether we're reading the play or watching it performed. The concept of narrative prosthesis is useful in understanding the holy fool's function in this scene; the extraordinary circumstances of his bodymind holds the bulk of the character's potential meaning. All of the character's significance comes from his role as a holy fool – his role precedes his name, and not much else about him is important. Unlike the other disabled characters, though, he is written with some basic level of phenomenological embodiment. Disability scholar Abby Wilkerson writes about this type of embodiment as "a way of thinking about bodily experience that [...] includes pleasures, pain, suffering, sensorial and sensual engagements with the world, vulnerabilities, capabilities, and

constraints as they arise within specific times and places."[167] Under this definition, a character could appear onstage but not be fully phenomenologically embodied if they are not shown to experience such bodily conditions. Nikolka is both present and embodied; he speaks of his pain when he weeps before the tsar. However, because the reader or audience knows the conceit of a holy fool archetype, we are led to question the pain we see. Like a holy fool's madness, it could be taken-upon or pretended. This further leads to the questions of how much it matters whether Nikolka's pain is authentic or pretended, and what kind of responsibility we have as onlookers to respond to that pain.

The text of the play provides us with four reactions to the holy fool's extraordinary and ambiguous embodiment. The boys following him harass him and steal the alms granted to him. One of them teases, "Why don't you take your cap off? *(Taps the fool's iron cap.)* Ooh, what a sound!"[168] [что же ты шапки не снимаешь? *(Щелкает его по железной шапке.)* Эк она звонит!][169] In a carnival mode, this teasing would be considered all in good fun and would not be held against the boys, but this moment is portrayed instead as an act of cruelty against an innocent – perhaps an inverted echo of the spectre of Tsarevich Dmitri's murder that haunts Tsar Boris, soon to arrive onstage. They are a microcosm of the world that sees an extraordinary bodymind, holy foolish in one framework or disabled in another, as an opportunity to assert their own normality through ridicule and other forms of othering. Although Nikolka weeps, he never censures the boys directly. That is the response of the old woman, who gives Nikolka a kopek and requests he pray for her. She herself is an inverted parallel to Tsar Boris, whose request for prayer Nikolka refuses. In the mass of

[167] Abby Wilkerson, "Embodiment," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, 67-9 (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 67.

[168] Pushkin, *Comedy*, 403.

[169] Ibid., *Komediia*, 163.

holy fool narratives, hagiographical and otherwise, she and other similar believers (usually elder women) are outliers, demonstrating a positive possibility of pious acceptance and connection.

The third reaction to Nikolka is from Godunov himself. This brief exchange stands out as one instance in which the tsar is directly confronted about his guilty conscience instead of through insinuations or rumors out of earshot. As discussed above, whether or not Nikolka's accusation of murder is factually accurate is beside the point to this encounter; the direct confrontation itself is significant. As a fourth, the boyars are outraged at the accusation – or at least perform outrage before the tsar – although they have insinuated as much among themselves. They shout, "Away with you, old fool! Seize the fool!"[170] [Поди прочь, дурак! схватите дурака!].[171] Tellingly, in this moment they call Nikolka *durak*, a word for fool or idiot removed from any sacred or holy connotations, denying Nikolka his narrative function and discounting the recognition of a holy foolish encounter, according to which the tsar would be forced to face his wrongdoing. Tsar Boris halts them, recognizing and accepting for a moment this inversion of social order on behalf of divine order. Unlike the scene in the Lithuanian tavern, this scene ends on the word instead of the body, and Nikolka's last word is an attestation of divine authority: "The Mother of God forbids it."[172] [Богородица не велит.][173]

Of course, the reader or audience is expected to understand that Nikolka is not literally calling for the death of these boys. Like other instances of pretending, he's using the word ("Have their throats cut, as you cut the young Tsarevich's"[174] [Вели их зарезать, как зарезал ты маленького царевича.]) to obfuscate the truth of the body (in this case, the deceased body of the

170 Ibid., *Comedy*, 405.

171 Ibid., *Komediia*, 164.

172 Ibid., *Comedy*, 405.

173 Ibid., *Komediia*, 164.

174 Ibid., *Comedy*, 405.

true tsarevich).[175] Just like Nikola Salos, the materiality of true bloodshed is a more powerful censure than any more abstract word of transgression against God. In a way, this makes Nikolka's word as dubious as other cases of unreliable speech; he's not speaking his true intention, and his accusation is implied but not confirmed to be true. But in combination with the particular paradoxical embodiment of the holy fool as mad or degenerate for Christ's sake, uncertain word and uncertain body come together to form one of the most direct and solid assertions in the entire play. Truth located in the divine supersedes both the word and the body as potential locations of truth.

In the original *Comedy*, this scene is situated between the above-mentioned scene "The Tsar's Council" [Царская дума], in which the Patriarch recounts a tale of a posthumous miracle attributed to the true Tsarevich Dmitri and in which Tsar Boris cannot conceal the sweat on his brow, and the scene "A Plain Near Novgorod-Seversky" [Равнина близ Новгорода-Северского], in which the Pretender is victorious over Tsar Boris's forces in battle, in which a cry of "Long live Dimitry!" [Да здавствует Димитрий!] is raised in echo of the play's concluding line. The holy fool's appearance at this specific moment prepares the audience to pass judgement on Tsar Boris before his death four scenes later, in which he begs for forgiveness of his sins.

Concluding remarks

In the context of a play so concerned with the semiotic process on so many different levels, from the momentary carnivalesque joke to the historical weight of a tsar's guilt to the discourses of rumor and deception, disability studies can give us perspective on how we interpret meaning from the body, even beyond simple representation of disabled characters. The fact that Pushkin writes his holy fool encounter in so close a parallel to the story of Nikola Salos reminds us that Nikolka the

[175] Ibid., *Komediia*, 164.

holy fool is like Boris Godunov, Grigory Otrepiev, Ivan the Terrible, and most of the *dramatis personae* in that he presumably did exist in life at some point, that he was embodied not just narratively but in reality. We receive his story, like Godunov's and the others', through many layers of unstable transposition – only some of which are consciously shown to us. In a way it is miraculous that their stories could have been transmitted so far, even with all the distortions, and at the same time it is impossible to know them on the embodied level, since words are all we have left. It is the mirror of that enigmatic final line, "The People are silent": we have the word, but nothing else.

Often I confuse pain with a poverty
of love
D. Allen, "Possession"

II. Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

The transition from Romanticism to Realism in Russian letters coincided with a critical paradigm shift in the conception of disability as well. Whereas in *Boris Godunov* the disabled character is largely a symbolic figure and a subject of parable, the mid-nineteenth century saw the proliferation of scientific medicine and the movement of disabled persons into the purview of medical institutions. Our text of interest for this chapter opens with a journey out of that fraught location: Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, serialized in 1868-9.

Dostoevsky was an immediately clear choice for writing about disability and holy foolery in the age of Realism. He famously wrote that his writing is realism in a higher sense: i.e., depicting mimetically not only the realia of life or even psychology but the human soul as well: realism of the spirit. This realism in a higher sense reflects the blending of highly practical concerns of disability and the mystical concerns of faith, reclaiming the sanctity of disabled lives. Moreover, Dostoevsky is an obvious choice for this study, given his reputation for writing about the abjected and the sacred in one, instantly recognizing the disabled among "the insulted and the injured."

The dynamic of illness and holy foolery coinciding in one character is a prominent feature in Dostoevsky's major works. In addition to possessing a title that is immensely tempting for a disability scholar, *The Idiot* stands out in representing Dostoevskian disabled fools for several reasons. One is that, of all these characters with connections to disability and holy foolery, Myshkin's story is the one that brings it to the forefront most: *The Idiot* centers that connection and examines it in detail. Another regards Myshkin's unique status as Dostoevsky's attempt to write a 'positively good person' [положительно прекрасный человек]. Positively good people in Dostoevsky's fiction are rare enough, but a *disabled* positively good *protagonist* is a rarity in fiction, period.

It's the holy foolish element that makes a difference here. In the mid-nineteenth century, a time of intense pathologization of difference in Russia as in Europe and North America, the holy fool archetype serves the narrative function of counterweight in *The Idiot*. Now, with the holy fool embodied together with the disabled protagonist, that remnant of the sacred and the mystical maintains the humanity of a person – by extension, an entire class of persons – who have been constructed as abnormal in the process of constructing the normal subject.

Medical histories: epilepsy, Dostoevsky, and Myshkin

As one cannot exist without the other, the normal and the abnormal are introduced together in the opening of *The Idiot* in the forms of Rogozhin and Prince Myshkin. The two are first introduced in terms of their similarity: "Both were young men, not very well dressed, and travelling with little luggage; both were of rather striking appearance, and both showed a desire to enter into conversation"[176] [оба люди молодые, оба почти налегке, оба не щегольски одетые, оба с довольно замечательными физиономиями и оба пожелавшие, наконец, войти друг с другом в разговор].[177] Their first distinguishing characteristic is their level of preparedness for a Russian November night, marking Myshkin as distinctly foreign in his Swiss-style cloak. The second is appearance – the unpleasantly ironical smirk of Rogozhin contrasted to the fair earnestness of Myshkin – and it is at this moment, before we know his name or anything else about him, that Myshkin is marked as fundamentally ill. "His eyes were large, blue and dreamy; there was something gentle, though heavy-looking in their expression, something of that strange look from which some people can recognise at the first glance a victim of epilepsy"[178] [Глаза его были большие, голубые

176 Fedor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1964), 1.

177 Ibid., *Idiot,* in *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1989), 6:5.

178 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 2.

и пристальные; во взгляде их было что-то тихое, но тяжелое, что-то полное того странного выражения, по которому некоторые угадывают с первого взгляда в субъекте падучую болезнь].[179]

That moment of recognition is critical to this chapter, and to the project as a whole. The narration leaves unsaid who it is doing this guessing or divination, but it is known that they find it strange (presumably, Myshkin himself does not find his own face strange) and that they have the expertise (real or imagined) to spot epilepsy at the very first moment. In fact, producers of medical knowledge had identified a 'strange look' characteristic to epileptics for centuries. In summarizing two such physicians in his medical history of epilepsy, Oswei Temkin writes that "a particular look of epileptics had been noted by the ancient physiognomists, and in 1843 Billod had written that their 'look has a characteristic expression which, no doubt, it owes to a dilatation often unequal, of the pupil, which is somewhat more than physiological and has become habitual.' Maudsley spoke of 'the heavy, lost look so often seen in confirmed epileptics.'"[180] It's left up to the reader to decide whether they include Rogozhin or themselves in this 'some' of medical expertise, but it is expected that the reader will accept this hypothetical first-glance diagnosis as legitimate.

In any case, Myshkin confirms the disembodied narrative diagnosis immediately afterwards. "He told him he had been a long while, over four years, away from Russia, that he had been sent abroad for his health on account of a strange nervous disease, something of the nature of epilepsy or St. Vitus's dance, attacks of twitching and trembling"[181] [Отвечая, он объявил, между прочим, что действительно долго не был в России, с лишком четыре года, что отправлен был за границу по болезни, по какой-то странной нервной болезни, вроде падучей или виттовой пляски,

179 Dostoevsky, *Idiot*, 6:6.

180 Oswei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971), 376.

181 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 2.

каких-то дрожаний и судорог].[182] This makes *epileptic* one of the first things both Rogozhin and the reader know about Myshkin, consequently driving the condition to encompass the protagonist's character over the first part. As Brian Johnson notes, Myshkin's medical history is front-loaded in the story, revealed fully in the first five chapters. Johnson writes, "The placement of the medical history within these initial chapters – the tightest and most cohesive section in the novel – foregrounds this aspect of Prince Myshkin's biography. His reputation as an 'idiot' consistently precedes him, determining beforehand the initial impression he makes upon other characters."[183] And, I would add, upon the readers.

Scientific medicine traces its understanding of epilepsy to a Hippocratic text *On the Sacred Disease* dating to about 400 BCE. Despite the contemporary connotations of words like the English *sacred* (via the Latin *morbus sacer)*, Temkin cautions against reading epilepsy in antiquity as a holy phenomenon.

> The disease might have been called sacred because a deity had sent it, or because a demon had been thought to enter the patient, or because it attacked those who had sinned against Selene, the goddess of the moon. Furthermore, it might have acquired its name because its cure was not human but divine. At the bottom of all these alleged reasons lies the basic belief that the disease is an infliction or possession by a higher power and that its cure must be supernatural.[184]

Temkin posits instead that the *sacred* in the sacred disease functioned more like antiquated usage of words like *terrific,* inspiring fear and something to be fled from.

In the European Middle Ages, physicians began characterizing the disease more by its characteristic symptom of falling unconscious – hence the English name *falling sickness* and the Russian calque *падучая болезнь*. The ascribed cause also shifted more specifically to one of deliberate possession by malevolent spirits. Physicians also began to distinguish two types of falling sickness:

[182] Dostoevsky, *Idiot*, 6:7.

[183] Brian Johnson, "Diagnosing Prince Myshkin," *Slavic and East European Journal* 56, No. 3 (Fall 2012), 378.

[184] Temkin, 7.

"Those afflicted with the first kind fall down suddenly, are unconscious, and suffer from convulsions or tremor of hands, feet, and neck. Those afflicted with the second kind, whom the crowd call 'demoniacs,' froth and tremble, but their limbs are not convulsed. The latter, moreover, are partly conscious, whereas the former are completely senseless."[185] According to Temkin, at this time and into the mid-nineteenth century falling sickness was not a clearly delineated condition but a web of symptoms that may also have included what we currently distinguish as separate neurological or mental illnesses.[186]

Consistent with the history of scientific medicine more broadly, the mid-nineteenth century saw a rapid paradigm shift in interpretations of epilepsy during Dostoevsky's lifetime into a physiological-pathological model, in Russia as well as Europe and the United States. As Dostoevsky was well-read in medical literature on epilepsy of this period and used it to inform both his work and his understanding of his own health, it is worth taking a moment to investigate what more precisely comprised the medical paradigm Dostoevsky would have known. Like most scholars interested in illness in Dostoevsky's world, I am grateful to take as a starting point the extensive research presented by James Rice in his 1985 study *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History*.

A handful of prominent physicians contributed to the nineteenth-century medicalization of epilepsy. The most widely acclaimed and widely circulated handbook on mental illness in Dostoevsky's lifetime was J.E.D. Esquirol's 1838 *Des maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médicaux, hygiéniques et médico-légaux*, which remained the leading text on epilepsy for decades. Up until the late 1830s-early 1840s, Russian and European medical literature claimed that epilepsy was caused by emotional distress: a personal or family history of traumatic fear, particularly fear caused by

[185] Ibid., 89.

[186] Ibid., 96.

seeing an epileptic person while pregnant (as written in M.P. Marochetti's popular handbook of medicine translated into Russian in 1845).[187]

Most relevant for this study, Esquirol included several chapters in this study on neurological conditions comorbid with epilepsy, including "idiopathic epilepsy" – the condition of being in a daze or unintelligible to others sometimes also called 'dementia' or 'insanity' in medical literature. In fact, Esquirol believed that epilepsy was nearly always accompanied by insanity in some form, as an inevitable result of repeated seizures.[188] It's likely that Dostoevsky would be familiar with this text in particular through his physician, Dr. Stepan Ianovskii, with whom he kept in close contact: "F.M. [Dostoevsky] was a fluently comfortable reader of French, and the original edition would have been readily available in Petersburg, probably in Ianovskii's library."[189] Even so, a medical encyclopedia published in Russian in 1845 by A.P. Lei cites French physicians of this vein on epilepsy.[190] It's even possible that Dostoevsky would have learned to identify his set of symptoms – including, most puzzling to him as indicated in his notebooks, "such severely incapacitating post seizure complications, lasting three to seven days, combining groundless fear, anxiety, and guilt, and sometimes referred to by F.M. precisely as 'mystical' experiences" – as epilepsy through Esquirol's study.[191]

Esquirol followed his teacher and mentor, Phillipe Pinel, in classifying idiocy or idiotism as a discrete pathology connected to epilepsy, going so far as to include an entire chapter in his book to 'idiopathic epilepsy.' He wrote that epilepsy inevitably led to some form of mental 'deficiency' at one stage or another, and listed among those conditions idiocy, imbecility, dementia, mania, and

187 Murav, 76.

188 James Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 112.

189 Ibid.

190 Murav, 76.

191 Rice., 113.

others.[192] According to Esquirol, idiocy is not a disease process but a condition that may have different underlying causes, and whose primary characteristic is a state of stupor in which so-called intellectual faculties are never manifested. In addition to its adoption as a clinical term, 'idiocy' and related words retained the derogatory connotations it carried and still carries. Harriet Murav outlines a history of the word and its derivatives starting with the ancient Greek noun *idiotes*, a term of abuse indicating a common person without professional knowledge or skill and adjective *idios*, meaning strange, unusual, of one's own (as in, not of the community or citizenry). In this linguistic context, an idiot is "unskilled with regard to the professions; he is an outsider, not a member of a class, group or nation."[193] In New Testament Greek, the term 'idiot' retained its meaning of an unskilled person or layman, but also became an unbeliever who cannot speak in tongues or interpret such speech; this dimension is especially puzzling given the narrative position of Myshkin as both an idiot and a fool for Christ's sake. The Russian Butashevich-Petrashevskii Pocket Dictionary (1845-6) describes an idiot as half-witted, dull but meek, not given to attacks of violence – in contrast to the popular profile of the epileptic criminal personality – and synonymous with дурак, дурачок, or дурень.[194] And Dahl's dictionary describes an idiot as weak-minded or even holy foolish, юродивый. Murav notes that the entry for юродивый provides the synonym уродища: defective, monstrous, twisted or 'crippled' bodily and morally: "Urod and iurod form a pair, in which physical and mental deformity are linked."[195]

Rice deduces which medical literature Dostoevsky may have been familiar with, based on Dostoevsky's frequent and regular discussions with Dr. Ianovskii on medical literature of the time. It

[192] Johnson, 387.

[193] Murav, 89.

[194] Ibid., 90.

[195] Murav, 90.

seems especially likely that Dostoevsky was also familiar with the research of one of Esquirol's rivals, German physician Moritz Heinrich Romberg, based on Dostoevsky's attempts to contact Romberg requesting a consultation in 1863.[196] Romberg published the first systematic nosology of diseases of the nervous system from 1840-46. That study, *Lehrbuch der Nervenkrankheiten des Menschen*, synthesized prevailing neurological theories in Germany with clinical observation and treatment strategies.[197] In the sections addressing epilepsy, published 1845, Romberg disagreed with Esquirol on epilepsy as the primary cause of idiocy (but did accept idiocy as a symptom or comorbid condition of epilepsy).[198]

Most promising to Dostoevsky, and the reason he sought to consult with Romberg, is Romberg's unique work on pre-seizure auras. Previously, when auras were discussed in medical literature, they were presented as horrible experiences akin to demonic possession. In 1847, Russian physician A.A. Malinovksii describes auras as the sensation of a breeze (hence the Russian term ветерок), a fearful rustling noise, perhaps even including a repulsive smell or taste or a vision of terrible black shapes.[199] Romberg, though, introduced to medical literature patients' descriptions of euphoric auras more like the "direct experience of God; blessedness/bliss; joy" described in Dostoevsky's notebooks and written into Prince Myshkin.[200] By the time P.I. Kovalevskii publishes his research on epilepsy in 1875, the phenomenon of religious euphoria as a possible aspect of pre-seizure aura is established enough that he speculatively diagnoses Mohammed, Joan of Arc, Emanuel Swedenborg, and St. Ignatius of Loyola with the falling sickness.[201]

196 Rice, 118.

197 Ibid.

198 Ibid., 120.

199 Murav, 77.

200 Rice, 119-20.

201 Murav, 77

Record of Dostoevsky's own experience of epilepsy symptoms is preserved in several places: in his notebooks, in the documents of Dr. Ianovskii, and in the reminiscences of Nikolai Strakhov and Sofiia Kovalevskaia. By his own calculation in 1870, Dostoevsky experienced seizures on average every three weeks since their onset at 26.[202] Rice categorizes Dostoevsky's symptoms into the general categories of hallucinations (usually auditory, sometimes in the form of alarming voices); dizziness, vertigo, or syncope (fainting); кондрашка, Dostoevsky's "whimsical euphemism" for seizures (first reported in 1847), and ветерок or pre-seizure aura.[203] Ianovskii himself describes his patient's condition this way in 1881, in refuting that it was caused by trauma related to exile in Siberia:

> The late Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky suffered from the falling sickness while still in Petersburg, furthermore for three or perhaps even more years before his arrest in the Petrashevsky case, thus before his exile to Siberia. The point is that his grave ailment, called *Epilepsia* – or falling sickness, appeared in F.M. in 1846, 1847, and 1848 in a slight degree. Meanwhile, though those not close to him didn't notice this, the patient himself (although, it is true, vaguely) was aware of his illness and usually called it "*Kondrashka with an aura* [*s veterkom* – literally: 'with a breeze']. (Mark well this last word). This [symptom] served F.M. ever excessively alert for signs of illness, as the premonition of a seizure, thanks to which he would say: "I'll manage to run to the Haymarket," i.e., to my apartment. And in essence, this is one of the characteristic symptoms of *Epilepsia*. For me, as a doctor, it was clear that our dear friend was suffering from falling sickness. Incidentally, even at that time on several occasions the illness appeared not only in a form that was unmistakable, but even in such an acute degree that it posed a seriously dangerous threat to the patient's life.[204]

While Rice suggests that based on Dostoevsky's notebooks it may have been the post-seizure complications ('idiocy') that distinguished Dostoevsky's falling sickness from other neurological conditions, for Ianovskii himself the aura may have been the key symptom: "As Dr. Yanovsky suggests, it was the second element of Dostoevsky's diagnostic phrase (ветерок: 'aura' or 'breeze') which clearly proved that the patient consciously understood his illness as epilepsy in whatever

[202] Rice, xiii-iv.

[203] Ibid., 6.

[204] Ibid., 7.

degree of severity."[205] Therefore, it seems prudent to consider both elements in combination as characteristic of the falling sickness for both the author and *The Idiot*.

Myshkin provides his medical history as well, over several scenes in the chapter following his conversation with Rogozhin on the train, when he seeks work with General Epanchin. One large piece of this story is given in third-person by the narrator, and the other first-hand, recounted by Myshkin to Madame Epanchin and her daughters. The narrator summarizes Myshkin's account of what brought him back to Russia:

> Myshkin lost his parents when he was a small child. He had grown up and spent all his life in the country, as his health had made country air essential. Pavlishtchev had put him in the charge of some old ladies, relations of his, and had engaged for him first a governess and then a tutor. Myshkin said that, although he remembered everything, there was much in his past life he could not explain, because he had never fully understood it. Frequent attacks of his illness had made him almost an idiot (Myshkin used that word "idiot"). He said that Pavlishtchev had met in Berlin Professor Schneider, a Swiss, who was a specialist in such diseases and had an institution in Switzerland in the Canton of Valais, where he had patients suffering even from idiocy and insanity, and treated them on his own method with cold water and gymnastics, training them also, and superintending their mental development generally. Pavlishtchev had sent him to Switzerland to this doctor nearly five years ago, and had died suddenly two years ago, making no provision for him. Schneider had kept him and continued his treatment for those two years, and although he had not completely cured him, he had greatly improved his condition. Finally, at his own wish, and in consequence of something that had happened, he had sent him now to Russia.[206]
>
> Остался князь после родителей еще малым ребенком, всю жизнь проживал и рос по деревням, так как и здоровье его требовало сельского воздуха. Павлищев доверил его каким-то старым помещицам, своим родственницам; для него нанималась сначала гувернантка, потом гувернер; он объявил, впрочем, что хотя и всё помнит, но мало может удовлетворительно объяснить, потому что во многом не давал себе отчета. Частые припадки его болезни сделали из него совсем почти идиота (князь так и сказал «идиота»). Он рассказал, наконец, что Павлищев встретился однажды в Берлине с профессором Шнейдером, швейцарцем, который занимается именно этими болезнями, имеет заведение в Швейцарии, в кантоне Валлийском, лечит по своей методе холодною водой, гимнастикой, лечит и от идиотизма и от сумасшествия, при этом обучает и берется вообще за духовное развитие; что Павлищев отправил его к нему в Швейцарию лет назад около пяти, а сам два года тому назад умер, внезапно, не сделав распоряжений; что Шнейдер держал и долечивал его еще года два; что он его

[205] Ibid., 9.

[206] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 24.

> не вылечил, но очень много помог, и что, наконец, по его собственному желанию и по одному встретившемуся обстоятельству, отправил его теперь в Россию.[207]

Here the narrator lends credence to Esquirol's theory that frequent seizures cause the conditions of idiocy or insanity. Curiously, there's a single word in this passage attributed to the patient himself – "idiot." In specifying that Myshkin used that word, the narrator may be justifying his own use of it against the derogatory connotations present in Russian and stretching all the way back to ancient Greek. Johnson claims that "His use of the word is not meant to be self-deprecatory; rather, he is using medical terminology that he absorbed from Dr. Schneider."[208] However, there's no reason language can't both be accepted medical practice and derogatory: consider the continued clinical use of terms such as *hysterical*, *psychotic*, *schizoid, retarded*, and others long after their widespread adoption as derisive. In fact, establishing language as a clinical diagnosis often imbues it with legitimacy as a weapon to name others as in some way defective.

General Epanchin's takeaway from this account, as we see in a later conversation with Madame Epanchin, is a delicate negotiation of infantilization. He tells his wife:

> "He is quite a child and such a pathetic figure; he has some sort of fits." […]
> "You amaze me!" Madame Epanchin went on as before. "Hungry and fits! What sort of fits?"
> "Oh, they don't occur so frequently; and, besides, he is like a child, but well educated."[209]

> — Совершенный ребенок, и даже такой жалкий; припадки у него какие-то болезненные [...]
> — Вы меня удивляете, — продолжала по-прежнему генеральша, — голоден и припадки! Какие припадки?
> — О, они не повторяются так часто, и притом он почти как ребенок, впрочем образованный.[210]

[207] Ibid., *Idiot,* 6:28-9.

[208] Johnson, 386.

[209] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 47-8.

[210] Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:53.

That is, he positions Myshkin as pathetic and helpless enough to warrant the charity of finding him a post, but not so abnormal as to be dangerous. By the mid-nineteenth century, a popular connection had been long established between epilepsy, so-called criminal personalities, and the belief that the mere sight of a disabled or otherwise deformed person could be frightful enough to harm a pregnant woman and debilitate her child. However, General Epanchin's favorable impression of Myshkin is incompatible with the trope of the disfigured criminal too dangerous to be looked upon by innocents; the only way to resolve his affection for Myshkin and Myshkin's undeniable disability is infantilization. By insisting several times that Myshkin is like a child and downplaying his fits, General Epanchin positions him as a victim of debility rather than a dangerous figure who could himself cause debility.

Myshkin elaborates on his medical history with the Epanchin women, describing at least some of his experience in more detail than with the General.

> That was after a long series of violent and painful attacks with my illness, and when my complaint was at its worst and my fits frequent, I always sank into complete stupefaction. I lost my memory, and though my brain worked, the logical sequence of ideas seemed broken. I couldn't connect more than two or three ideas together. That's how it seems to me. When the fits became less frequent and violent, I became strong and healthy again as I am now. I remember I was insufferably sad; I wanted to cry. I was all the while lost in wonder and uneasiness. What affected me most was that everything was strange; I realize that. I was crushed by the strangeness of it.[211]

> Это было после ряда сильных и мучительных припадков моей болезни, а я всегда, если болезнь усиливалась и припадки повторялись несколько раз сряду, впадал в полное отупение, терял совершенно память, а ум хотя и работал, но логическое течение мысли как бы обрывалось. Больше двух или трех идей последовательно я не мог связать сряду. Так мне кажется. Когда же припадки утихали, я опять становился и здоров и силен, вот как теперь. Помню: грусть во мне была нестерпимая; мне даже хотелось плакать; я всё удивлялся и беспокоился: ужасно на меня подействовало, что всё это чужое; это я понял. Чужое меня убивало.[212]

[211] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 52.

[212] Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:57.

This description seems to fall in line with both Dostoevsky's descriptions of his distress in experiencing a similar post-seizure state of confusion and with medical literature describing a post-seizure condition of 'idiocy.' Such a connection is reinforced by descriptive narration surrounding Myshkin's speech, such as "rousing himself from a momentary dreaminess" [выходя из минутной задумчивости] and "as though meditating profoundly"[213] [как бы в глубоком раздумье].[214] And this particular moment is especially significant for the purposes of this study in that it provides Myshkin's own account of his experience rather than the cacophony of external assumptions and interpretations (including the narrator's and the reader's). As we will see many times in this study overall, a disability justice perspective prioritizes and values the kind of experiential knowledge from which one can speak about one's own bodymind.

Normalcy and the medical gaze

So far, just like Rogozhin and the Epanchins, we have been looking upon Myshkin as an object of medical study or curiosity – but subjects are created in looking just as much as objects. Such moments show us just as much about the looker, who in their unmarked normalcy are granted the privilege of gazing. And medical knowledge is not discovered, not handed down or retrieved from some omniscient, infallible force: it is created, and it has creators. To consider *The Idiot* in the critical framework of disability, rather than the frameworks of medicine or illness as practiced by Rice and Johnson above, it is necessary to acknowledge the power at work in the creation of a class of governable subjects such as 'epileptics' and 'idiots.'

Disability scholar Lennard J. Davis writes on the history of the creation of the 'normal' subject in *Enforcing Normalcy*, contrasted to the seventeenth-century framework of the Ideal. In doing

213 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 57, 63.

214 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:63, 6:68.

so, he follows the imperative of the social model overviewed in this study's introduction: "I would like to focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. I do this because the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person."[215] The concept of a normal person is so deeply ingrained into contemporary culture that it can be hard to distance oneself far enough to examine it critically, but Lennard argues that "idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society."[216] By a "certain kind," he has in mind the societies emerging from industrialization and late eighteenth-century European notions of enlightenment, nationality, race, gender, etc. – a set of conditions that was beginning to apply to Dostoevsky's social context in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The concept of the 'normal citizen' arose first in the field of statistics. Davis attributes the generalized notion of the normal as an imperative to French statistician Adolpe Quetelet (1796-1847), who viewed the body of the statistically average citizen as exemplar of a progressive "Utopia of the norm."[217] Quetelet developed both the Body Mass Index and the bell curve, both still in use but not without controversy, in institutional settings such as medicine and education. But as on a bell curve, creating and centering a group of people characterized as average, middle, or normal also necessarily creates groups of people on the margins. "So, with the concept of the norm comes the concepts of deviations or extremes. When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants."[218]

[215] Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 24.

[216] Ibid.

[217] Ibid., 28.

[218] Ibid., 29.

The imperative norm has been consequently a useful tool for European and American eugenics movements: now, with populations of norm and non-norm established and an imperative to move toward the middle, the state can attempt to "norm the nonstandard."[219] English statistician Francis Galton, for example, used Quetelet's work in the early 1880s to create standardized tests of intelligence later developed into the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), shifting from a bell-shaped imperative middle with equally-weighted margins of abnormality to an S-shaped upward ranking curve with a disparaged lower margin and an esteemed upper margin. "The new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be."[220] This is the framework in place for physicians like Esquirol (and almost certainly as well for the fictional Dr. Schneider), for whom *idiot* is a coherent and undesirable class of people.

Of course, this nineteenth-century paradigm shift from Ideal person to Normal person was carried out in literature as well. Davis marks Gustave Flaubert's 1856 novel *Madame Bovary* as a watershed text in literature centering normal citizens in contrast to Neoclassical literature's Emperors and Romantic literature's Great Men. The Realist novel does more than to simply inscribe prejudices against people with disabilities: in addition, "the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character, whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her. […] This normativity in narrative will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled, the native, the colonized subject, and so on."[221] The task of disability scholars, Davis writes, is to counteract the hegemony of normalcy at the

[219] Ibid.

[220] Ibid., 35.

[221] Ibid., 41-2.

heart of cultural production and to promote alternative ways of thinking about the normal and the abnormal in a way that includes disabled people as full participants in social life.

Questioning ideologies of normalcy has been at the core of critical disability theory for decades. Even before Davis, whose work is considered foundational to disability studies as an academic discipline, scholars saw normalcy as a construction that needed to be critically examined in order to make room for disabled perspectives. Leonard Kriegel writes in 1987, somewhat more pointedly than Davis, that:

> It is important to point out that writers, by and large, view the world from the vantage point of the 'normals.' Writers like to think of themselves as rebels, but the rebellions they are interested in usually reinforce society's conception of what is and is not desirable. And most writers look at the cripple and the wounds he bears with the same suspicion and distastes that are found in other 'normals.' The image exists in literature because the reality exists in life. The world of the crippled and disabled is strange and dark, and it is held up to judgment by those who live in fear of it.[222]

More recently, disability and postcolonial scholar Ato Quayson disagrees with Davis on the scope of the normativizing drive of literature. He writes that, as opposed to beginning only with the rise of the novel, "as can be shown from an examination of folktales from all over the world, the plot of physical and/or social deformation is actually one of the commonest starting points of most story plots, so much so that it is almost as if the deformation of physical and/or social status becomes the universal starting point for the generation of narrative emplotment as such."[223] And Rosemarie Garland Thomson reinforces the critical attention on normalcy in her highly influential 1997 book *Extraordinary Bodies*:

> the disabled figure operates as a code for insufficiency, contingency, and abjection – for deviant particularity – thus establishing the contours of a canonical body that garners the prerogatives and privileges of a supposedly stable, universalized normalcy. The figure of the cultural self, then, in its refusal to be fleshed out, is the twin subject of this study. Moreover,

[222] Leonard Kriegel, *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, edited by Alan Gartner and Tom Joe (New York: Praeger, 1987), 33.

[223] Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 20.

> within this cultural choreography the disabled body is a spectacle – sympathetic, grotesque, wondrous, or pathological – in a complex relation between seer and seen, between the opposing subject positions of the intensely embodied, reified, and silenced object and the abstract, unmarked, disembodied normate.[224]

Concerning idiocy specifically, and in response to the mission described by Davis to reinvent ways of thinking of bodymind difference, Martin Halliwell offers a different formulation in his study of the idiot archetype in film: "Idiocy can more accurately be said to refer to a range of human experiences and traits that are difficult to classify, ultimately deriving from neurological impairment, but often reflected in forms of asocial behaviour that can be visually mimicked."[225]

The Idiot fits uneasily into Davis's claim about (at least) the nineteenth-century novel structured around normativity: the central character, Myshkin, is himself marked with abnormality and written by a disabled author with the same, or at least very similar, condition. Does *The Idiot* encourage us to identify with Myshkin, or with the people who mark themselves as normal by marking him as abnormal?

The Idiot, the Fool, and the Positively Good Man

In the current literature on *The Idiot*, most critics interpret Myshkin in the latter mode, from an external perspective: as either (more rarely) primarily ill, weighing his illness most in explaining who he is and how he operates as a character, or (more commonly) primarily a fool, emphasizing his mystical or saintly aspects. The notable exception is Harriet Murav's *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique*, which balances these two aspects more evenly and takes steps to connect them. In this section, after reviewing interpretations from either unilateral mode, I will continue the work that Murav has done in uniting the idiot and the fool into one reading. For a

[224] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*: *Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 136.

[225] Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy,* 1.

satisfactory reading, it is critical that we keep in mind that Myshkin is *both* epileptic and a positively good man – moreover, he is an epileptic positively good man.

Brian Johnson, cited above for his work synthesizing nineteenth-century medical literature on epilepsy, falls into the camp reading Myshkin through his illness. To introduce his article, he writes of the term *idiot*,

> Does this epithet really explain his identity? No. It explains what is wrong with him. It diagnoses him without stabilizing his identity. He is a 'doctor,' a 'rogue,' a 'philosopher,' a 'fool' who is also an idiot, who suffers from idiocy, a medical condition, as Myshkin himself explains multiple times. The question 'Who is Prince Myshkin?' is destabilized in the novel, bifurcated into questions of identity and diagnosis, questions which are inextricably bound together. His stable diagnosis as an 'idiot' serves as the fundamental characteristic of his unstable identity, which in turn cannot be divorced from his diagnosis no matter how his identity is perceived.[226]

Johnson justifies his focus on Myshkin the epileptic over Myshkin the saint on several points – although, as seen directly above, he does not deny those nonmedical aspects of his characterization. Most obviously, though not insignificantly, he is led by the title: the novel is *The Idiot* after all, named for a medical condition even more than for a person. Johnson also observes that Myshkin's medical history, as outlined in the section above, is given in the first five chapters of the novel (which Johnson regards the "tightest and most cohesive section"), foregrounding this illness as the first impression of the protagonist both for the other characters and for the readers. And Johnson finds it significant that other characters, such as Ippolit, also decide that Myshkin is ultimately an idiot. To structure his article, Johnson sorts the "central motifs and characteristics associated with the prince" which are elucidated through the lens of illness: the cultural connotations of epilepsy, his strange sexuality, his fixation on execution, the motif of recognition, the story of Myshkin's treatment abroad, and the use of the word 'idiot.'[227] Johnson's research, even though it is not built on a

[226] Johnson, 377.

[227] Ibid., 378.

disability framework, is useful for a disability-centered reading of Myshkin, and his case is strengthened by his care not to overstate it: "Myshkin's medical history is no magic key to unraveling the enigma that is the prince. It cannot definitively answer the question 'Who is Prince Myshkin?' It does, however, offer insight into the make-up of the prince and the tenuous identity he manifests in the interim period between his initial and eventual states of stupor."[228]

Another study that reads Myshkin primarily through his illness comes from outside the Slavic field, by American studies scholar Martin Halliwell in *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film*. Although not working in an explicitly disability-informed framework, he does far more in this book to follow what Quayson calls the ethical core of disability studies, to expose cultural structures that create and then marginalize disability in order to insist on the inherent value and humanity of disabled people. In that vein, his definition of 'idiocy' is far different from those of the nineteenth-century physicians discussed above:

> Idiocy can more accurately be said to refer to a range of human experiences and traits that are difficult to classify, ultimately deriving from neurological impairment, but often reflected in forms of asocial behaviour that can be visually mimicked. The second argument is that visual images usually precede and often complicate an understanding of idiocy, serving to stigmatize the idiot in a discrediting way, or presenting characters as idiot figures that do not have appropriate cerebral limitations. While it may be difficult to conceptualize literature in visual terms, the physical depiction of idiot figures in fiction and film often fixes them with a particular image or 'look', which writers and directors often go on to problematize in the narrative.[229]

Halliwell poses his main question for his chapter on *The Idio*t around the project of writing a positively good man: "If this is the main purpose of *The Idiot* then it poses an aesthetic problem: how to construct a 'positively good' character (who may have Christ-like and morally virtuous qualities), without giving up on reality and identifiably human characteristics."[230] Like Milton's portrayal of

[228] Ibid., 391.

[229] Halliwell, 1.

[230] Ibid., 74.

God in *Paradise Lost*, Halliwell claims, Dostoevsky runs up against a problem of language being insufficient to portray the ideal, perfect goodness of divinity. Following Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Halliwell finds the dualistic counterbalance to the problem of portraying divinity in the humanizing effect of illness and the idiot figure: "he often depicts an ideal form in opposition to the physically determined; withdrawal in tension with activity; rationality with irrationality; innocence with stupidity."[231]

Unlike Johnson, Halliwell eventually comes around in his chapter to considering idiocy more as a narrative or social role rather than a clinical condition:

> On this level, Myshkin's label of idiocy is less a medical definition than it is a social insult in the Flaubertian sense. Although it does link with his hospitalized past, the insult seems to be more clearly linked to Myshkin's lack of worldly knowledge. But whereas Flaubert used the term in a derogatory way (to designate the stupidity of both the Parisian bourgeoisie and, in his masochistic moods, himself), the labelling of Myshkin as 'idiot' throws into doubt the authority of those who stigmatize him and also serves to question the knowledge which they, implicitly, claim to hold.[232]

He comes closest to the task of critically interrogating normalcy as set by Davis and others in the section above when he close reads the ending of the novel with its extended depiction of Myshkin's seizure. He hypothesizes that portraying the seizure in first-person perspective would be unrepresentable or too close to madness, so Dostoevsky chooses instead to depict it from a detached outsider view.[233] Halliwell writes:

> Instead, he resorts to the device of a detached narrative voice to comment on the screaming and convulsions that accompany such fits. The emphasis is placed upon how the epileptic appears to observers: 'the sight of a man in an epileptic fit fills many others with absolute and unbearable horror, which has something mystical about it'. In this dramatic spectacle the convulsing man has the appearance of one undergoing, or recently having undergone, a mystical experience. By turning to the observer who cannot experience the psychic conditions of epileptic or idiot, Dostoevsky does not confirm or negate the authenticity of

[231] Ibid, 78.

[232] Ibid., 83.

[233] Cf. Murav's *Holy Foolishness*, in which this scene is depicted with a detached view because the narrator has given up on Myshkin as a mystical figure and views him only as a clinical case.

> the experience. Instead, he implicitly questions the authority of those who label certain individuals as idiots.[234]

Although Halliwell chooses to root his reading in Myshkin as an idiot figure, he does bring up the alternative interpretive possibility of Myshkin as a holy fool. From the way he discusses the saintly archetype, however, it is clear that he has mischaracterized it, thereby weakening his interpretive argument. He writes about the "quixotic equation of foolishness and goodness" and of the "religious figure of the holy fool, or childlike saint."[235] He equates saintliness with innocence or childlike meekness, neither of which appropriately describe the scandalous, assertive, disruptive persona of the holy fool or allow for the times Myshkin himself causes a scandal. He also confuses the concept of foolishness for Christ's sake [юродство Христа ради] with a "Christ-like" figure – perhaps a small distinction but an important one. Rather than being *like Christ* themselves (although there is no shortage of Biblical stories of Christ himself causing scandal or disrupting order), holy fools follow the directive of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:10 to be foolish *for Christ's sake*, on Christ's behalf.

Other scholars have stressed the difference between a Christ figure and a holy fool in making their case for reading Myshkin as primarily a fool. Frances Hernandez emphasizes just such a distinction in her interpretation: "The young epileptic, Myshkin, does indeed have the obvious characteristics of humility, compassion, and a sensitivity to the sufferings of others that cause him to be regarded as an imbecile – as such a person often is in modem society" – but he should ultimately be read as a holy fool specifically and not as a stand-in for Christ himself.[236] While acknowledging that the holy fool archetype is not completely separable from Christly depictions, she finds the

234 Halliwell, 82.

235 Ibid., 75, 76.

236 Frances Hernandez, "Dostoevskij's Prince Myshkin as a 'Juródivij,'" *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 26, no. 1 (March 1972): 16.

significant differences in his "seraphic but deficient nature," outbursts of outrage as in his screed against the Roman Catholic church, and unorthodox philosophies such as his professed materialism and reluctance to affirm faith in God.[237]

Hernandez characterizes Myshkin as a flawed and struggling human being, who, "instead of ending triumphant as such a parallel would demand, fails in misery, returning hopelessly to his former condition of mental and physical debility in a sanatorium."[238] While I believe outrage and unorthodoxy are more Christlike than Hernandez allows – consider the stories in Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, and John 2 of Christ driving out with a corded whip those buying and selling in the temple courts, overturning the merchants' tables and throwing their coins on the ground – her overall conclusion that Myshkin should not be read as an outright Christ figure is sound. Note, however, how Hernandez treats Myshkin's disability: his "nature" makes him fundamentally "deficient," and she associates the novel's ending on his post-seizure condition with misery, hopelessness, and failure. In this reading it is his illness, in fact, that prevents him from reaching Christ-figure-hood, as though none of the euphoric moments of light, wholeness, and complete consciousness were also caused by his condition, and as though none of the impact his presence had on the other characters mattered in the end.

The argument to read Myshkin as a holy fool instead of a Christ figure was made more recently, and more effectively, by Erik Egeberg in *Poliarnyi vestnik*. In response to critics who read Myshkin as Christ, Egeberg writes:

> As we know, in his last novel Dostoevsky depicts Christ himself – but not as a character in a work of Realism, but as a person of "legend." In my opinion, Dostoevsky understood as early as the late 1860s, when he wrote *The Idiot*, that it would be impossible to depict Christ in a novel set in our own time. Christ and Prince Myshkin are figures on different levels.

[237] Ibid., 17.

[238] Ibid.

> That fact in my view is more important than all the possible points of comparison between them which have been noted by various scholars.
>
> Как известно, в своем последнем романе Достоевский выводит самого Христа — но не как действующее лицо реалистического произведения, а как персонаж «легенды». По-моему, Достоевский еще в конце шестидесятых годов, когда писался «Идиот», понял, что изображать Христа в романе, действие которого происходит в наше время, нельзя. Христос и князь Мышкин — лица разных уровней. Этот факт на мой взгляд важнее, нежели всевозможные точки соприкосновения между ними, отмеченные разными исследователями.[239]

To reinforce the specificity of reading Myshkin as a holy fool, Egeberg takes Lebedev as a contrasting example, arguing that his role as a different kind of fool (a шут, often translated as buffoon) illuminates the positive, compassionate nature of Myshkin's foolery.[240]

V. Vs. Ivanov follows a similar line of interpretation in emphasizing Myshkin's Christian love in analyzing him as a holy fool type without naming him a Christ figure. Unusually among other scholars discussed, for Ivanov the words idiot [идиот], holy fool [юродивый], and eccentric [чудак] are directly synonymous in the context of the novel.[241] His reading of Myshkin is that the positively good man's holy foolery is much more aligned to the message of the Gospels than the hagiographical fool or even literary fools as in *Boris Godunov*, which he describes as a "hagiographical persona denouncing a prince on an Old Russian city square: 'You're not a prince, you're filth!'" [житийный персонаж, на площади древнерусского города порицающий князя: "Ты не князь, ты – грязь!"][242] The function of such a Gospel fool is to facilitate what Ivanov calls a "dialogue of hierarchies" [диалог иерархий] between the hierarchy of the spirit [иерархия духа] and the hierarchy of society [иерархия социума], in which "The holy fool emerges as something like an

239 Erik Egeberg, "Myshkin i Lebedev: O Iurodivykh i Shutakh v 'Idiote'," *Poliarnyi Vestnik* 7 (January 1, 2004): 41. Translation mine.

240 For more on the distinction between holy fools [юродивые] and buffoons [шуты] in Russian literature, including in Dostoevsky, see Patterson.

241 V.Vs. Ivanov, "Iurodivyi geroi v dialoge ierarkhii Dostoevskogo." *Problemy istoricheskoi poetiki* (1994), 204. For a counterargument on this point, see Kasatkina.

242 Ibid., 208.

intermediary between two levels of knowing Truth." [Юродивый же оказывается чем-то вроде посредника между двумя уровнями познания истины.][243]

The commentary that best integrates a fool-centered reading and an illness-centered reading, as mentioned above, is Harriet Murav's *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique*. Murav identifies the novel's central problematic as that very combination, "namely, the coincidence of the holy and the pathological in the "wholly beautiful man," as Dostoevsky called his hero."[244] Murav defends the novel from its detractors on that point, including contemporaneous reviewers, who insisted that both/either a holy fool protagonist and/or an epileptic protagonist were wholly inappropriate for the form of the novel which was suited only for "normal" subjects. Instead, she argues that the critical response shows that the novel is constructed out of impossibilities, which instead of indicating failure are part of a deliberate narrative strategy to part with the unreliable narrator in more active interpretation. "But I would relate this feature of the novel's structure to its thematization of the conflicting interpretations of Myshkin's epilepsy as a "higher state" or pathology. The reader is called upon to resist the reduction of Myshkin to a medical case. But what exactly is the reader asked to make of Myshkin?"[245] Murav argues that the narrative pulls us toward holy foolery, and with it the embrace of sanctity, scandal, and ambiguity, as an alternative interpretive framework.[246]

There is much in Murav's reading that makes it appealing to a disability studies approach, including a critical analysis of the medical gaze and an unwillingness to use stigmatizing rhetoric uncritically, but in the end it still positions the interpretive (im)possibilities of a holy fool protagonist

[243] Ibid., 203.

[244] Murav, 73.

[245] Ibid., 88.

[246] A similar claim is made by Robin Feuer Miller in *Dostoevsky and 'The Idiot:' Author, Narrator, and Reader*, although Murav dedicates significantly more pagespace to it.

and an ill protagonist as opposites (alternatives). From this point, I'd like to add that these interpretations don't have to be an either/or choice – that holy foolery and *disability* work together in a way that holy foolery and illness may not.

A presentiment of light

Often, critics root their argument for Myshkin as either primarily ill or primarily a fool in the critical scene in which Myshkin breaks the priceless Chinese vase at the Epanchins' soiree. In the retelling of this part of the story, commentators sometimes describe it as though Myshkin's outbursts were causeless – that it came from nowhere, or suddenly, or unexpectedly. They may be following the narrator's lead in that assessment: "Why he was suddenly so agitated, why he was in such a state of ecstasy and emotion quite irrelevant and as it seemed out of all proportion with the subject of conversation, it was difficult to decide"[247] [Почему он вдруг так растревожился, почему пришел в такой умиленный восторг, совершенно ни с того ни с сего и, казалось, нисколько не в меру с предметом разговора, — это трудно было бы решить].[248] But in fact, keeping in mind both Myshkin's roles as the sick man and the holy fool together, it's not difficult to decide at all.

There are two waves of Myshkin's scandalous monologue, each with a clearly identifiable trigger. The first is Myshkin's screed against the Roman Catholic Church. If the reader allows themselves to be led by the narrator or other characters' reactions, they might experience this moment as they do: disturbingly unbidden. But Myshkin doesn't start on this screed out of nowhere; it's triggered by a guest's mention of Pavlishtchev's conversion to Catholicism. From Myshkin's wording, especially unfiltered as it is by high emotion, it's clear that Pavlishtchev above all is the

[247] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 530.

[248] Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:540.

center of Myshkin's distress. "Pavlishtchev… Pavlishtchev, went over to the Roman Church? Impossible!" he cried in horror. [...] "Pavlishtchev was a clear-headed man and a Christian, a genuine Christian," Myshkin brought out suddenly. "How could he have accepted a faith… that's unchristian? Catholicism is as good as an unchristian religion!"[249] [Павлищев... Павлищев перешел в католицизм? Быть этого не может!" [...] "Павлищев был светлый ум и христианин, истинный христианин, — произнес вдруг князь, — как же мог он подчиниться вере... нехристианской?.. Католичество — всё равно что вера нехристианская!][250] Pavlishtchev is closely connected to Myshkin's history of disability, as his benefactor and caretaker during his period of institutionalization and someone who made it possible for him to leave the institution. It's his personal connection with Pavlishtchev that makes this news a betrayal rather than simply a shame, as is emphasized again when Myshkin, still deeply upset, moves closer to the ill-fated vase. "When he had heard Pavlishtchev's name mentioned, and General Epanchin had brought him forward and introduced him again to Ivan Petrovich, he moved nearer to the table and sat down in the very arm-chair nearest to the huge and handsome china vase, which stood on a pedestal almost at his elbow and a little behind him"[251] [Когда он услышал о Павлищеве и Иван Федорович подвел и показал его снова Ивану Петровичу, он пересел ближе к столу и прямо попал на кресло подле огромной, прекрасной китайской вазы, стоявшей на пьедестале, почти рядом с его локтем, чуть-чуть позади].[252]

Of course, as Myshkin himself foresaw, he shatters the priceless vase. At this point, signs of a pre-seizure aura are already appearing in the narrator's assessment of his mental state. But only

[249] Ibid., *The Idiot,* 531-2.

[250] Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:541-2.

[251] Ibid., *The Idiot*, 536-7.

[252] Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:546-7.

slightly: it still might not have occurred if not for the second trigger, Myshkin's extreme relief that no one was angry at him for breaking the vase, which then washes into an extreme gratitude and feeling of love for the guests. He asks Lizaveta Prokofyevna, "And you forgive me for *everything*? For *everything*, besides the vase?"[253] [И за *всё* прощаете? За *всё* кроме вазы?][254] And to the group, he says, "So I've not offended anyone? You can't think how happy I am at the notion, but that was bound to be so! Could I possibly offend anyone here! I should be offending you again, if I could think of such a thing"[255] [Так я вас никого не оскорбил? Вы не поверите, как я счастлив от этой мысли; но так и должно быть! Разве мог я здесь кого-нибудь оскорбить? Я опять оскорблю вас, если так подумаю].[256] He becomes effusive with gratitude, explaining his anxiety in coming specifically as the fear that he would offend people he holds dear.

This is another powerful moment of recognition for me, and I expect for many other readers also with invisible disabilities. The threat of demonization and ostracization, as we have seen in the medical histories regarding epilepsy alone – equated to possession by demons, a curse by God or gods, and a fundamentally criminal personhood, who can cause disability themselves just by the glimpse of their horrible body – is so strong that the fear of having "outed" oneself as such an undesirable person can indeed trigger trauma responses of many forms. It's clear from Myshkin's anxious comportment even before either of these triggers that he's experiencing such fear, complete with nervous laughter and compulsive apology. He says, "But Marfa Nikitshna, too… forgive me… but I think you are mistaken about Marfa Nikitshna! She was severe, but… how could she help losing patience… with such an idiot as I was then. Ha-ha! You know I was a complete idiot. Ha-

253 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 538, emphasis original.

254 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:548, emphasis original.

255 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 538.

256 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:548.

ha!"[257] [Но и Марфа Никитишна... простите меня, но вы, кажется, ошибаетесь в Марфе Никитишне! Она была строга, но... ведь нельзя же было не потерять терпение... с таким идиотом, каким я тогда был (хи-хи!). Ведь я был тогда совсем идиот, вы не поверите (ха-ха!)].[258] And again shortly after: "Oh, my goodness!" cried Myshkin, overcome with confusion and growing more and more hurried and eager. "I… I've said something stupid again, but… that's bound to happen because I… I… I.. but that's out of place again!"[259] [Ах, боже мой! — вскричал князь, конфузясь, торопясь и воодушевляясь всё больше и больше, — я... я опять сказал глупость, но... так и должно было быть, потому что я... я... я, впрочем, опять не к тому!][260] And, I wish to point out, his fear is not ungrounded: "There, he's off again," said Princess Byelokonsky, losing patience"[261] [— Ну, опять застучал! — не утерпела и проговорила Белоконская].[262]

It's also critical to notice the difference in Myshkin's emotional experience of these two triggers in light of his combined disability and holy foolery. The first set of emotions is fear, terror, horror. The second is gratitude, love, and happiness, which takes on more and more religious overtones as it develops toward what Myshkin himself describes as a moment of perfect consciousness of existence, which he deems worth the whole of life. "I want to explain everything, everything, everything! Oh, yes! You think I'm Utopian? A theorist? My ideas are really all so simple… Don't you believe it!"[263] [Я хочу всё объяснить, всё, всё, всё! О да! Вы думаете, я утопист? Идеолог? О нет, у меня, ей-богу, всё такие простые мысли... Вы не верите?][264] The

257 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 529-30.

258 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:549.

259 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 530.

260 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:540.

261 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 540.

262 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:550.

263 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 541.

264 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:551.

extended discourse that follows isn't random or nonsense, as it seems to the other guests and the narrator: those simple ideas are Christian love and the very holy foolish reminder that God's world is so much more than oneself. At the same time, it must be viewed in light of the aura of religious ecstasy that has been building through this entire scene at the party, both in the narrator's description and in Myshkin's own words:

> Oh, what does my grief, what does my sorrow matter if I can be happy? Do you know I don't know how one can walk by a tree and not be happy at the sight of it? How can one talk to a man and not be happy in loving him! Oh, it's only that I'm not able to express it… And what beautiful things there are at every step, that even the most hopeless man must feel to be beautiful! Look at a child! Look at God's sunrise! Look at the grass, how it grows! Look at the eyes that gaze at you and love you!...[265]

> О, что такое мое горе и моя беда, если я в силах быть счастливым? Знаете, я не понимаю, как можно проходить мимо дерева и не быть счастливым, что видишь его? Говорить с человеком и не быть счастливым, что любишь его! О, я только не умею высказать... а сколько вещей на каждом шагу таких прекрасных, которые даже самый потерявшийся человек находит прекрасными? Посмотрите на ребенка, посмотрите на божию зарю, посмотрите на травку, как она растет, посмотрите в глаза, которые на вас смотрят и вас любят...[266]

Immediately after this exclamation, Myshkin goes into a seizure. Lizaveta Prokovyevna is the first to realize, then Aglaia:

> Lizaveta Prokofyevna cried out: "Ah, my God!" and threw up her hands in dismay, the first to realise what was wrong.
>
> Aglaia quickly ran up to him. She was in time to catch him in her arms, and with horror, with a face distorted in pain, she heard the wild scream of the "spirit tearing and casting down the unhappy man".
>
> The sick man lay on the carpet. Someone hasted to put a pillow under his head.[267]

> Лизавета Прокофьевна вскрикнула: «Ах, боже мой!», прежде всех догадавшись, и всплеснула руками. Аглая быстро подбежала к нему, успела принять его в свои руки и с ужасом, с искаженным болью лицом услышала дикий крик «духа, сотрясшего и повергшего» несчастного. Больной лежал на ковре. Кто-то успел поскорее подложить ему под голову подушку.[268]

[265] Ibid., *The Idiot*, 543.

[266] Ibid., *Idiot,* 6:552-3.

[267] Ibid., *The Idiot*, 543.

[268] Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:553.

In those quotation marks within the narration, Dostoevsky's narrator is borrowing phrasing from the Gospels, Mark 9:17-27 and Luke 9:42, in which Christ casts a demon out of a man it was possessing.[269] This observation is from an external perspective immersed in the particular disability stigma of Dostoevsky's time; they interpret the seizure as a result of demonic rather than divine forces.

Another key blending of the sick man and the holy man is the emphasis on premonition in this scene. At the very moment of the vase shattering, the narrator describes, "But we must not omit to mention one odd sensation which struck him at that very minute, and stood out clearly above the mass of other confused and strange sensations. It was not the shame, not the scandal, not the fright, not the suddenness of it that impressed him most, but his foreknowledge of it!"[270] [Но не можем не упомянуть об одном странном ощущении, поразившем его именно в это самое мгновение и вдруг ему выяснившемся из толпы всех других смутных и странных ощущений: не стыд, не скандал, не страх, не внезапность поразили его больше всего, а сбывшееся пророчество!][271] The beginnings of the religious-ecstatic aura and the premonition are both emphasized in the moment that Myshkin breaks the vase: "In the course of the evening other and brighter impressions had flowed into his soul: we have spoken of that already. He forgot his presentiment"[272] [В продолжение вечера другие сильные, но светлые впечатления стали наплывать в его душу; мы уже говорили об этом. Он забыл свое предчувствие].[273] The density of such narrative description increases until the onset of Myshkin's seizure and we are removed from his interiority as if it would be impossible for us to experience as well. "He seemed for a long time unable to understand the fuss

269 G.M. Fridlender and I.A. Bitiugova, "Kommentarii" in *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1989), 6:659.

270 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 547.

271 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:547.

272 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 546.

273 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:546.

that was going on around him, or rather, he understood it perfectly and saw everything, but stood, as it were apart, as though he had no share in it, and, like someone invisible in a fairy-tale, had crept into the room and was watching people, with whom he had no concern though they interested him"[274] [Он долго как бы не понимал суматохи, кипевшей кругом него, то есть понимал совершенно и всё видел, но стоял как бы особенным человеком, ни в чем не принимавшим участия и который, как невидимка в сказке, пробрался в комнату и наблюдает посторонних, но интересных ему людей.].[275] The narrator describes him as appearing to outsiders spasmodic, confused, feverish at the same time as he describes the overwhelming feelings of joy, light, gratitude, and Christian love.

As assessed in the introductory description of the holy fool, however, a holy foolish encounter depends as much on the audience or recipient as on the fool themselves. In this case, Myshkin's message of Christian love for God's earth and fellow people, feverish though it may be, is not received – precisely because of its melding with the context of disability stigma. Lizaveta Prokofyevna decides immediately upon witnessing Myshkin's seizure that she no longer considers him a suitable marriage candidate (although, in theory, she knew about all of it before – apparently witnessing it was too much for her to overcome the prejudice). Aglaia denounces him as well, insisting that she never considered him a real candidate in the first place. Perhaps most explicit is Princess Byelokonsky's reaction, as spoken to Lizaveta Prokovyevna as she takes her leave in disgust: "Well, there's good and bad in him. And if you care to know my opinion, there's more bad than good. You can see for yourselves what he is, a sick man!"[276] [Что ж, и хорош и дурен; а коли — хочешь мое мнение знать, то больше дурен. Сама видишь, какой человек, больной

[274] Ibid., *The Idiot*, 547.

[275] Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:547.

[276] Ibid., *The Idiot*, 544.

человек!][277] As though a sick man by the very definition cannot also be a good man, let alone a positively good man.

"Yes, for this moment one might give one's whole life!"

Bookends of institutionalization frame the action of the entire novel, making the story a brief reprieve for the sick man among "normal" society from a longer, likely lifelong context of institutionalization. The specter of cure is raised by Rogozhin on the train, and its ideology persists to the last. "The dark man smiled several times as he listened, and laughed, especially when, in answer to his inquiry: "Well, have they cured you?" his companion answered: "No, they haven't""[278] [Слушая его, черномазый несколько раз усмехался; особенно засмеялся он, когда на вопрос: «Что же, вылечили?» — белокурый отвечал, что «нет, не вылечили»].[279]

There's a deep, unspoken assumption among many of the novel's characters (certainly including Dr. Schneider, Pavlishtchev, and the Epanchin family, the narrator, and perhaps including the reader as well) that cure is the desirable outcome: that everyone, including Myshkin, could only desire him to be cured. That assumption is problematized by both Myshkin's narrative role as a holy fool figure and by some glimpses the narrator gives of his internality. In the above narration of Myshkin's pre-seizure aura of religious ecstasy, he unequivocally asserts that the inexpressible experiences of love, beauty, and wonder at God's creation is worth all of the grief, sorrow, and pain that doctors would seek to cure from him. Challenging the ideology of cure as Myshkin does has been a priority of disability studies for decades; in addition to the scholarly work on normalcy discussed above, two of the leading scholars in that project have been Robert McRuer and Eli Clare.

277 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:553.

278 Ibid., *The Idiot*, 2.

279 Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:6.

In *Crip Theory*, McRuer teases out the implicit questions in the interaction of ideologies of normalcy and cure:

> I can imagine that answers might be incredibly varied to similar questions: "In the end, wouldn't you rather be hearing?" and "In the end, wouldn't you rather not be HIV positive?" would seem, after all, to be very different questions, the first (with its thinly veiled desire for Deafness not to exist) more obviously genocidal than the second. But they are not really different questions, in that their constant repetition (or their presence as ongoing subtexts) reveals more about the able-bodied culture doing the asking than about the bodies being interrogated. The culture asking such questions assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, "Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?"[280]

It's clear in *The Idiot* that, even if in a complicated way, Myshkin's answer to that question is not always affirmative. He works through his affective relation to the question of cure in Part II, Chapter 5, and in weighing the experience of his pre-seizure auras with the pain of the seizures themselves and the resulting condition of confusion, the perfect ecstasy of the aura wins out. Following Clare's practice of disabled people telling their own stories as a countermeasure to curative discourse, and with the awareness that it likely closely reflects Dostoevsky's own experience, it's worth reproducing in full the beautiful description of Myshkin's pre-seizure aura:

> He remembered among other things that he always had one minute just before the epileptic fit (if it came on while he was awake), when suddenly in the midst of sadness, spiritual darkness and oppression, there seemed at moments a flash of light in his brain, and with extraordinary impetus all his vital forces suddenly began working at their highest tension. The sense of life, the consciousness of self, were multiplied ten times at these moments which passed like a flash of lightning. His mind and his heart were flooded with extraordinary light; all his uneasiness, all his doubts, all his anxieties were relieved at once; they were all merged in a lofty calm, full of serene, harmonious joy and hope. But these moments, these flashes, were only the prelude of that final second (it was never more than a second) with which the fit began. That second was, of course, unendurable. Thinking of that comment later, when he was alright again, he often said to himself that all these gleams and flashes of the highest sensation of life and self-consciousness, and therefore also the highest form of existence, were nothing but disease, the interruption of the normal condition; and if so, it was not at all the highest form of being, but on the contrary must be reckoned the lowest. And yet he came at last to an extremely paradoxical conclusion. "What if it is a

[280] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 8-9.

disease?" he decided at last. "What does it matter that it is an abnormal intensity, if the result, if the minute of sensation, remembered an analyzed afterwards in health, turns out to be the acme of harmony and beauty, and gives a feeling, unknown and undivided until then, of completeness, of proportion, or reconciliation, and of ecstatic devotional merging in the highest synthesis of life?" These vague expressions seemed to him very comprehensible, though too weak. That it really was "beauty and worship", that it really was the "highest synthesis of life" he could not doubt, and could not admit the possibility of doubt. It was not as though he saw abnormal and unreal visions of some sort at that moment, as from hashish, opium, or wine, destroying the reason and distorting the soul. He was quite capable of judging of that when the attack was over. These moments were only an extraordinary quickening of self-consciousness – if the condition was to be expressed in one word – and at the same time of the direct sensation of existence in the most intense degree. Since at that second, that is at the very last conscious moment before the fit, he had time to say to himself clearly and consciously: "Yes, for this moment one might give one's whole life!" Then without doubt that moment was really worth the whole of life.[281]

Он задумался, между прочим, о том, что в эпилептическом состоянии его была одна степень почти пред самым припадком (если только припадок приходил наяву), когда вдруг, среди грусти, душевного мрака, давления, мгновениями как бы воспламенялся его мозг и с необыкновенным порывом напрягались разом все жизненные силы его. Ощущение жизни, самосознания почти удесятерялось в эти мгновения, продолжавшиеся как молния. Ум, сердце озарялись необыкновенным светом; все волнения, все сомнения его, все беспокойства как бы умиротворялись разом, разрешались в какое-то высшее спокойствие, полное ясной, гармоничной радости и надежды, полное разума и окончательной причины. Но эти моменты, эти проблески были еще только предчувствием той окончательной секунды (никогда не более секунды), с которой начинался самый припадок. Эта секунда была, конечно, невыносима. Раздумывая об этом мгновении впоследствии, уже в здоровом состоянии, он часто говорил сам себе: что ведь все эти молнии и проблески высшего самоощущения и самосознания, а стало быть и «высшего бытия», не что иное, как болезнь, как нарушение нормального состояния, а если так, то это вовсе не высшее бытие, а, напротив, должно быть причислено к самому низшему. И, однако же, он все-таки дошел наконец до чрезвычайно парадоксального вывода: «Что же в том, что это болезнь? — решил он наконец. — Какое до того дело, что это напряжение ненормальное, если самый результат, если минута ощущения, припоминаемая и рассматриваемая уже в здоровом состоянии, оказывается в высшей степени гармонией, красотой, дает неслыханное и негаданное дотоле чувство полноты, меры, примирения и восторженного молитвенного слития с самым высшим синтезом жизни?». Эти туманные выражения казались ему самому очень понятными, хотя еще слишком слабыми. В том же, что это действительно «красота и молитва», что это действительно «высший синтез жизни», в этом он сомневаться не мог, да и сомнений не мог допустить. Ведь не видения же какие-нибудь снились ему в этот момент, как от хашиша, опиума или вина, унижающие рассудок и искажающие душу, ненормальные и несуществующие? Об этом он здраво мог судить по окончании болезненного состояния. Мгновения эти были именно одним только необыкновенным усилением

[281] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 219-20.

> самосознания, — если бы надо было выразить это состояние одним словом, — самосознания и в то же время самоощущения в высшей степени непосредственного. Если в ту секунду, то есть в самый последний сознательный момент пред припадком, ему случалось успевать ясно и сознательно сказать себе: «Да, за этот момент можно отдать всю жизнь!», — то, конечно, этот момент сам по себе и стоил всей жизни.[282]

In this passage, an unusually direct recounting of Myshkin's own thoughts, the clarity of his consciousness is affirmed again and again. He characterizes his auras as "the highest sensation of life and self-consciousness" [высшего самоощущения и самосознания], "an extraordinary quickening of self-consciousness" [необыкновенным усилением самосознания], "the direct sensation of existence in the most intense degree" [самоощущения в высшей степени непосредственного], in which he can speak to himself "clearly and consciously" [ясно и сознательно сказать себе]. The root "self-" [само-] floods the passage, affirming Myshkin's experiential and mystical knowledge above any observer's proclaimed expertise on a condition they do not experience. Above all, the entire mystical condition is expressed in the single word "self-consciousness" [самосознания]. It is the one God-given moment in which he is most aware on the highest level. When Myshkin is swayed by the powerful and pervasive ideology of cure, he names that moment "disease," but nothing else about the way he describes his experience could be framed as disease. And in the end, even if this moment of the highest self-consciousness is disease, he judges it worth even the unbearable pain of what follows. That judgement in affirmation of his condition, that it is worth the whole of life, is unequivocally presented as clear and conscious. Myshkin rejects cure not in a haze of impairment or a state of unreality, but in the context of the highest possible understanding of existence.

The narrator, however, immediately discredits Myshkin's experience of his own condition, claiming authority over his experience and its meaning in a way similar to the doctors, the General,

[282] Ibid., *Idiot*, 6:226-7.

and other people granted the appellation of "normal." He claims, "There was undoubtedly a mistake in his conclusion – that is, in the estimate of that minute, but the reality of the sensation somewhat perplexed him. What was he to make of that reality? For the very thing had happened; he actually had said to himself at that second, that, for the infinite happiness he had felt in it, that second really might well be the whole of life"[283] [В выводе, то есть в его оценке этой минуты, без сомнения, заключалась ошибка, но действительность ощущения все-таки несколько смущала его. Что же в самом деле делать с действительностью? Ведь это самое бывало же, ведь он сам же успевал сказать себе в ту самую секунду, что эта секунда, по беспредельному счастию, им вполне ощущаемому, пожалуй, и могла бы стоить всей жизни].[284] The narrator assumes and expects that the reader will agree with *him* rather than Myshkin in affirming the ideology of cure. The reader is positioned between the two and brought to a choice: whether to elevate Myshkin's clear and conscious assertion beyond all possibility of doubt that his disability is worth the whole of life, or the narrator's certainty that such an absurd conclusion must be a mistake.

Eli Clare argues in *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure* that, even given the benefit of medical care and the necessity of it for many disabled people's survival, at the ideological core of cure is an inherent violence that denies the inherent value of disabled people's lives. He is careful to specify, "I don't mean that each individual instance of cure is violent. Remember, the restoration of health arrives in many slippery guises. Rather I mean that as a widespread ideology centered on eradication, cure always operates in relationship to violence."[285] Cure is motivated and justified by a notion of defects in an impossibly ideal body-mind, which transforms into the categorization of

[283] Ibid., *The Idiot*, 220.

[284] Ibid., *Idiot*, 227.

[285] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017), 28.

entire individuals, communities, and cultures as *defective*, consequently making those deemed defective an unquestioned target for institutionalization and eventually eradication.[286]

In this aspect, again, the application of a disability studies framework can move Murav's approach of oppositional readings of holy foolery and illness into something more cooperative and unified. According to the ideologies of normalcy and cure, it's obvious that anything marked as an illness or defect should be eliminated, no matter how the person with that illness experiences or feels about it. A disabled holy fool, though, resists the application of cure. Since they are inextricably linked, curing Myshkin of his epilepsy or idiocy (if such a thing were possible) would mean "curing" him of his saintliness. What would it mean to cure Myshkin of his holy foolery? We would lose our moral anchor in the narrative, our positively good man, along with all the qualities that make him a compelling and endearing character through the present day. For that reason, Myshkin's return to the Swiss clinic feels more like a tragic ending than a hopeful one.

Concluding remarks

Both Myshkin's disability and his embodiment of the holy fool archetype are integral factors in his ambiguous characterization: together, they call attention to intensifying processes of pathologizing those who could not be molded to fit the role of normal citizen and pose alternative values for a different way of being. To answer the question of whether he succeeds as a positively good man – if that is a question that interests a reader, or just in understanding his narrative function holistically if it does not – both must be taken into account. To discuss one without the other creates an incomplete reading; to discuss them as opposing or alternate factors, as though one cancels out the other or provides a counter-explanation for his character, also creates an incomplete

[286] Ibid., 23.

reading. They operate as complements, bringing the holy fool into the age of scientific medicalization.

There's a critical distinction between reading *The Idiot* through a medical lens and reading it through the lens of disability, as I have demonstrated here. In a way, the intervention of a disability justice perspective takes on a holy foolish function: the insistent, often uncomfortable, demand to practice love (or, if you prefer, Quayson's "ethical core") for those whom medical and state authorities have deemed undesirable or unworthy, to remember and celebrate our humanity. It's the call to take Myshkin's words seriously when he tells us to talk to a person and be happy in loving them.

My heart flutters and pounds every waking step
Not sure i found home yet
T. S. Banks, *Call Me Ill*

III. The late poetry of Sophia Parnok

Among the subjects of each of my chapters, Sophia Parnok is perhaps the biggest surprise. She would likely not be the first poet one would reach for as a representative of Russian modernism, and she would likely not be the first poet one would reach for as a representative of holy foolery in literature. This may be in part explained by a comparatively smaller body of criticism (certainly in contrast to giants Pushkin and Dostoevsky), and in another part by the focus of that criticism on the lesbian facet of her life and work. Here I will build on that foundation to discuss the interaction of two other significant facets of Parnok's poetic life-creation: those of chronic illness and spirituality, which place her centrally in the realm of inquiry presented by this study.

Like most scholars, I suspect, I found Parnok through Marina Tsvetaeva, with whom she had a brief and tumultuous relationship – that is, in reading Tsvetaeva's love lyrics, I found *Podruga*, the posthumously-published cycle dedicated to Sophia Parnok, and only then discovered that Parnok was a talented poet in her own right. Parnok's lesbian identity preceded her poetic one. But Parnok merits more scholarly attention both as 'Russia's Sappho,' as biographer and critic Diana Burgin calls her, and from other angles, as her work embodies core elements of the Modernist subject: self-creation, alienation, and a search for belonging in a world that no longer makes sense as it once did. In addition, while not providing a singular holy fool character such as in *Boris Godunov* or *The Idiot*, it contains all the necessary elements of the holy fool as outlined in the introduction. In other words, the lyric persona herself takes on the role of a holy fool through the course of her development, and we the readers are the audience experiencing a foolish encounter and are given the opportunity to respond as is Tsar Boris or the Epanchin family.

This chapter focuses on Parnok's late poetry: specifically, the poems first published posthumously in *Collected Poems* [*Собрание стихотворений*], compiled and prefaced in 1979 by Sofiia Poliakova. These include fifteen uncollected poems Poliakova gathers under the title *Poems of Later Years* [*Стихи последних лет*] (1928-33) and the two cycles dedicated to Parnok's then-partner Nina Vedeneeva, *Ursa Major* [*Большая медведица*] (1932-33) and *Useless Goods* [*Ненужное добро*] (1933), collectively referred to as the Vedeneeva cycles. According to critical consensus – including Sofiia Poliakova, Diana Burgin, Ol'ga Zhuk, and Elena Romanova – Parnok reached the height of her poetic development when she was writing the *Poems of Later Years* and reached her creative apogee with her very last works, the Vedeneeva cycles. The agreed explanation among the above critics is that Parnok knew after her attempts to get the collection *Sotto Voce* [*Вполголоса*] published in 1928 that under increasing Stalinist restrictions publishers and censors were no longer willing to let a consciously lesbian poet into print.[287] Consequently, everything written after *Sotto Voce* was written for the drawer and may have allowed Parnok to write more openly or freely, knowing that the only censor who could touch it was the internal self-censor. This period also coincided with a sharp decline in Parnok's health as part of a lifelong chronic illness, which spurred Parnok to take stock of her life and take this last chance to write her voice and her life into eternity.

In a letter to E.K. Gertsyk in 1926 on the publication of her collection *Music* [*Музыка*], Parnok wrote that she didn't expect a "voice like mine" [такой голос, как мой] could be heard in her lifetime.[288] She wrote that the recognition of the soul's right to existence was more valuable to her than any literary recognition, and that she considered poetry to be above all a means of communication with people – she was delighted that she could find an "eternal, timeless language"

[287] Diana Burgin translates this title literally, as *Half-Voiced*. Other possible, more common translations of the word *вполголоса* include "in a hushed voice," "in a whisper," or "under one's breath."

[288] Sofiia Poliakova, "Poeziia Sofii Parnok," in *Sofiia Parnok: Sobranie stikhotvorenii* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 27.

[вечный вневременный язык] with which to reach people. After *Music*, Parnok published one more collection, *Sotto Voce* [*Вполголоса*, composed 1926-27]; all further poetry she wrote for the drawer, for an unknown reader in an unknown time. That act of reaching through time is the focus of this chapter: for a poet who keenly felt a personal proximity to death for much of her life, the element of the holy fool connects both her experience of chronic illness and her powerful love for women with something sacred that reaches through and beyond time.

Lesbian love as a life-creating force

The foundation of current scholarship on Parnok is Sofiia Poliakova's article "Poeziia Sofii Parnok" prefacing the 1979 *Collected Poems* in which all the works addressed in this chapter were published for the first time. The commentary is part biography and part literary path, creating a linear narrative of literary development. Poliakova's biography is based in part on her own interviews with the people who knew Parnok in life, as very little of an archive remains for Parnok. The poet did not keep journals or creative notebooks as Dostoevsky did, and letters addressed to Parnok were not preserved – even most poetic drafts or manuscripts were only preserved by those to whom Parnok gave them.[289] Poliakova's biography includes no information at all on Parnok's lifelong chronic illness; that information comes from Diane Lewis Burgin's 1994 biography and commentary *Sophia Parnok: The Life and Work of Russia's Sappho*. Burgin sources information on that major aspect of the poet's life from documents others have preserved from Parnok and their reminiscences of her.

By Poliakova's judgment, everything from her first collection *Poems* [*Стихотворения*] in 1916 to the collection *Roses of Pieria* [*Розы Пиерии*] in 1922 shows an unpromising, even banal start.[290] In

289 Ibid., 7.

290 Ibid., 55.

Poliakova's view, they were modeled too closely on others' poetry, either on her early mentor and later (briefly) husband, Vladimir Volkenstein, or on poets of antiquity, especially Sappho. In her more mature verse, with a developed voice of her own, Parnok writes especially, as Poliakova has noted, under the influence of Fedor Tiutchev, whom she read extensively in school, in themes of the soul at nighttime, silence, dreams as a special form of creative existence, and in later works of the impossibility of making one's feelings known to others.[291] Other influences Poliakova identifies include Evgenii Baratynskii in Parnok's rhythms and lexicon, Karolina Pavlova in parallels of "one's own spiritual homelessness and complicated way of loving," [собственной душевной бездомности и сложной любви], and Vladislav Khodasevich (who knew her personally), in her intimate, conversational, prose-like poetics.[292] Poliakova does not attribute Parnok's work within any of the modernist movements such as Acmeism or Symbolism, although she concedes that, if anyone, Parnok had a poetic sibling in Anna Akhmatova in a shared value of relatively unfiltered personal experience.[293]

Poliakova describes the world of these posthumously published works (composed after the publication of *Sotto Voce*) as for the most part grim and frightful, with broad themes of assault on the poet's creativity, and a stifling social vacuum.[294] Parnok saw the same, writing in a letter to Gertsyk dated May 4, 1929, "The poems I have are so dark, I don't even want to send them. What a gloomy poet I am!" [стихи у меня такой мрачности, что и посылать не хочется. Невеселый я поэт!][295] Poliakova finds it unfortunately ironic that Parnok would reach the height of her poetic skill in such depths of unhappiness: "The uptick in creativity for such a 'taciturn' poet at the threshold of death is

[291] Ibid., 38, 92.

[292] Ibid., 38, 46, 51.

[293] Ibid., 37.

[294] Ibid., 86.

[295] Ibid., 87.

astounding – even in the best of times Parnok called her Muse deaf-mute and untalkative, a completely hopeless patient, having fallen silent for two entire years preceding the Vedeneeva renaissance." [Удивителен этот взлет творчества в преддверии смерти у такого "неразговорчивого" – Парнок и в лучшие-то времена звала свою Музу глухонемой, несловоохотливой – больного, отчаявшегося во всем, а в годы, предшествующие веденеевскому ренессансу, смолкшего на целое двухлетие поэта].[296] I'll discuss later in this chapter some of the complex implications of a disabled muse for a disabled poet at the apogee of her work, but for the moment Poliakova works through her surprise at the zenith of Parnok's poetic ability coinciding with the nadir of her health and well-being and, like the other scholars of Parnok, cannot speak highly enough of these last cycles. "The Vedeneeva poems represent Parnok's greatest lyrical achievement, placing her poetry among the best examples produced by the brilliant constellation of her contemporaries, a diary unlike any other, with a rare freedom of expression depicting a story of arduous love and complicated conditions of the spirit." [Стихи веденеевского ряда – высшее достижение лирики Парнок, которое ставит ее поэзию в ряд с лучшими образцами блистательной плеяды ее современников, единственный в своем роде дневник, с редкостной свободой самовыражения запечатлевший историю трудной любви и сложных состояний духа.][297]

Poliakova saw that, for Parnok, "poetry was the primary form of expressing her identity" [Поэзия была для Парнок главной формой выражения своей личности].[298] In Poliakova's study, this refers primarily to her identity as a poet, with a defined lyrical persona and belonging in the Russian poetic tradition. Burgin responds by emphasizing that Parnok uses poetry as the main form

[296] Ibid., 90.

[297] Ibid., 91.

[298] Ibid., 93.

of creating her own identity specifically as a *lesbian* poet. She argues that "the life Parnok created in her lyrics for herself and for her readers is a consciously conceived, albeit unnamed, lesbian existence, politically as well as spiritually aware of other lesbian existences in history, myth, art, and life."[299] Naturally, this lesbian existence is created through the many lyrics Parnok composed to her lovers and dedicated to them by name, but Burgin sees a lesbian self-creation in other aspects as well.

Burgin pays more critical attention to Parnok's spiritual journey than Poliakova does, addressing her complex relation to a Jewish identity through her mother (who died when Parnok was a child) and her father's Catholicism, leading to a conversion to Russian Orthodoxy around the time of her divorce from Volkenstein in 1915. This spiritual searching is not irrelevant to the creation of a consciously lesbian lyric identity; by Burgin's reading, in Parnok's later and more mature poetry, "the center of spiritual intensity shifts [from Orthodoxy] to the eternal life of the poet's soul (whose separate life story the poet also writes in her lyrics) and the poet's merging with her. This religious feeling is neither Jewish nor Russian Orthodox; rather, it springs from elemental feminine archimages and is expressed lyrically in the lesbian narrator's intimacies with nature and her soul."[300] From this perspective, the spiritual and lesbian facets of Parnok's lyric persona become one and the same, imbuing the spiritual element with female love and the lesbian element with deep spiritual significance.

This merger of spiritual and lesbian love folds into the second manifestation of lesbian life-creation, what Burgin calls a "radical woman-centeredness" in her writing of relationships between women as varied as any relationships between people, including "examples of mothering (including

[299] Burgin, Diana Lewis, "Sophia Parnok and the Writing of a Lesbian Poet's Life," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 2 (Summer 1992), 214.

[300] Ibid., 225.

god-mothering, grandmothering, Ur-mothering), both with and without an erotic component, daughterhood, sisterhood (both biological and spiritual), female friendship and, of course, female same-sex love."[301] Burgin collects a sampling of the allegorical ideas, experiences, and powers written by Parnok as women: Woman-Life [Женщина-жизнь], Mistress-Anguish [Тоска-Владычица], Lady Fate [госпожа Судьба], Music of Musics [Музыка музык], Old Woman Death [старуха-смерть], and – of course – her Muse [Муза].[302]

Chronic illness in Parnok's life and poetry

With Burgin's thorough scholarship, the case for reading Parnok as a consciously lesbian Russian poet is solidly made. In this study I'd like to make the case further for reading Parnok as a poet for whom chronic illness is also an omnipresent and foundational aspect of lyric identity. I also will be building on Burgin's biographical research and am indebted to her for the level of detail included in *Sophia Parnok: The Life and Work of Russia's Sappho*, in which she goes into much more detail about Parnok's health and how it interfered with her poetic development. Adding a disability perspective makes it clear that chronic illness not only interfered, the experience of illness was also *part of* that poetic development and manifested in her poetry. Parnok is not 'just' a Russian lesbian poet; she's a *disabled* Russian lesbian poet.

In the course of tracing Parnok's development as a lesbian poet through her life, Burgin also traces the progression of Parnok's illness through her life and identifies a few moments in which those two processes intersect. Burgin is the first (and possibly only) critic to name a diagnosis – "She was chronically ill (with Grave's disease, evidently) from her youth […]" – although whether she

301 Ibid., 227.

302 Ibid., 227-8.

found the diagnosis already named in her research or deduced from Parnok's symptoms is unclear.[303] Grave's disease [базедова болезнь; диффузный токсический зоб; заболевание Грейвса] is a hyperthyroidic immune system disorder that presents most commonly in women before the age of 40, with wide-ranging symptoms including tachycardia, tremors in hands and fingers, low body mass, chronic fatigue, and others.[304] Burgin lists among Parnok's frequent symptoms "exhaustion, muscular weakness, and emaciation" as well as "headaches, insomnia, fatigue, and tachycardia."[305] She does not note when these symptoms first appeared (likely due to the unavailability of such information), but does mention a connection between the condition and her earliest poetry at gymnasium around 1906.

Chronic illness occupies a well-established position among the sub-fields of disability studies. Despite the many debates within disability studies on how to conceptualize or theorize impairment, it is common practice to consider chronic illness a category of impairment, following the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) in 2001. That classification includes among impairments conditions that may be lifelong or acquired, physical or mental, in a way that easily includes diseases and conditions (including Graves') commonly considered chronic illness.[306] In *Sociologies of Disability and Illness*, her critical comparison of how chronic illness is treated in disability studies and medical sociology, Carol Thomas also makes a case to include chronic illness as a subject of disability studies from an approach of social oppression: that "chronically ill and disabled people, whether their conditions are designated physical or mental, are seen as the unfortunate and suffering victims of labels that carry stigmatizing

303 Burgin, *Sophia Parnok: The Life and Work of Russia's Sappho* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 57.

304 Dan L. Longo, Terry J. Smith, and Laszlo Hegedüs. "Graves' Disease." *The New England Journal of Medicine* 375, no. 16 (2016).

305 Burgin, *Sophia Parnok*, 57, 135.

306 World Health Organization, "International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health." https://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/

meanings."[307] When this book was published in 2007, Thomas was encouraged to see signs of increasing consideration of chronic illness by disability studies scholars – fortunately, in the decade since, that trend has continued.

More recently, in 2016, poet Emilia Neilsen wrote on the ongoing tension in claiming disability for people with chronic illness, in a creative-critical hybrid piece, a mixture of poetry and essay, published in *Disability Studies Quarterly*. In describing her experience with chronic illness, she writes, "At that time, during active autoimmune disease, unlike many people with disabilities, I was sick and unsure if I would ever be well again. I lived with enormous uncertainty where the future was concerned."[308] The pain, fatigue, and uncertain futurity had a marked impact on her art as well; she "came to value reading work that was as disruptive, unpredictable and unruly as the bodies and minds from which the work emerged" and began to see poetry as an especially effective genre for articulating such deeply subjective experiences and knowledge.[309] The instability and flux of poetic language are for Neilsen, perhaps like for Parnok, the traits that make poetry the perfect medium to write the continual flux of health, ability, and identity with chronic illness.

The inclusion of chronic illness into the disability-centered conversations we have considered so far introduces some important complications. In *Brilliant Imperfection*, the subject of chronic illness leads Eli Clare to critically reconsider his stance on cure with more nuance. He writes with a great deal of vulnerability and honesty about how his relationships with chronically ill friends challenged his positions on the violence of cure and the value, even desirability, of disabled bodyminds, as discussed in the previous chapter. He writes, addressing this friend directly, "Many a

307 Carol Thomas, *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 21.

308 Emilia Neilsen, "Chronically Ill, Critically Crip?: Poetry, Poetics and Dissonant Disabilities" *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2016).

309 Ibid.

disability activist has declared that there's nothing wrong with our disabled body-minds, even as we differ from what's considered normal. I have used this line myself more than once, to which you respond, 'It's true; we need to resist the assumptions that our bodies are wrong and broken. But at the same time, the chronic fatiguing hell pain I live with is not a healthy variation, not a natural bodily difference.'"[310] Talking more deeply with friends with chronic pain, type 1 diabetes, heavy metal poisoning, cancer, and other chronic illnesses, he is led to re-question what his own experience of cerebral palsy brought him to understand about how *normal* variation and *natural* bodily difference are decided. Based on her poetry, it seems likely that the sentiment about "chronic fatiguing hell pain" would have resonated with Parnok.

In her biography, Burgin notes significant moments when her illness impacted Parnok's life, such as her move with Volkenstein to Sorochintsy, Ukraine in 1913 on doctor's orders and a fateful evening in January 1916 when a flare-up prevented Parnok from attending a gathering with her then-partner Tsvetaeva at the Kannegiser family in which Mikhail Kuzmin and Osip Mandelstam were also in attendance.[311] She also notes a few ways in which Parnok's illness manifested in her poetry, attributing Parnok's early lyrical fondness for autumnal imagery to her illness: "She believed, however, that her view of nature was another thing that alienated her from 'normal' experience" in that "She had never and could never perceive nature with the eyes of a healthy person."[312] Burgin further speculates that "her emphasis on nature's feebleness, tiredness, and withering reflected her empathy with the aspect of nature that seemed to externalize her frequent symptoms."[313]

310 Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 54.

311 Burgin, *Sophia Parnok*, 67, 140.

312 Ibid., 57.

313 Ibid.

Primarily, Burgin sees a reflection of Parnok's illness in her preoccupation with death, noting that "The knowledge that death often occurred unexpectedly and instantaneously for sufferers of Grave's may have contributed to the poet's lyrical obsession with last moments."[314] Based on Burgin's reporting, it seems that Parnok's flare-ups became more of a steady decline in health starting around 1926. Burgin writes that in that period "death continued to hover in the shadows of the poet's room well into the spring but without bringing the desired end, as she wrote self-ironically in an April poem which she dedicated Yulia Veisberg (#185)" and calls Parnok "death-obsessed" in October of that year.[315] If anything, that slow death accelerated in 1932, when she began composing the Vedeneeva cycles. In describing the last photograph of Parnok, taken in winter of 1932, Burgin writes, "By early winter Parnok had visibly deteriorated, and classic symptoms of heart malfunction showed in her appearance. The last photograph Gornung took of her reveals a body swollen with edema. Her face wears a poignant half-smile and looks grandmotherly and ailing; one would easily give her ten more than her forty-seven years."[316] Parnok died August 26, 1933 at age forty eight of complications relating to her chronic illness, in the company of those closest in her life at that time, including Vedeneeva.

But autumnal moods and a proximity to death are by far not the only way chronic illness manifests in Parnok's poetry. It shows in numerous physiological details where Graves' symptoms are written into her emotional life. To take another example from *Poems of Later Years*, the February 1928 poem "Out the Window" [В форточку] (#216) opens with this description:

314 Ibid., 135.

315 Ibid., 230, 236.

316 Ibid., 298.

Kneeling on the hard window sill	Коленями - на жесткий подоконник,
And thrust out the window – a gaping fish mouth!	И в форточку - раскрытый, рыбий рот!
A breath…a breath of air…Like a living corpse	Вздохнуть... вздохнуть...
Who sucks life from a gray oxygen bag,	Так тянет кислород,
And whose heart thumps: time to go! time to go![317]	Из серого мешка, еще живой покойник,
	И сердце в нем стучит: пора, пора![318]

This poem, like others we will see in this chapter, narrates a poet's speech act with deep symbolic significance. The urgency of the poet's speech is felt through the desperation of not getting enough air and the anxiety of a rapid heartbeat very common to Parnok's own experience of embodiment. She continues, though, "But I am not dying" [Но я не умираю], and declares her prophecy out onto the street. I will return to the content of that speech act and the significance of its recipient in the next section, but the poem closes on a listener of sorts – an imagined kindred spirit, someone far away in the West, "Breathing the same poisonous swill, / And using all her strength just to take a breath," [Дыша такой же ядовитой жижей / И силясь из последних сил вздохнуть, -]. This imagined Western counterpart also struggling to breathe is "Not white, and not red, and not black, / Not a citizen, but simply a human being," [Не белый, и не красный, и не черный, / Не гражданин, а просто человек,] and also just trying to survive her dangerous and tragic age. Such a connection of physiological symptoms of breathlessness, fatigue, irregular heartbeat, etc. to spiritual, emotional, and creative fatigue is common in Parnok's poetry, especially after the Civil War – the mood is perfectly encapsulated by the first line of the uncollected poem "My blood and my rhymes have a shortage" [В крови и в рифмах недостача] (#222), composed October 6, 1931.

Based on Parnok's poetry and correspondence, I would add that lifelong chronic illness and the expectation of an early death contribute to the poet's sense of a prematurely advanced age.

317 Diana Burgin, "Sophia Parnok: Other Poems (published posthumously)," DianaBurgin.com, 2007, http://www.dianaburgin.com/P-Poem-Other.html. Except where I have noted changes, all following Parnok translations are Burgin's.

318 Sophia Parnok, *Sobranie stikhotvorenii* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 231.

Burgin herself remarks that Parnok "felt at times that she was in the early winter of her life," although the pattern is more significant than is mentioned in Burgin's biography. For instance, an undated poem (#89) in the collection *The Vine* [*Лоза*, 1922] characterizes the poet's body as a house "wrapped in an snowy shroud" [в снежном саване], in which "the soul leaps within me" [Прыгает душа во мне] but the house itself is in "icy repose" [Ледяной покой...].[319] Parnok's conception of herself as old before her time became especially pronounced evidently around 1927 and onward. Burgin attributes Parnok's "persistent sense of being 'old' in what was, chronologically, merely her middle age" to her Graves' disease, "in which the body wears itself out prematurely."[320] On July 12, 1927, at age 42, Parnok wrote in a letter to her friend and coworker Sophia Fedorchenko, "I'm withering by the day, coming apart at all the seams, every day brings a new ailment… I feel like an old woman, forever tired, like mortal sin."[321] Around that time, September 21-24, 1927, Parnok composed an untitled poem (#191) for *Sotto Voce* [*Вполголоса*, 1927] which repeats the thematic pattern of ice and stillness and begins:

Old beneath an aged elm tree,	Старая под старым вязом,
old beneath an aged sky, an	старая под старым небом,
aged woman in old anguish,	старая над болью старой
I have fallen into thought.[322]	призадумалася я.[323]

Such identification with old age continues from this point into the Vedeneeva cycles, as I will discuss further below.

But when Parnok's feeling of prematurely advanced age is poetically linked not to her unfortunate situation in historic time but with her relationships, it becomes a beautiful and desirable

319 Parnok, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 158. Translation mine.

320 Burgin, *Sophia Parnok*, 236.

321 Burgin, *Sophia Parnok*, 234.

322 Ibid.,, "Sophia Parnok: Half-Voiced," DianaBurgin.com, 2007, http://www.dianaburgin.com/P-Poem-Half-Voiced.html

323 Parnok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 213-14.

trait instead of a tragic one. In another of the *Poems of Later Years*, dated Fall 1929 and dedicated to Marina Baranovich (#220), Parnok takes on the mantle of age with fondness. Parnok writes of Marina, "You are young, long-limbed! With such / A marvelously molded, winged body!"[324] [Ты, молодая, длинноногая! С таким / На диво слаженным, крылатым телом!][325] She readily takes upon herself the role of older, wiser lover and reminisces on how Baranovich reminds her of another young and passionate Marina: Parnok's previous lover, Marina Tsvetaeva. In the Vedeneeva cycles this develops even further, directly associating signs of advanced age with feelings of love and desire. Variations on the epithet "grey-haired" or "silver-haired" [седая] appear as an iconic epithet: "Oh, my grey-haired darling" [О, мой друг седоволосый], "Let your grey locks be ruffled" [Пусть седые пряди треплет], "A head of silver gray" [Седая голова], "Silver-Gray Rose" [Седая роза], and Gray-haired muse [седая муза].

"Stop acting crazy, poet"

In addition to the elements of lesbian love and chronic illness, the lyric persona Parnok builds through her poetry also incorporates all the necessary elements of the holy fool identified in the introduction: an ambiguous madness/holy wisdom, a marginalized status within one's own society, a powerful moral/ethical truth, and an encounter with a "normal" person who often does not receive the fool's message. Parnok links herself by name to holy foolery and performs the role through her lyrics. In contrast to Nikolka and Myshkin, though, the role of audience is largely played not by another persona or character, but by us as readers.

The holy fool archetype would not have been foreign to Parnok's spiritual sensibilities, especially in her mature verse. Sometime between her divorce in 1915 and the 1917 revolution,

[324] Burgin, "Sophia Parnok: Other Poems."

[325] Parnok, 234.

Parnok was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church. Poliakova sees the conversion as a result of the First World War, during which Parnok developed worldviews of Christian pacifism and Slavophile faith in the Messianic path of Russia.[326] In discussing the religious motifs in Parnok's work as early as her first collection *Poems*, Poliakova claims that "In general, Parnok's sense and way of life were very Russian and even Orthodox" [Вообще жизнеощущение и уклад жизни Парнок были очень русскими и даже православными].[327] Burgin calls the conversion a "final, entirely symbolic trip away from the paternal."[328] She further speculates that "the stimulus behind her conversion was probably her deeply-rooted yearning for a motherland, which may have been a compensation for the loss of her biological mother as well as in keeping with her Russophile sympathies," and that "the lesbian narrator in Parnok's work expresses a desire to be Russia's "own," to engage in the life of Russia whom she perceived as a lonely wanderess like herself."[329] Whatever the motivation behind the conversion, it's clear that Parnok closely associated faith with nation and highly valued love and loyalty to the homeland. In a February 1917 letter to Iu. L. Vaisberg, she wrote:

> If you asked me now what is the most remarkable, the most Russian quality of a Russian person, I would say with full conviction: the inability to love their homeland. The previous regime cultivated disrespect for country in generations of people, but no disappointments could cure one of love – because love is in the blood, and if Russians were cured of love for Russia, that means there was never any love in the first place.
>
> [Если вы меня теперь спросили, какая самая разительная, самая русская черта русского человека, я бы с полным убеждением сказала – неумение любить свое отечество. Старое правительство воспитало в поколениях неуважение к родине, но от любви ведь не излечивают никакие разочарования, – потому что любовь – в крови – и если русские излечились от любви к России, то, значит, никакой любви и не было.][330]

[326] Poliakova, 18.

[327] Ibid., 19.

[328] Burgin, *Sophia Parnok*, 224.

[329] Ibid.

[330] Poliakova, 20.

Holy foolish elements are scattered all throughout Parnok's late poetry, though foregrounded most explicitly in "Prologue" [Пролог] (#215, Jan.-Feb. 1928). This poem takes the form of a dramatic dialogue between a Voice [Голос] and the Poet [Поэт], without stage directions or any other paratextual notes. The Voice itself opens the scene for us:

Voice.	**Голос.**
Enormous city. Wind. Evening.	Огромный город. Ветер. Вечер.
Lights flicker in the dark,	Во мраке треплются огни,
And you, madman, are off in search of	И ты, безумец, в первом встречном
A soul mate in each passerby.	Идешь искать себе родни.
Calm down, stop acting crazy, poet,	Смирись, поэт, и не юродствуй,
Resign yourself to orphan-hood	Привыкни к своему сиротству,
And do not pester with your cries	И окриком не тормоши
The people there who pass you by.[331]	Тебе не внемлющей души.[332]

Even this first stanza of a poem, significantly longer than the average Parnok lyric, prepares us for a holy foolish encounter. The Voice sets an enormous urban setting, bringing to mind St. Andrei Iurodivyi of Constantinople. The poet is named as mad by an outside persona and is also established with a quest of connection. Diana Burgin translates this line with "soul mate," but I find it worth noting (especially given her commentary discussed above that Parnok's woman-centered poetic world values female relationships of all kinds) that the original word, родни, primarily holds connotations of kinship, extended family, or one's own people. We are given the image of a mad (or mad-acting) poet accosting the unmarked and thereby presumably normative citizens with that attempt at a deeper connection, a series of such encounters condensed into eight lines. The Voice represents the next layer of such rejection, in telling the Poet to give up and resign herself to a life of isolation. And as if just to make sure the dynamic is perfectly clear, the Voice invokes holy fools by name in the command not to be one: *не юродствуй*. Burgin translates that imperative verb as "stop

331 Burgin, "Sophia Parnok: Other Poems."

332 Parnok, 229-31.

acting crazy," though another phrase closer to the particular phenomenon might be "don't play the fool." We then as readers are directed to the option of where to align ourselves in this conflict, with the normativizing Voice or with the holy mad Poet, just as each person who encounters a holy fool is given the option to hear them (typically they do not – but we can).

The Poet speaks next, addressing those passing by:

Poet.	**Поэт.**
Hey, you there, passing by!	Прохожий, проходящий мимо!
Not joyful and not sorrowful,	Не радуясь и не скорбя,
Obsessed one, where are you rushing to,	Куда спешишь ты, одержимый,
A fugitive from your own self?	Беглец от самого себя?
No matter who you are, even a foe,	Кто б ни был ты - хотя бы недруг, —
Inside, deep down inside your soul,	В душе своей, в дремучих недрах, —
Even a grunt, if you are mute	Мычаньем, если ты немой,
Respond, as if you hear my voice! [333]	Ответь, ответь на голос мой.

If we as readers have positioned ourselves as passersby as well, then she is speaking directly to us, including those of us in a far-off future who are unable to speak back to her but are able to hear and understand her voice. She characterizes the passerby as indifferent, "Not joyful and not sorrowful," which in the context of the direct invocation of holy foolery, recalls Revelation 3:15-16 – " know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." As we will see further, this 'lukewarm,' 'neither here nor there' judgment is used often in Parnok's late poetry to chastise the lyric addressee. Again the Poet reinforces her outsider status – a more literal translation than Burgin's "I don't care if you do not like me" might read "Whoever you may be – even a foe." In Burgin's system of interpretation, this clearly points to the intensifying discrimination that prevented Parnok from publishing earlier this same year. Together with the religious context, it blends lesbian love and holy foolery. The reason for the Poet's abjection isn't only the worldly citizen's prejudice

[333] The translation of this stanza is based on Burgin, with some modifications to more closely match the original.

against the mad, the poor, the generally lowly; it's also now intertwined with the citizen's prejudice against a voice like hers. And the Poet demands we not only hear a voice like hers, but that we answer to it, in deed if not in speech: account for ourselves and pronounce a disabled, lesbian poet one of our own.

This stanza in particular links Parnok to another poetic successor to the poet-prophet role: Boris Pasternak, through his lyric poem "About These Poems" [Про эти стихи], part of the collection *My Sister – Life* [*Сестра моя – жизнь*], written in spring and summer 1917 and published in 1922. In "About These Poems," the poet hermits himself indoors during a time-bending, months-long winter storm, rafters resounding with his verses. When he recalls the sun and emerges on Christmas day – echoing in turn Ebenezer Scrooge's spiritual transformation – he too calls out to passersby:

Bundled in a muffler, I'll screen the sun's glare with my palm and yell to the kids: "Hey, what millennium is in our yard?"	В кашне, ладонью заслонясь, Сквозь фортку крикну детворе: Какое, милые, у нас Тысячелетье на дворе?
Who cleared this path to my door, that hole all choked with snow, while I was smoking with Byron, drinking with Poe?	Кто тропку к двери проторил, К дыре, засыпанной крупой, Пока я с Байроном курил, Пока я пил с Эдгаром По?
And then I came to Daryal, that workshop, arsenal, hell, and with Lermontov's death-quiver on my lips dipped my life into Vermouth.[334]	Пока в Дарьял, как к другу, вхож, Как в ад, в цейхгауз и в арсенал, Я жизнь, как Лермонтова дрожь, Как губы в вермут окунал.[335]

Like the lyric persona of "About These Poems," the lyric persona of "Prologue" appeals to passersby for connection, with no evidence of success. While they both connect to a past continuity of poet-prophets through their own verse, in the lineage of Lermontov's transformation of the Pushkinian

334 Boris Pasternak, *My Sister – Life*, trans. Mark Rudman and Bohdan Boichuk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 9-10.

335 Boris Pasternak, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii s prilozheniiami. V odinnadtsati tomakh*, tom 1 (Moskva: Slovo, 2003-2005), 115.

poet-prophet into a holy foolish figure, their calls to other people in their present time go unanswered. In the case of "About These Poems," at least, someone sought out the poet during his hermitage, leaving a track in the snow to his door; for Parnok, the isolation is more complete and more painful.

Pasternak's winter storm transformation, with its verses echoing off the rafters, is an ecstatic time with the company of fellow human beings, but Parnok's isolation is despairing and lonely. When Pasternak cries, "What millennium is it?" to the children in the yard, he calls them "my dears" [милые]; this affectionate mood shows that he has lost track of time in the joy of creation. When Parnok cries out to passersby, she calls them "obsessed" [одержимый], "fugitive from yourself" [Беглец от самого себя], possibly even foes. This is a holy foolish provocation rather than a celebration. In Mandelstam's review of *My Sister – Life*, he writes that "To read Pasternak's verse is to clear one's throat, fortify one's breath, refresh one's lungs; such poetry must cure tuberculosis" [Стихи Пастернака почитать — горло прочистить, дыхание укрепить, обновить легкие: такие стихи должны быть целебны для туберкулеза].[336] To read Parnok's "Prologue," however, is to feel a choking shortness of breath; the 'cure' of connection between poet and the rest of the world is not achieved. The poet of "Prologue" may be able to heal with words as well, but she never has the chance. No matter how desperate her appeal, the passersby will not hear her out, let alone approach of their own accord.

As the script of "Prologue" progresses, it becomes clear that the passerby will on the contrary becoming more and more distant. In the next stanza, the Voice identifies itself as coming from within the crowd with the line "We're deafened by a thunderous sound" [— Мы грохотом оглушены,], now marked with the em-dash that in Russian convention indicates direct speech in the

[336] Osip Mandelstam, "Zametki o poezii," in *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, tom 2 (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 210.

way that double-quotation marks do in English. First characterized as possibly mute, now deafened, the recipient of the poet's message gradually diminishes in sensory contact with the world, increasingly unlikely to communicate successfully during a period when Parnok found it increasingly difficult to publish under tightening restrictions. The Voice confirms that "You're just not traveling our road, / Your dreams confuse and rankle us, / Your talk of summits makes us fret," [Тебе не по дороге с нами, / Ты нас опутываешь снами, / Ты нас тревожишь вышиной,] and also confirms the Poet's earlier declaration that the crowd is hiding from their own selves. As with St. Andrei the Fool of Constantinople, Nikolka, and other fools, the addressee is brought to realize by the fool that they already know the Truth: that they are not living by the principles (God's, justice – "equality" [сверстничество] in this poem) they would pretend to uphold. Again and again the Poet reaches out to individuals in the crowd with a cry to "Come back!" [Вернись!], but they refuse to join her, demurring that they have no time for her. The last outright acknowledges that to come back would mean to burst the bubble of normality constructed in their favor, "To moan and groan together, / Make noise and lead a dog's life" [вместе ныть, и хныкать, / И выкликать, и горе мыкать]. They finish dismissively, "What the hell's your soul to me?" [На кой мне черт душа твоя?].

The drama ends:

Poet.	**Поэт.**
The sky is torn to tatters,	Разодранное в клочья небо,
And impenetrable dark…	И эта взвихренная тьма...
And the sky is also mute,	И это небо — тоже немо,
And everything's gone mad!	И все вокруг сошло с ума!
Don't come closer, evil shadows,	Не надвигайтесь, злые тени,
Retreat, repulsive hue and cry!	Отхлынь, ужасное смятенье!..
One last time I scream, I whisper:	В последний раз кричу, шепчу:
"Understand…"	Поймите...

With the last word given to the Poet, now it is not she who is mad but the world which shut itself away from her. Like in Mikhail Lermontov's lyric poem "The Prophet" [Пророк, 1841], itself a lyric response to Pushkin's 1828 poem of the same name, the Poet is left completely rejected and

abandoned by the kinfolk she could have helped with the holy wisdom spoken through her. Her poetic prophecy is like pearls thrown to swine, but all the same it is her duty to speak. In this case, that holy wisdom is the worthiness and beauty of a voice like hers, shaped by chronic illness and a tumultuous relationship with faith and wholly dedicated to lesbian love.

Immediately following "Prologue," Parnok performs another holy foolish speech act in "Out the Window" [В форточку] (#216, Feb.-March 1928). As discussed in the section above, the first two stanzas of this lyric depict the poet struggling to breathe, who with a pounding heart thrusts her head out the window. Next, Parnok shows that it isn't just the desire to breathe that puts her in this position: "And once again / The ardently demanding word / Casts its spell over my life" [И снова / Над жизнию моею горячо / Колдует требовательное слово]. Here there's a mixture of pagan magic with the word: perhaps the Word of God, or perhaps the word as logos so esteemed by other modernist poets. The next two stanzas mark as a quotation the word spoken by (through) the poet:

"Like a bathhouse the world's got so damn stuffy	– Как в бане испаренья грязных тел,
From the vapors of dirty bodies, impending dark thoughts,	Над миром испаренья темных мыслей,
	Гниющих тайн, непоправимых дел
Rotten secrets, irreparable deeds,	Такой проклятой духотой нависли,
That even if you open the window wide,	Что, даже настежь распахнув окно,
There's no air for a despairing soul to breathe!..	Дышать душе отчаявшейся – нечем!..
Isn't it strange? We treat all diseases:	Не странно ли? Мы все болезни лечим:
Sarcoma, and sclerosis, and old age… But	Саркому, и склероз, и старость... Но
The world still has no clinics where people	На свете нет еще таких лечебниц,
Can be cured of the streptococci of evil.	Где лечатся от стрептококков зла…
That's why I would crawl on my hands and knees	Вот так бы, на коленях, поползла
Over highway potholes, over crushed stone	По выбоинам мостовой, по щебню
On wilderness roads – where? God knows where!	Глухих дорог. – Куда? Бог весть, куда! –
To some forsaken monastery deep in the woods,	В какой-нибудь дремучий скит забытый,
And I'd beg forgiveness and intercession –	Чтобы молить прощенья и защиты -
I'd entreat with tears and prayer… If only	И выплакать, и вымолить... Когда б
I knew where they were, the protectors, Zosimas,	Я знала, где они, – заступники, Зосимы,
And if the eternal flame still burns.."	И не угас ли свет неугасимый?..

Mirroring many fools' performances, this speech confrontationally admonishes the institutions in power. Saintliness and disability are linked here in the inability of the poet to breathe, in body and in

soul, in such a polluted place and time. The metaphor is fully embodied, like the hagiographical Nikola Salos bringing the metaphor of Tsar Ivan the Terrible's slaughter of Christians into the physical world by offering him meat during the Great Fast. Then the speech calls attention to the hypocrisy specifically of such a spiritually and physically dirty world: the age of scientific medicine brought forth in Dostoevsky's time has worked diligently to cure diseases caused by streptococcal bacteria, but has ignored and disavowed treating diseases of the soul. Further, it shows the voluntary abjection of the poet-saint, crawling through the painful urban environs of hagiographical fools, over potholes and gravel, to beg salvation. She even names Father Zosima, spiritual guide to another of Dostoevsky's holy foolish protagonists, Alesha Karamazov. But because she does not know where the Zosimas of this world are, she crawls on a rough road, not to a monastery, but to the windowsill where she can at least speak this word.

At first, the word is spoken "to no one, into space" [так, никому, в пространство] – perhaps just to us as readers. But after the poet-fool finishes speaking, and the poem describes a sunrise over the cupolas and cross of the Church of the Burning Bush [поблескает купол / И крест Неопалимой Купины…], the speaker envisions another addressee: the unknown person in the West discussed in the section above, not a citizen but just a person.

Вот так же высунувшись в душное окно,	Like me, her head thrust out a stuffy window,
дыша такой же ядовитой жижей,	Breathing the same poisonous swill,
и, силясь из последних сил вздохнуть,	And using all her strength just to take a breath,
стоит, и думает, и плачет кто-нибудь	Someone stands, and thinks, and weeps,
не белый, и не красный, и не черный,	Not a white, and not a red, and not a black,
не гражданин, а просто человек,	Not a citizen, but simply a human being,
как я, быть может, слишком непроворно	Like me, perhaps, too un-adroitly
и грусто доживающий свой век.	And sadly living out her life.

Unusually for the holy fool tradition, this connection allows for a possible locus of salvation outside of Russian Orthodoxy or even Russia itself. This person in the West parallels the speaker in the same position, head thrust out a window to breathe (and maybe to speak), disconnected from the

ideological battle waging across the world, and also just trying to survive her age. The comparison leads us to ask whether this person in the West might also have a similar "ardently demanding word" to speak. After all, the medical institutions that ignore the health of the soul were also developed in Paris, Turin, and Hamburg. At the same time, the poet specifically mentions not just the cross but the cupolas reflecting the sunrise, iconic of Orthodoxy specifically. The person is not given to speak at the end of the poem; she simply is there – perhaps she won't speak without a Zosima to act as an intercessor.

The holy foolish elements in Parnok's late poetry work to anchor her in the Russian poetic tradition – if not through the tradition of homoeroticism debated in Zhuk's polemic with Poliakova, then in the position of Russia as the locus of salvation. How could one deny that a voice like Parnok's belongs to Russia when her chosen faith shows through so clearly, with images of sunlight glinting off cupolas from her first collection *Poems* all the way through the *Poems of Later Years*? It puts her prophet in succession to Pushkin's prophet and Lermontov's prophet, and links her to Dostoevsky's yearning for a Christlike love. It also projects her not only into the past but into the future as well: in writing her late works for the drawer, she writes them for an eternal future.

Crip time in *Ursa Major*

Such occupations with futurity continue and even intensify with the Vedeneeva cycles, in ways that disability and holy foolery can together illuminate better than either can separately. As discussed above, Parnok lived evidently her entire life with the sense that she existed somehow out of step or out of sync with a normal life's timeline. The verses she wrote during her school years were preoccupied with twilight and autumn; that identification with advanced age due to illness remained constant throughout her life. A close echo of that 'out of sync' feeling reverberates in a recent creative nonfiction article published by Ellen Samuels in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, "Six Ways

of Looking at Crip Time." In talking about her own experience with chronic illness, she writes, "I look 25, feel 85, and just want to live like the other 40-somethings I know. I want to be aligned, synchronous, part of the regular order of the world. Like the leaves just now turning as the year spins toward its end, I want sometimes to be part of nature, to live within its time. But I don't. My life has turned another way. I live in crip time, now." Parnok's experience of living in crip time infused the Vedeneeva cycles, written in the last eighteen months of her life (January 1932 – July 1933). There, the temporalities she inhabited as a chronically ill, converted Orthodox, lesbian poet develop into a vision of futurity that will carry her love and her voice into eternity through the 'eternal, timeless language' of poetry.

One of the most impactful theorizations of crip time is written by Alison Kafer in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Following the example of disability scholars and activists Irv Zola and Carol Gill, she takes as her starting point the widespread usage of the term 'crip time' in disability communities outside of scholarship. Whereas Zola and Gill write about crip time without defining it, as though the concept and its resistive potential would already be familiar to their audience (as it likely was), Kafer then asks what it would mean to explore disability in time or to articulate a theory of crip time.[337] Starting from that term's in-community usage, Kafer writes, "Operating on crip time, then, might be not only about a slower speed of movement but also about ableist barriers over which one has little to no control; in either case, crip time involves an awareness that disabled people might need more time to accomplish something or to arrive somewhere."[338] Expanding beyond that, Kafer also sees crip time as an orientation to time counter-positioned against 'curative time,' aligning closely with Eli Clare's critique of cure discussed in the previous chapter.[339] Crip time is part of an

337 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 26.

338 Ibid.

339 Ibid., 27.

understanding of disability that does not expect, assume, or demand curative intervention; it creates instead an understanding that can hold the complexities of "chronic fatiguing hell pain," for example, alongside the inherent value of disabled lives. Clare joins Kafer in connecting his grappling with cure to the dimension of time. He writes:

> The desire for cure, for the restoration of health, is connected to loss and yearning. What we remember about our body-minds in the past seduces us. [...] *Normal* and *natural* won't leave us alone. We remain tethered to our body-minds of the past, wanting to transport them into the future, imagining in essence a kind of time travel. Cure is such a compelling response to body-mind loss precisely because it promises us our imagined time travel. But this promise can also devalue our present-day selves. It can lead us to dismiss the lessons we've learned, knowledge gained, scars acquired. It can bind us to the past and glorify the future. It can fuel hope grounded in nothing but the shadows of *natural* and *normal*. And when this time travel doesn't work or simply isn't possible, we need a thousand ways to process the grief prompted by body-mind loss.[340]

If time travel into a past prior to loss is impossible, time travel into some kind of future is a certainty, and Kafer includes in her theorization a connection of crip time to the concept of queer time through discussion of futurity. She polemicizes Lee Edelman's argument in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* for an ethics of queer theory that completely rejects reproductive futurity, embracing the position created for us by the social-political order as a force of negativity and embodiment of the death drive. Instead, Kafer argues that "abandoning futurity altogether is not a viable option for crips or crip theory."[341] If the social-political order is bent on curing us into eradication, the stance of resistance is to survive. One project of crip theory is to build that future where disabled life in all its ways of doing time is valued, for the sake of the present: "As critics of utopian thinking have long argued, the futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present; it seems entirely possible that imagining different futures and temporalities might help us see, and do, the present differently."[342]

[340] Clare, 57. Emphasis original.

[341] Kafer, 28.

[342] Ibid.

The first of the two Vedeneeva cycles, *Ursa Major* [*Большая медведица*] (January – March 1932), can be read through the lens of crip time as a process of grieving a 'normal' future that illness has made impossible and seeking other ways of being in time that allow the poet to live out the love she desires. The cycle consists of seven short lyrics (#232-8) addressed to Vedeneeva, portraying small but meaningful moments in early stages of their relationship. Through much of the cycle, the poems express infatuation, devotion, contentment, and desire; in the last two poems (#237-8), however, the poet turns toward doubt and an uneasy sense of ill-fatedness, writing, "And sorrow runs its fingers over my heart strings: / Ah but the love I feel is out of place!"[343] [И в сердце грусть перебирает струны: / Ах, и люблю я нынче невпопад!] [344] (#237). In each of the seven poems of this cycle, time has a significant thematic presence, and investigating how time changes in relation to illness and aging through the progression of the cycle shows an interpretive possibility for the seemingly abrupt shift in the sixth and seventh poems. In this section, I examine the lead-up to that turn both in the narrative context of Parnok's relationship with Vedeneeva and also in the context of crip temporality. In the next section on the second of the Vedeneeva cycles, *Useless Goods* [*Негужное добро*] (March 1932 – July 1933), I show the repercussions of that out-of-place feeling as the poet's earthly love comes into conflict with her duty as a foolish poet-prophet.

In the first poem of *Ursa Major* (#232) Parnok establishes the emotional space of the cycle and the relationship as one with peculiar laws of physics:

[343] Diana Burgin, "Sophia Parnok: *Ursa Major*," DianaBurgin.com, 2007, http://www.dianaburgin.com/P-Poem-Ursa-Major.html.

[344] Parnok, 241-44.

Why? Because it is the phone zone,	Это зона телефона,
Zone of mental stupefaction,	Зона головокруженья,
Zone of sheer absurdity;	Зона непонятных дел,
Laws of gravity and bodies	Где особые законы
In repulsion and attraction	Тяготенья, притяженья
Function there peculiarly.	И отталкиванья тел.

The "laws of gravity and bodies in repulsion and attraction" operate on her physically, peculiarly preventing her from picking up the phone and calling her beloved ("What exactly is the fateful / Force that rules me in that corner, / Unremitting, troublesome?" [Что за роковая сила / Неизменно, злополучно / В том углу владеет мной?]). The body doesn't operate as expected in this strange zone. The new laws of physics also operate strangely on the emotions, affecting the laws of desire: attraction and repulsion. This feeling of infatuation, being absurdly too anxious to contact the one she loves, mirrors the feeling of illness. Burgin translates "головокруженья" as "mental stupefaction," but it works on both the physical and emotional levels of dizziness, vertigo, distress, and disorientation. This poem brings Parnok's chronic illness into the sensory landscape, reminding us that no experience – even romance – can be separated from it. The poet's lesbian desire and chronically ill embodiment operate together, at the same time, and they affect each other; they're both about what bodies we find desirable and undesirable, and both are felt in the body as a physiological phenomenon.

The physics motif plays on a couple of levels: when the speaker says that she should call a physicist to help explain this strange phenomenon to her [Я бы физика спросила / Пусть мне обьяснит научно / Этот феномен чудной], the knowledge that Nina Vedeneeva was herself a physicist pulls together the conceit. The addressees are the same: the woman who has upended the laws of physics and made Parnok inexplicably too shy to call her, and the physicist who could explain such a phenomenon. In that same stanza, the speaker calls it "Этот феномен чудной" – Burgin translates that as "this strange phenomenon," but the adjective has roots in wonders and

miracles, a decidedly unscientific description. She reinforces that notion in the next line, phrasing the question that she would ask such a physicist: "What exactly is the fateful / Force that rules me in that corner, / Unremitting, troublesome?" [Что за роковая сила / Неизменно, злополучно / В том углу владеет мной?] At the same time that she uses physics as a motif to depict experiences of embodiment and desire (and in a playful nod to her Vedeneeva's profession), she also brings in such concepts beyond human understanding such as fate, wonders, and miracles. But like the wisdom of the holy fool is usually experienced by their addressee as deeply troubling or upsetting, this fate is similarly far from soft and rosy. Even in this stage of early infatuation, the fateful force in the corner is experienced as *злополучно*, translated by Burgin as 'troublesome' but more literally meaning ill- or evil-fated, as though cursed from the start to an unhappy end. It prepares us for some kind of experience beyond control or understanding, one that may not be aligned with our earthly desires. As the cycle progresses, the poet's devotion will become more conflicted, until in the seventh and final poem (#238) she wonders whether her beloved is worthy of these "seven-star consetellation of verse" [семизвездие стиха] after all.

In the second poem (#233), a short lyric of two quatrains, Parnok establishes a Dantean parallel for her relationship with Vedeneeva in which her lover plays the role of Virgil: she writes, "All right then, lead me, lead, lead / Even through all the circles of hell" [Ну что ж, веди меня, веди, веди /Хотя б сквозь все круговороты ада], further alluding to a premonition of ill-fatedness for their path together. She makes the allusion explicit with the last line, "You're the only Virgil I need!" [Другого Вергилия не надо!]. Although Vedeneeva leads in this cycle, Parnok will shift in *Useless Goods* to following the lead of God directly instead of her Virgil. The third poem (#234) is also a pair of quatrains, with an epigraph from Baratynskii's 1822 lyric "The Kiss" [Поцелуй]: "I dream of you, I dream of pleasure…" [Мне снишься ты, мне снится наслажденье...]. Like Baratynskii's poem, this one speaks of the tormenting desire for and pleasure of the beloved's kiss.

With the fourth poem (#235), Parnok imagines a tropical paradise, Viovocala [Виоголоса], where she can live and love Vedeneeva away from the social restrictions of her homeland. Each of the three stanzas of this poem begins with an apostrophe to this paradise, first "Breeze out of Viovocala!" [Ветер из Виоголосы!] then "Tropical Viovocala!" [Жаркая Виоголоса!] and "Generous Viovocala!" [Щедрая Виоголоса!]. In this place, Parnok imagines inhabitants who "go barefoot" [ходят босы] and "shun straitlaced clothes" [без чопорных одежд], living more freely and authentically than the metaphorical inverse of tight and restrictive clothing in her homeland. In the third and final stanza, Parnok describes Viovocala as a place "Where they kiss without palaver" [Там целуются без спроса] and where they follow the following "women's creed" [у женщин нрав таков]: "When you kiss, you feel happy, / When you kiss, you're not smashing / Against a palisade of teeth" [Что, целуя их, смеешься, / Что, целуя, не наткнешься / Ты на частокол зубов!].

This poem brings advanced age as a facet of temporal orientation to the center in describing the beloved primarily through her grey hair. The adjective grey- or silver-haired [седая] is a consistent epithet for Vedeneeva, in this cycle and elsewhere in Parnok's poetry. In the first stanza, she writes:

Oh my gray-haired darling,	О, мой друг седоволосый,
Open up your window wide –	Настежь распахни окно –
Let your gray locks be ruffled,	Пусть седые пряди треплет,
Let your heart start to tremble,	Пусть взыграет в сердце трепет,
Let it warm up inside!	Пусть согреется оно!

This image of the warm, tropical breeze ruffling her beloved's grey locks is one of the more unambivalently pleasant moments of the cycle, and it establishes a pattern, following the declaration to "Leave rushing to the callow youth" [Пускай спешит неопытный юнец] in the third poem (#234), of valuing advanced age as a desirable trait in both the speaker and the addressee. Time has advanced unusually quickly compared to the normative or expected life timeline, but that's not

necessarily a cause for distress. In this stanza, Parnok is able to pause time and appreciate this fond moment of the warm breeze in her lover's silver hair. Here again, an aspect of Parnok's illness (premature aging) is made a poetic experience of romance in the parallel structure of the grey locks ruffled, trembling heart, and warmth. The rapid heartbeat is wrapped between the sign of the beloved and the tropical, emotional warming, not to 'cure' it but to embrace it.

The fifth poem (#236) is a three-stanza lyric narratively split in half. In the first half, the speaker reads a romance ("It starts right in with chapter five / (And there must be a hundred twenty) –" [В начале пятая глава / (А их как будто бы сто двадцать!) –] full of urgency and passion, where "in their beds they toss from yearning" [И оба мечутся, тоскуя] for their lover's burning kiss. That middle stanza is split in half with an ellipsis, then the lyric moves from fictional time and space to the speaker's present: "Oh, darling! Here's the bookmark where, / Right here, the place that I stopped reading," [О, друг мой! Вот закладка где, / Вот до чего я дочитала]. In contrast to the fictional lovers' burning passion, Parnok suggests instead, "Come on, together, let us read / A long, long romance slowly-paced" [Давайте же читать вдвоем/ Роман отменно длинный-длинный.].

Starting at this point in the cycle, time begins to transform as something not just advanced, ahead-of-time, but jumbled out of order as well. The first stanza, depicting the youthful and hasty romance read by the poet, is more rushed in tone than the rest of the cycle has been; with "Five minutes to a rendezvous" [Уж без пяти минут свиданье], there's no possibility for the lovers to hide from their fate, and they toss in their beds at night, "And burned completely through their hearts / A kiss's embryonic burning…" [И сердце прожжено насквозь / Ожогом первым поцелуя…]. When the speaker reaches her bookmark and sets down the story, returning to her own space and time, she adds a parenthetical: "(I reached my doom with time to spare) / I can't reread from the beginning!" [(Проворна я, к своей беде!) - Не начинать же мне сначала!]. With the

expectation of an early death and a sense of age ahead of her time, the poet has no time to start a new romance from the beginning. While she does not wish to rush, she also cannot afford to take the time to develop this romance at her own pace.

Instead, she proposes:

Come on, together, let us read	Давайте же читать вдвоем
A long, long romance slowly-paced.	Роман "отменно длинный-длинный".
You want to make a start with me?	Хотите, вместе мы начнем?
But only straight *in medias res*!	Но только прямо со средины!

The solution to the paradox is to start not at the beginning but in the middle, so that the lovers have time to enjoy their long, slow romance before the ill-fated end. Here also is another indication that the timescape of the cycle is not just advanced but also a little bit jumbled – and that this strange temporality is also desirable. By solving the paradox of wanting a long, slow romance but having foreshortened time, breaking the linear narrative of romance preserves the quality of love desired, so a nonlinear experience of time becomes welcome and even necessary.

A nonlinear timeline is written not only into the relationship but also, in the sixth poem (#237), on the poet's body. It opens:

A head of silver gray. And youthful features.	Седая голова. И облик юный.
And Dante's profile. And a winged gaze, –	И профиль Данта. И крылатый взгляд, -
And sorrow runs its fingers over my heart strings:	И в сердце грусть перебирает струны:
Ah but the love I feel is out of place!	Ах, и люблю я нынче невпопад!

The paradoxical image in the first line of a face with both silver-gray hair and youthful features is certainly identified as the poet through the transposition of Dante's profile onto the portrait, completing the parallel of the lovers Virgil leading Dante through hell and into paradise. Here is the pivot of the cycle, arising from the strange experience of time that comes to a crisis in this penultimate poem of the cycle. Now having admitted this sorrowful, out-of-place feeling, the poem continues, "How aging women suddenly go mad… / Yes, I'd like to be a little stronger, drier, / Like

old wine, – you know, I'm old myself!" [Как сходят вдруг на склоне лет с ума... / Да, я хотела б быть покрепче и посуше, / Как старое вино, – ведь я стара сама!]. On one hand, age remains a desirable trait, as it was when the tropical breeze ruffled her beloved's silver-gray hair; the poet even expresses that she would like to age even further like a vintage wine. On the other, it comes with a risk of sudden madness.

When that madness comes, it takes the form of loss of her desire for desire itself. Even though her romance with Vedeneeva has so far been sweet, gentle, with its own passion at moments, the poet exclaims "If time could just evaporate this sweetness! / I've had enough. I do not want to want!.." [Чтоб время испарило эту сладость, / Довольно мне. Я не хочу хотеть!..]. The poet looks to time itself to solve the poet's sorrow. Just two stanzas above, the relationship could only begin *in medias res* if it was to be the long, slow romance Parnok desires; now, suddenly, she already wishes to be at the end, when a long stretch of time has dissolved the intensity of love. The stanza continues, "Happy are those who in their youth can manage / To have their fill of sparkle, froth and song…" [Счастливы те, кто успевают смладу / Доискриться, допениться, допеть...]. Parnok does not expect to live long enough to have her own fill of love, and so seeks ways of experiencing time that would allow her to have her fill. Even starting in the middle, her illness hasn't left her enough time to live out the full story of her romance; it's been cut short from both ends. Like in Samuels's essay, the experience of living in crip time is a complicated enmeshment of pleasure, loss, and loneliness.

This sixth poem ends with the image of the poet's passion redirected to something else, as she stands alone on a theatre stage:

I've come too late. The curtain has been lowered,	Я опоздала. Занавес опущен.
The hall empties. Not for intermission, – it's the end.	Пустеет зала. Не антракт, – конец.
Just in the gallery there one fool's still raving,	Лишь там, чем безнадежнее, тем пуще,
The more despairingly, the more intense.	В райке еще безумствует глупец.

In the fifth poem, the poet is too early, reaching the end with time to spare. Now, she's too late for her voice to be heard. Given the identification earlier with "How aging women suddenly go mad" and other identifications in Parnok's late poetry with madness and loneliness, it seems likely that this one fool (not explicitly a holy fool, but in the more mundane sense of stupidity) is the poet herself. Like earlier poems discussed in this chapter, this image of the mad poet addressing no one willing to listen ties Parnok to the poet-prophets of Pushkin and Lermontov. She too has something of higher importance to say, but the message is not being heard – in this case because of time in addition to indifference. Now the audience has turned away once more, but they've turned away *because* the speaker falls out of the accepted timeline; she was too late to make the intermission and everyone who could have heard her chose to prioritize the normate schedule over the poet-prophet who lives in crip time.

The seventh and final poem of the cycle (#238) presents a final turn away from Vedeneeva, regretting without malice that the poet's earthly love "can't be helped." The title of the cycle also appears at the end, revealing these seven poems as the seven stars of the constellation Ursa Major:

Well you're not good, and you're not evil,	Ведь ты не добрая, не злая,
You're simply dry, like standing wood, –	Ведь ты, как сухостой, суха, -
I bring you seven stars of poems,	Зачем несу тебе, не знаю,
And can't imagine why I should.	Я семизвездие стиха.

The description of Vedeneeva as "dry" calls back to Parnok's own admission earlier in the cycle that she would like to be dry like an aged wine, implicitly reflecting whatever disappointment the speaker has in the recipient of her seven stars back to herself. And the major characterization of Vedeneeva in this poem is lukewarm or tepid, as condemned in Revelation 3:15.[345] Parnok writes in the third stanza of this poem, "It's not that you are cold, just cool, / It's not that you are hot, just warm" [Не холодна ты, а прохладна, / Не горяча ты, а тепла]). The Biblical instruction that it would be

[345] "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot."

better to be hot or cold than lukewarm naturally refers to devotion in faith; Parnok's criticism of Vedeneeva as lukewarm could refer to devotion faith or in love. Either way, she emphasizes that for her addressee, "To sit upon God's right or left in / Heaven's not in store for you." [Ни одесную, ни ошюю / Не быть тебе вовек в раю]. All the same, she does still love her. Even with this turn in devotion away from Vedeneeva and toward God, the poet does not regret the time they've spent together or the seven-star constellation of this seven-poem cycle for her beloved. The poem and the cycle end,

But do not understand me wrongly!	Но не пойми меня превратно:
No matter how I might curse, lament,	Ни проклиная, ни скорбя,
I don't take my gifts back, –[346]	Я не беру даров обратно, –
I love you! So it can't be helped!	Что ж делать! Я люблю тебя!

The contradiction untangles itself here in different scales of time. On the timescale of a single human life, Parnok's experience of loving Vedeneeva as depicted in *Ursa Major* is those pleasant or humorous images of being too nervous to call and making jokes about laws of physics and of silver-grey locks ruffled in a tropical breeze – and she's content or at least willing to live in crip time and make it a long, slow-paced romance starting *in medias res*. But as we have seen in other late poems and in glimpses within this cycle, Parnok is not only a person living in a human timescale; she's also a holy foolish poet-prophet working on the timescale of eternity. This is the image of the poet shouting madly on a stage after everything has ended. For the poet on a human timeline, a phone call or a warm afternoon might be fulfilling, but they become so small as to be undetectable on the timeline of Heaven. The final lines of the cycle seem to indicate that the poet loves her

346 Burgin's translation of these lines reads, "I don't take back my gifts without / A bit of cursing and lamenting, –" I find this translation to be misleading, and so have substituted a more literal variation.

partner almost despite herself, that given the choice, she would operate on the heavenly timescale and turn her devotion higher.

Eternity in *Useless Goods*

The second of the Vedeneeva cycles, *Useless Goods* [*Негужное добро*], elevates the competing timescales in which the poet lives. The cycle consists of twenty-three lyrics dated between March 24, 1932 and July 31, 1933. Parnok died just after its completion, on August 26, 1933, at age forty-eight. Although the poems of the cycle are not sectioned, a narrative progression of several phases of conflict between earthly life and eternal life is identifiable. Poems one (#239, March 24, 1932) through four (#242, March 1932) are energetic, full of exclamations and apostrophe, and speak of the torment of Parnok's passion for Vedeneeva. In poems five (#243, March 1932) through ten (#248, June 1932), exhaustion seems to catch up with the poet, and though her declarations of love do not lessen, she increasingly portrays that love as an illness and pulls away from desire. In poems eleven (#249, August 2-9, 1932) through seventeen (#255, November 1932), the poet demonstrates a final burst of struggle between her desire for earthly love and her need to prepare for her life's end. In poems eighteen (#256, November 2, 1932) through twenty-three (#261, July 31, 1933), she comes to accept her transition into the next, eternal life and says her goodbyes to Vedeneeva. The conflict of the poet's passion for her beloved on the earthly timescale ultimately cedes in the hour of death to the responsibilities of the poet-prophet to move beyond such transient experiences and operate on the eternal timescale.

In the first poem of the cycle (#239, March 24, 1932), Parnok actually casts us back into the first moments of Biblical time. The first two stanzas establish an Edenic metaphor:

Yes, you're greedy, deaf-mute woman,	Да, ты жадна, глухонемая,
You're greedy, Adam's rib!	Жадна, Адамово ребро!
Why pick up without accepting	Зачем берешь, не принимая,
These goods you do not need?	Тебе ненужное добро?
What use to you is all this produce –	К чему тебе хозяйство это -
The thundering play of elements,	Гремучая игра стихий,
The rapid heartbeat of a poet,	Сердцебиение поэта,
Her verse in all its shagginess?[347]	Его косматые стихи?[348]

This first poem of *Useless Goods* was composed eleven days after the final poem of *Ursa Major* (March 13, 1932), creating a continuity in both theme and time between the two cycles. Given that the addressee remains the same in this cycle and that the first poem continues Parnok's lament that her poetic talent is misdirected or going to waste, the first evident interpretation of the "Deaf-mute woman" would be Vedeneeva. As in the final poems of *Ursa Major*, the poet regrets that her "produce," the tempting fruit of her talent and labor, is received by someone who is improper, unworthy, or too much of this earthly place and time. The thunderous image and the "rapid heartbeat of a poet" once again recalls Pushkin's 1841 lyric poem "The Prophet," in which a seraph tears out the poet-prophet's heart and replaces it with a burning coal representing the Word.[349] In #239, the beloved is admonished for selfishly taking the poet's attention away from divine matters in favor of momentary pleasures.

However, the description of the addressee as "Deaf-mute" introduces another layer: as discussed above, Parnok often referred to her Muse, whom she conceived of as separate from any

[347] Diana Burgin, "Sophia Parnok: *Useless Goods*," DianaBurgin.com, 2007, http://www.dianaburgin.com/P-Poem-Useless-Goods.html.

[348] Parnok, 246-57.

[349] "And with a sword he cleft my breast / And took the heart with terror turning, / And in my gaping bosom pressed / A coal that throbbed there, black and burning." [И он мне грудь рассек мечом, / И сердце трепетное вынул / И угль, пылающий огнем, / Во грудь отверстую водвинул.] Translation by Babette Deutch and Avrahm Yarmolinksy in *Modern Russian Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1921), 8.

living person, as Deaf-mute.[350] With this confrontation directed to the Muse as well as the beloved, Parnok also laments her role as a poet, with the duty that comes with it of existing in Heavenly time, of speaking in that "eternal, timeless language" for unknown readers in unknown times.[351] The "produce," then, would be Parnok's love lyrics, such as those early poems of *Ursa Major* built around the small moments of love for Vedeneeva. In that case, the "rapid heartbeat of a poet" recalls more Parnok's practice of writing symptoms of her illness into her love lyrics, as for example in the "Zone of vertigo" [Зона головокруженья], where experiences such as dizziness, light-headedness, and rapidly beating heart are common to both illness and love. The poet chastises her Muse for compelling her to write her love for Vedeneeva instead of more important matters on a heavenly scale. In both cases, the poet's priorities lean more toward the prophet role than the lover role, chiding Adam's rib (and Parnok will call Vedeneeva her "Greying Eve" [седая Ева] later in the cycle) for taking this passion all to herself and the Deaf-mute Muse for misdirecting the poet's talent.

The difference that Burgin notes in the pace of *Ursa Major* and *Useless Goods* is especially evident in the cycle's second poem (#240), quoted below in full:

I live, and even from myself I hide	Жить, даже от себя тая,
That I'm exhausted and that I'm	Что я измучена, что я
Tormented by you as by music!	Тобой, как музыкой, томима!
I live off-target, out-of-tunely,	Жить невпопад и как-то мимо,
But in a temper, at top speed,	Но сгоряча, во весь опор,
Willfully, defiantly –	Наперерез, наперекор, -
And so, full blast, I'll take a dancing	И так, на всем ходу, с разбегу
Leap into death as into languor.	Сорваться прямо в смерть, как в негу!..

The fatigue evident throughout *Ursa Major* is still present – many who live with chronic illness attest that it is ever-present – but the poet is no longer looking for that long, slow-paced romance. Now,

[350] Poliakova, 90.

[351] Ibid., 27.

even still living in crip time (out of step [невпопад] and somehow off to the side [как-то мимо]), Parnok has seen the imminent approach of death and decided to shift from slower-than-usual to faster-than-usual, gathering all her passion to sprint into eternity. The tone of the cycle is as written in the beginning to poem eight (#246, May 1932): "Exhausted, weary unto death, / But all – fire, but all – poetry" [Измучен, до смерти замотан, / Но весь – огонь, но весь – стихи]. The poet begins to refer to her present relationship in past tense and hypothetically, as in poem five (#243, March 1932): "It seems to me, together we'd have been / So tender, so intense, so unbearably…" [Мне кажется, нам было бы с тобой / Так нежно, так остро, так нестерпимо.] (#243, March 1932).

The transition from crip time to eternal time through *Useless Goods* is not a linear progression: especially in the first half of the cycle, several poems still speak of a lingering but passionate love for Vedeneeva, as if against the poet's own will. In these early poems of the cycle, the connection between love and illness intensifies; it is presented not just in details of the body but is made explicit. For example, the fourth poem (#242, March 1932) concludes, "Oh how sweetly I am ailing / From the greenness of your eyes!" [О, как сладко я болею / Прозеленью глаз твоих!]. However, in these early poems of the cycle, the metaphorical connection between love and illness expands beyond the embodied experiences of Parnok's chronic illness (light-headedness, dizziness, tachycardia). Love becomes all manner of disease, including communicable diseases and cancer. For instance, in the sixth poem (#244, April 1932), Parnok portrays a moment of seeing her beloved getting off a streetcar: "You, carrier of a very sweet contagion, who never has a cold. / You, who clouds your lover's reason, who keeps her self-control"[352] [Ты, неся сладчайшую заразу, – не больна сама, / Ты, любовнику туманя разум, – не сойдешь с ума]. Love is now not only an illness but a contagious illness, that causes madness and fogged reason for the infatuated but not for

[352] More literally, 'who does not lose her mind' or 'who does not go mad.'

the asymptomatic carrier. In poem ten (#248, June 1932), the illness of love transforms further into a cancer, creating a much more desperate tone:

How can I root out this horrid feeling, So it won't spread to my soul, my thoughts, my blood! How rid my heart of, cauterize with weeping My illness, a creeping cancer, – love!	О, как мне этот страшный вживень выжить, Чтоб не вживался в душу, в мысли, в кровь? Из сердца вытравить, слезами выжечь Мою болезнь, ползучий рак, - любовь?

The narrative of Parnok's love for Vedeneeva disrupting the poet's transition into eternal time plays out in miniature in poem seven (#245, April 20, 1932), below in full:

Before Saint Rodyon-Icebreaker's,[353] Thirteen days ahead of time, Tremors shook the river's bosom, Fissures cleft the stubborn ice,	До Родиона-ледолома, За тринадцать дней вперед, Дрогнуло речное лоно, Затрещал упрямый лед.
I'd not ventured to the river, But I caught a certain signal And was absolutely sure, She was just about to stir;	Не ходила я на реку, Только по примете некой Знала я наверняка, Что вот-вот пойдет река,
Water was already streaming, Coursing warmly through the ice, And beneath the cased-in streams a Mermaid leaned her shapely thighs;	Что сквозь лед тепло струится И под теплые струи Подставляет водяница Бедра стройные свои,
Nature was awake and restless, And her wine went to one's head, – Something's on the verge of coming, That will simply knock 'em dead!	Что природа в непокое, Что хмельно ее вино, – Что сейчас пойдет такое, От чего в глазах темно!

With this metaphor of the breaking-up of river ice and the resumed flow of the river, earthly life is a temporary stoppage in the flow of the eternal soul, and its eventual dissolution is an expected and possibly even welcome part of the natural calendar. The breaking-up of Parnok's earthly time is early, signaled by trembling and cracking of the stubborn body. The poet foresees her departure from this place and time from some "certain signal" and knows without a doubt that her time has

353 A Russian folk holiday on April 21st which marks the breaking of river ice.

come; at the same time, as the flow of the river has already begun away from this place and time, an alluring mermaid is spotted beneath the streaming water. Parnok chooses the word *vodianitsa* to represent her beloved rather than the more common water-dwelling spirit of Russian folk culture, the *rusalka*. One effect of this choice is to avoid the dangerous or unholy connotations of the *rusalka*, who is often considered aggressive toward living people, and is often specifically the doomed soul of an unbaptised child or maiden who died by drowning.[354]

Unusually for poems in *Useless Goods* up to this point, the beloved in this form as an alluring river spirit fades into the background in the last stanza of #245. Nature, instead of earthly love, becomes the compelling force. Many times earlier in the Vedeneeva cycles, Vedeneeva's love is presented as something intoxicating: for instance, in #242 (April 1932), "All my senses reel from your intoxication, – utterly beloved!" [Все пять чувств ты опьяняешь сразу, – / вся любимая!]. In this stanza, however, nature's 'wine' and not Vedeneeva's goes to the poet's head. The poet's eyes are darkening [в глазах темно] from the "something" that is restless and stirring as the river is beginning to stir. As the poems in the next phase of the cycle make explicit, that "something" coming to the foreground is death.

In this phase of the cycle, the poet prepares for her death by drawing out and grieving a series of final moments and goodbyes to her love. The eleventh poem of *Useless Goods* is titled "To Myself" [К самой себе] and is dated August 2-9 from Kashin, a balneological (mineral-bath) resort town near Tver', where Vedeneeva had a dacha.[355] In this poem, Parnok calls herself "granny Sophie" [бабушка Софья] and repeats the line "When we're well into our forties" [Когда перевалит за сорок] seven times total. It opens:

354 E.E. Levkievskaia, *Mify russkogo naroda* (Moskva: Astrel', 2000), 233-56.

355 Burgin, *Sophia Parnok*, 258.

When we're well into our forties,	Когда перевалит за сорок,
It's late to be playing with Muses,	Поздно водиться с Музами,
Late to get blue over music,	Поздно томиться музыкой,
Gulp down enflaming intoxicants,	Пить огневое снадобье, –
Take it easy – that's what we oughta do,	Угомониться надобно:
Oughta fuss over our grandsons,	Надобно внуков нянчить,
Put our affairs in order,	Надобно путь заканчивать,
When we're well into our forties.	Когда перевалит за сорок.

Only now entering what for most would be considered middle age (Parnok was one week from turning forty-seven on August 2, 1932), the poet is already preparing to set down what occupied her in life and settle into the process of dying.

In poem thirteen (#251, August 8-9), also composed in Kashin, is built around the metaphor of a nighttime fire in a jungle, calling back to poem four of *Ursa Major* with its unrestrained tropical Viovocala, in which passion is burning out and the sunset is obscured by the fire's smoke. It ends with the first of many final moments and goodbyes to Vedeneeva:

Oh, on this night, the last one on earth,	О, в эту ночь, в последнюю на земле,
I'd like to press my parched mouth, athirst,	Покуда жар еще не остыл в золе,
To you, my gray-haired, my fateful passion,	Запекшимся ртом, всей жаждой к тебе припасть,
Before the heat has cooled into ashes.	Моя седая, моя роковая страсть!

This night of the burning jungle was not to be Parnok's very last night on earth, but many of the succeeding lyrics are written as though they each might be the last. In poem fourteen (#252, August 21), Parnok writes:

I'd beg from death a	Выпросить бы у смерти
Year or two,	Годик, другой.
But it's too little time to	Только нет, не успеть мне
Inhale all of you.	Надышаться тобой.
And if I lived to be a hundred,	И доживу хоть до ста,
My misfortune,	Моя напасть,
I could not finish looking,	Не налюбуюсь досыта,
I could not kiss my fill.	Не нацелуюсь всласть.

Whether the poet's time left on earth is one year or a hundred, it still wouldn't be enough to exhaust her love. Such resignation of insufficient time is in a way reassuring: on the timescale of eternity, it

matters little that Parnok has so little time left, since two or three lifetimes would also be too little. If it matters little either way, it might as well be one, and in fact she did live one more year almost to the day.

In the next three poems, fifteen through seventeen, the poet has one last burst of defiance against her slow death, looking back on earthly time like Lot's wife looking back on the home she left. In poem fifteen (#253, September 27), below in full, the poet wishes it could be another way, that she could live in both earthly time and eternal time:

There's no way back for me!	Нет мне пути обратно!
I shout out loud from grief,	Накрик кричу от тоски,
As I run over the squares	Бегая по квадратам
Of the chessboard.	Шахматной доски.
I step across one:	Через один ступаю:
The others aren't mine.	Прочие – не мои.
Oh my stingy darling,	О, моя радость скупая,
Bisect me, too, with a line, –	Ты и меня раздвои, –
So I could give in half-ways,	Чтоб мне вполмеры мерить,
Believe with half faith,	Чтобы вполверы верить,
So I could scream at half voice,	Чтобы вполголоса выть,
So I could be not myself.	Чтобы собой не быть!

The poet is already on the path to eternity with no possibility of turning back, but, as though stuck between earthly life and eternal life in this time of transition from one to the other, wishes she could live half with Vedeneeva and half with God. The paradox of "scream at half voice" recalls her earlier collection *Sotto Voce* [*Вполголоса*, 1926-7]. Now, however, that halved-ness is expressed as a hypothetical, an impossibility rather than the poet's reality. She has irrevocably changed since then into a new self, whose role is to be measured fully, believe with full faith, and scream in full voice.

The last earthly outburst comes in poem seventeen (#255, November 1932), along with a return of the Edenic metaphor and a moment of crip time. Parnok writes:

Give me your hand and let's go to our earthly paradise!..	Дай руку, и пойдем в наш грешный рай!..
Defying the State Pension Plans of heaven,	Наперекор небесным промфинпланам,
May returned for us in winter time,	Для нас среди зимы вернулся май
And flowers blossomed in the greening meadow,	И зацвела зеленая поляна,

Here she proposes a compromise: the paradise she proposes to go to is earthly, literally sinful [грешный], but even a sinful heaven or paradise, paradoxical though it may be, is eternal. Devising an earthly heaven would stretch out the passionate love Parnok knows must be so short-lived into eternity. In the calendar of a healthy lifetime, the emergence of love "well into our forties" might be closer to May, with plenty of summer left ahead. In Parnok's abbreviated time, love emerged during winter, the end of one year and the beginning of another. In ending this poem with the declaration that, now that they are both one year older, "The fruits of ripe knowledge are more succulent. / My love! My Graying Eve! Greetings!" [Еще вкусней познаний зрелых яства… / Любовь моя! Седая Ева! Здравствуй!], the poet attempts to recreate a garden of Eden, the original earthly paradise, as one that can continue forever. But the sweeter the fruits of knowledge become, the greater the temptation, and the closer the earthly paradise comes to its own death.

By the next poem (#256, November 1932), the poet seems to have realized it, and the cycle begins to resolve its conflict in the acceptance of death. Parnok opens that poem with a stern command to herself, "With no if's, and's or but's whatever, / Accept your lot right till the end" [Без оговорок, без условий / Принять свой жребий до конца]. As we have seen in the poems of later years and in *Ursa Major*, when Parnok speaks of her fate, she refers not to any fortune or misfortune (or both mixed together) in earthly time, but of futurity and eternity: all of this verse written for the drawer to be discovered by an unknown reader in an unknown time, the faith that this message she is bound to speak as a poet-prophet in the lineage of Pushkin's and Lermontov's will be heard, that God will lead it where it needs to go. Using a metaphor of a life's earthly time and earthly love as a card game, she writes:

No! Damn it! I've had it up to here with	Нет! К черту! Я сыта по горло
The game – too much of a good thing.	Игрой – Демьяновой ухой.
I've rubbed the callouses in my heart	Мозоли в сердце я натерла
And trashed my spirit with littering –	И засорила дух трухой, –
That's what life – a stubborn game – has	Вот что оставила на память
Left me to remember her by,	Мне жизнь – упрямая игра, –
But I shall out-stubborn	Но я смогу переупрямить
Her, the demoness! It's time!	Ее, проклятую!.. Пора!

Again, this last line operates on the multiplicity of referent: in this case, 'her,' the demoness, instead of Eve. The parallel structure of 'stubborn' and 'out-stubborn' invites a reading of the cursed one as the feminine noun 'game' [игра], the earthly love which has distracted the poet-prophet from her mission and littered her spirit with unnecessary distractions. It also refers back to the feminine noun 'life' [жизнь]: if not just love but all of life is a game, then love can also be put aside with the rest of the litter that clutters the poet's spirit. Now that the poet has accepted her fate as prophet, she is ready to come to terms with the closing of her earthly life, and the cycle turns its all attention toward the eternal.

The next step in this process, and the subject of the next few poems in the cycle (roughly nineteen through twenty-two (#257-60)) is to say goodbye to Vedeneeva. The first poem of this stage, "Silver-Gray Rose" [Седая роза] (#257), was composed November 17, 1932 and revised June 16-17, 1933. It was during this early winter of 1932 that Parnok's health began to deteriorate more sharply; she left her job as a translator but kept in contact with close friends and her sister, and it was during this time that the last photograph of Parnok was taken, described above by Burgin as "grandmotherly and ailing."[356] "Silver-Gray Rose" narrates a sleepless night in Moscow when snow is starting to fall and frost to form. The poet sees the petals of the rose turn silver with frost and begin to be buried in snow. In revising the poem, Parnok changed only the final stanza, which she

[356] Burgin, Sophia Parnok, 298.

completely rewrote. The new ending after six months and a steady decline in health reveals a significant shift in mood and perspective.

The original version, composed November 17, 1932, ends:

I sing and weep,	Я пою и плачу,
Weep and sing,	Плачу и пою,
Weep for I'm losing	Плачу, что утрачу
My rose![357]	Розу мою!

For her translation of *Useless Goods*, Diana Burgin uses the revised version from June 1933:

Well then, die,	Ну что ж, умри, умри теперь,
die now,	Моя душа, мой бич, мой зверь.
My soul,	С тобой была я в краю,
my scourge, my beast.	С тобой бродила я в раю.
With you I went to the very edge,	
With you I roamed in paradise.	

The first version is simpler in its image: the song is a farewell lamentation for Vedeneeva, the silver-gray rose, and the form matches that simplicity in its symmetrical repetition. The speaker will evidently continue on after this snowy night, once the rose is buried in ice and gone. The second version is both more complex and more closely matches the earlier motifs of Revelation and heavenly conflict. In the revision, the naming of the lost love as 'my soul' introduces the interpretive possibility that the speaker is also dying, and that the 'scourge' or 'beast' is the same weakness of the spirit imagined as a demonic game previously, rather than the wistful rose. It also juxtaposes the two paradises that compete for Parnok's devotion in these last days: the earthly paradise with silver-gray Vedeneeva, or the heavenly paradise that has no time for romantic distraction.

By the twenty-first poem (#259, January 6, 1933), it's clear how severe Parnok's illness has become and how much pain she's in. Like in Mayakovsky's poem "Backbone Flute" [Флейта-

[357] Translation mine.

позвоночник, 1915], the poet's body rings out a "farewell concert" [прощальный концерт], tormented by a love that cannot be fulfilled in this life and welcoming death when it comes.[358]

I anguish as the beasts must anguish,	Тоскую, как тоскуют звери,
Each vertebra's in misery,	Тоскует каждый позвонок,
And my heart feels like a doorbell	И сердце – как звонок у двери,
When someone gives the bell a squeeze.	И кто-то дернул за звонок.

Within the Edenic conceit, Parnok's illness becomes God's punishment for the original sin of desire. Also in echo of "Backbone Flute," this stanza of #259 plays on the etymological connection between *позвонок* [spine, backbone, vertebra] and *звонок* [ring, call]. This is the painful transformation of the poet into the prophet, whose earthly form must perish before the Word can be spoken through them. The ring at the door, a threshold between times and spaces, is a Heavenly signal that it's time. It's both a death toll that squeezes the life out of the poet's heart and a call to cross over that must eventually be answered. Now, Parnok is prepared to answer: "And I'm leaving / This life, alive, without a pang…" [И не жалко / при жизни бросить эту жизнь…].

On the way to answer, she bids Vedeneeva farewell, calling her "The fire of my parting days" [Огонь моих прощальных дней]. She then returns to the hot and cold motif of devotion: "And sin to say it, with either love / Or hatred, I do not love." [И страшно молвить: ни любовью, / Ни ненавистью не люблю!]. The love and hatred with which Parnok loved was evident and at the forefront even two months earlier in the same cycle; apparently now that she has said her goodbye, the direction of her devotional energy has shifted away. And although Burgin translates that line as "sin to say it," the original is closer to "frightening" or "terrible" – but not connected to sin; however, the verb Parnok uses in that line to speak, "молвить," does ring with a liturgical weight due to its root in Old Church Slavonic.

358 Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, tom 1 (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1955), 197-208.

After the twenty-second poem (#260, February 5, 1933), which asks forgiveness of Vedeneeva as though unburdening the soul before its departure ("Forgive me that I love, beloved one, / Forgive, forgive me!" [Прости, что я люблю, любимая, / Прости, прости меня!], there is a long gap in time before the final poem (#261, July 31, 1933). That poem, written less than a month before her death on August 26 – portrays the moment of departure:

"Come what may," you wrote, "we shall be happy…"
Yes, my friend, happiness has come to me in life!
Now, however, a mortal weariness
Closes up my heart and shuts my eyes.

Now, without rebelling or resisting,
I can hear my heart beat its retreat.
I grow weaker, and the leash that tightly
Bound the two of us is slackening.

Now, the wind blows freely ever higher,
Everything's in bloom and all is still, –
Till we meet again, my friend! You can't hear me?
I'm telling you goodbye, my far-off friend!

"Будем счастливы во что бы то ни стало..."
Да, мой друг, мне счастье стало в жизнь!
Вот уже смертельная усталость
И глаза, и душу мне смежит.

Вот уж, не бунтуя, не противясь,
Слышу я, как сердце бьет отбой.
Я слабею, и слабеет привязь,
Крепко нас вязавшая с тобой.

Вот уж ветер вольно веет выше, выше,
Все в цвету, и тихо все вокруг, -
До свиданья, друг мой! Ты не слышишь?
Я с тобой прощаюсь, дальний друг.

Even this final farewell of the cycle, the poet grounds the transition from one life to the next in poetic predecessors, far past and very recent. Parnok calls back to Pushkin's farewell poem "It's Time, My Friend, It's Time" ["Пора, мой друг, пора," 1834], in which "the heart begs for peace" [покоя сердце просит] and "We plan to live, and look – we die" [Предполагаем жить, и глядь — как раз умрем].[359] While these two farewells have in common a weariness of the heart, in #261 Parnok refutes the most famous line from "It's Time, My Friend, It's Time": whereas Pushkin writes, "There is no happiness on earth, but there is peace and freedom" [На свете счастья нет, но есть покой и воля], Parnok asserts that she did find happiness in her beloved in this life. Ironically,

[359] Aleksandr Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v deciati tomakh*, tom 2 (Moskva: GIKhL, 1959-62), 387.

happiness in #261 can *only* be found on earth; as the ties between Parnok and her love slacken, the poet cannot take that happiness with her.

Especially in the final two lines bidding goodbye to her friend on the threshold of death, Parnok also echoes another lyric farewell: Sergei Esenin's last poem, "Goodbye, My Friend, Goodbye" ["До свидания, друг мой, до свидания," December 17, 1925], written the day before his death by suicide.

Goodbye, my friend, goodbye. My dear, you are in my heart. This predestined parting Promises a meeting hence.	До свиданья, друг мой, до свиданья. Милый мой, ты у меня в груди. . Предназначенное расставанье Обещает встречу впереди.
Goodbye, my friend, without a hand or word, Don't mourn or furrow your brow, — To die in this life is not new, But to live, of course, is hardly newer.	До свиданья, друг мой, без руки и слова, Не грусти и не печаль бровей, — В этой жизни умирать не ново, Но и жить, конечно, не новей.[360]

Burgin's translation of the phrase "До свидания, друг мой!" as "Till we meet again, my friend!" reflects the promise in "Goodbye, My Friend, Goodbye" of another meeting in the next life. The link turns Parnok's 'goodbye' into a prophecy on its own. The distance between the poet's spirit and her beloved palpably increase through the last stanza, as though she can already feel her soul ascending through the breeze, looking out over life in bloom on the earth, until she is so far away that her now far-off love can no longer hear her voice. If Parnok's long-predestined parting also promises a meeting in the future as Esenin's does, then this farewell holds in it the possibility that the conflict of timescales in *Ursa Major* and *Useless Goods* can be resolved: that Parnok can fulfill both her roles as lover and poet-prophet. Like happiness for Pushkin, however, it cannot be in this world. If happiness and poetic duty are to coincide, it can only be in the eternal future.

[360] Sergei Esenin, *Sergei Esenin* (Moskva: Moskovskii rabochii, 1958), 299.

Concluding remarks

The picture created in current scholarship on Parnok, especially by Poliakova and Burgin, is of a poet fearlessly speaking her love without compromise or hiding, for whom barriers of censorship and taboo proved too great to overcome in her lifetime but who nevertheless continued to speak her truth as long as she could. Burgin summarizes that "the lesbian poet dared to say out loud what people hide even from themselves."[361] Even though Burgin and others don't say so directly, such an image of the marginalized speaking truth to power does fit in with the holy foolish archetype – however, taking a closer look at how exactly the holy fool and disability manifest together in Parnok's mature verse show that speaking that truth was far from simple. In few other accounts of hagiographical or literary foolish personas do we see how difficult it can be to take on the role oneself. In this case, the picture created in Parnok's verse is of a poet struggling to prioritize the holy foolish role over her romantic love for her partner.

In "Prologue," Parnok directly names her poetic tendency to "play the fool" [юродствовать]. Part of that foolery was certainly what "Prologue" depicts: the poet speaking a direct and confrontational condemnation of the addressee's apathy to the pain of others. Another critical part, playing out in the Vedeneeva cycles, is reflexive: turning the foolish gaze inward and coming to terms with that which does not serve the higher purpose. Earthly love is transient and temporary – this Parnok knew acutely, living in a painfully foreshortened timeframe even compared to most – and a voice like hers must be eternal and speak to eternal matters.

[361] Burgin, *Sophia Parnok*, 230.

II.
When I speak
I speak with one voice
When I cry
I cry with all

Jim Ferris, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Crip Poetry"

IV. Sasha Sokolov's *A School for Fools*

Postmodern arts and fiction in Russia found the archetype of the holy fool to be well suited to their interests in disruption and provocation, anti-aestheticism and the abject, and the skeptical search for true reality in a world made of layers of simulacra. Sasha Sokolov's novel *A School for Fools* [*Школа для дураков*], finished in 1973 and published in the United States in 1976, is famous for its literary experimentation, programmatic of Russian postmodern fiction. It incorporates developments common to postmodernist movements, including fragmentation of the self and reality and deep skepticism toward ideological bodies of knowledge, along with a reinvention of hagiography and medieval Russian forms of writing such as *pletenie sloves* or "word-weaving." As it also features a protagonist, undiagnosed in the text but widely diagnosed as schizophrenic by literary scholars, who is a student in a school of special education or specschool [спецшкола], it makes a highly suitable object of study for this dissertation. It also produces several parallels to the earlier chapter on *The Idiot*, providing a century-later update on institutionalization and pathologization of difference, with the major difference that in this case the pathologized saint is himself the narrator (or at least one of them).

Literary scholars use a variety of names for the protagonist and central narrative voice of *A School for Fools*: some call him Student so-and-so as he is sometimes addressed by other characters in the novel (Lipovetsky); most call him simply the narrator, the hero, or the hero-narrator (Boguslawski, Danshina, Freedman, McMillan, Johnson, Lipovetsky, Simmons); and some call him the student (Karriker). Following the example of Karen Rice McDowell in her 1996 dissertation

"The Reemergence of Medieval Word-Weaving in Sasha Sokolov's *Shkola dlia durakov:* Invoking the Word," I will for the most part use the name he chooses for himself, Nymphea. While it may not be certain whether Nymphea as a name refers to every voice in the text attributed to the Student (or even at times which voices belong to him and which to others), this choice reflects the etiquette in crip, queer, and trans communities that when a person chooses and declares a name for themselves, that name should be used. I make it as a gesture of respect to all those who choose names that others refuse to use.

The primary focus of close reading in this chapter is Chapter Four of *A School for Fools*, "Skeerly." The overlapping point of protest or resistance in common between the analytical tools of holy foolery and disability studies are well suited for interpretation of this chapter in particular, with its central theme of Nymphea's "shout of a new type"[362] [крик нового типа].[363] This phrase, a subversive pun on the Leninist slogan of a "party of a new type" [партия нового типа], encompasses a disruptive, cathartic, and creative act of self-affirmation in a context of institutional pathologization. Current scholarship on *A School for Fools* largely reproduces the stigma of psych disability that the shout protests, while leaving a gap in close reading around the shout itself. The intervention of a critical disability perspective intertwined with attention to holy foolery shows the function of the shout: the loud, disruptive, sometimes otherwise inexpressible demand to be regarded as human in the face of dehumanizing ideologies. In the dehumanizing and cruel context of institutionalization, widely resonant in the political atmosphere of the Soviet 1970s but especially to psychiatric survivors, Nymphea recognizes a transcendental need for shouting one's own "I." That shout has a transformative effect; it melts away the strictly maintained façade of imperative

362 Sokolov, *A School for Fools*, 137.

363 Sokolov, *Shkola dlia durakov*, 100.

normalcy, exposing the nastiness of the institution's collaborators and rallying the other specstudents to unruliness. It is a prayer and a protest; disability activists have been shouting like this for decades.

Postmodern foolery

Nymphea's narrative role as a holy fool is made textually explicit in Pavl/Savl Norvegov's charge to "shout for yourself and for me, and for all of us, deceived, defamed, dishonored and stupefied, for us, the idiots and holy fools, the defectives and schizoids…"[364] [кричите за себя и за меня, и за всех нас, обманутых, оболганных, обесчещенных и оглупленных, за нас, идиотов и юродивых, дефективных и шизоидов…], and literary scholars of *School for Fools* readily follow that reading.[365] Mark Lipovetsky writes of the Student and of the protagonist Venichka in *Moscow to the End of the Line* [*Москва-Петушки*] that "The heroes of these works are both holy fools. In both works, moreover, the holy foolishness of the hero forms the structure of the artistic world, insofar as the holy fool acts as the central narrator in both these cases."[366] McDowell, citing Ziolkowski's definition, writes that Nymphea "is a holy fool in the sense that his [feigned] madness both fosters humility in him and 'provides him with a persona which may speak the truth more directly than allowed by normal social conventions'."[367] Holy foolery saw a notable resurgence in postmodern arts, including fiction; Per-Arne Bodin goes so far as to say in "Holy Foolishness and Postmodern Culture" that, in Russia, *iurodstvo* was "the key word of twentieth-century culture."[368] To explain the resurgence of the holy fool archetype in postmodern arts, scholars have theorized several avenues of

364 Sasha Sokolov, *A School for Fools* (Ann Arbor, Ardis, 1977), 136.

365 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976), 99-100.

366 Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodern Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. by Eliot Borenstein (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 83.

367 McDowell, 169.

368 Per-Arne Bodin, "Holy Foolishness and Postmodern Culture," in *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*, ed. by Priscilla Hunt and Svitlana Kobets (Bloomington: Slavica, 2011), 365.

resonance for holy foolery and Russian postmodernism on (anti-)aesthetic, philosophical, and theological grounds. Bodin summarizes, "*Iurodstvo* in postmodern culture is commonly interpreted as a way to challenge appearances and is a reflection of the possibility of reaching reality, spirituality, and depth. In fact, in *iurodstvo* there is a strong tension between what is true and what is false. It thus occupies a logical place in a postmodern discussion centering on whether it is possible today to represent a divine reality or any reality at all."[369] This tension between realities and possibilities of truth produces Nympha's shout of a new type: it is that insistent affirmation of possibility.

In Eliot Borenstein's introduction to Lipovetsky's *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, he addresses the misconception of postmodernism as a Western import of sorts to Russian culture. He praises Lipovetsky's study for making significant advances in answering the questions:

> What, then, is the place of postmodernism in Russia? Is it another in a long line of Western cultural imports, the latest concession to cosmopolitanism? Or is a natural outgrowth of Russian (Soviet) reality, the legitimate counterpart to similar phenomena in North America and Europe? And if Russian postmodernism is *sui generis*, can theoretical models developed in the West be applied to Russian cultural production — and if they can, should they?[370]

Lipovetsky's answer, according to Borenstein, is that "Russian postmodernism is both an integral part of a worldwide phenomenon and a product of the Russian cultural reality," in large part through demonstrating continuity between Russian postmodern fiction and Russian modernism.[371] For several scholars interested in interactions of postmodernism and Orthodoxy, the figure of the holy fool serves as another anchor of postmodernism in Russian cultural traditions specifically, as a point from which philosophical and aesthetic patterns of postmodernism could arise in the Russian context. Bodin observes that holy fools "frequently served as a marker of Russianness" for

369 Ibid., 371.

370 Eliot Borenstein, "Editor's Introduction: Postmodernism, Duty-Free," in *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. Eliot Borenstein (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), xv.

371 Ibid., xvi.

postmodern artists and authors invested in secular performances of postmodernism.[372] And for Tatiana Goricheva, who argues for an understanding of Russian dissidents as secular transpositions of the holy fool tradition, holy fools embody the revolutionary potential as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari of mental illness.[373] In a similar way that this dissertation uses the figure of the holy fool to keep discussions of disability grounded in Russian cultural traditions, thereby addressing concerns of 'Western cultural imports' as Borenstein writes, these artists and scholars of Russian postmodernism find the holy fool useful as a specifically Russian framework for their work.

Perhaps immediately evident due to the dramatic nature of their disruptive practices, both holy foolery and postmodernism are invested in iconoclasm or anti-aestheticism. According to Bodin, who borrows stigmatizing rhetoric of disability to characterize holy foolery's position outside of normativity, Russian postmodernists were attracted to "the deformed language of the holy fool in discussions of twentieth-century literary language."[374] In addition to the public scandal caused by holy fools' outrageous appearance, postmodern writers were drawn to the speech of holy fools consisting of "parables, riddles, obscure utterances, and disjointed phrases."[375] In Nymphea's case, that speech is a shout: a single word, his name, or just a long-held wordless sound. In *Vera i obraz: religioznoe bessoznatel'noe v russkoi kul'ture 20-go veka* (*Faith and Image: The Religious Unconscious in 20th Century Russian Culture*), following the Panchenko-Likhachev model of holy foolery, Mikhail Epstein argues that holy foolery, the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, and postmodern movements later in the twentieth century share a tendency to iconoclasm in pursuit of the revelation of a higher God or higher truth that cannot be identified with art or language considered

[372] Bodin, 353.

[373] Tat'iana Goricheva, *Pravoslavie i postmodernizm* (Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Leningradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 1991), 44.

[374] Bodin, 367.

[375] Ibid. See also Panchenko, 75-6.

aesthetically beautiful. In Epstein's view, the holy fool, who on all levels "disrupts the semiotic membrane of culture, returning to nakedness and silence, debasing that which is human in himself in order to elevate the divine" [разрушает знаковую оболочку культуры, возвращаясь к наготе и молчанию, унижая человеческое в себе – чтобы возвысилось божественное] serves as the perfect emblem of the disruptive and anti-aesthetic impulses of avant-garde and postmodernism.[376] This de-aestheticization [деэстетизация], he writes, "as the destruction of art is a social act, as the self-destruction of art is a religious act, imparting to art itself new, paradoxical qualities of anti-art" [как уничтожение искусства это акт социальный, как самоунижение искусства это акт религиозный, придающий самому искусству новые, парадоксальные свойства антиискусства].[377]

However, although Bodin and Epstein agree on the identification of anti-aesthetic iconoclasm and apophatism as points in common that make the holy fool an emblematic figure for Russian postmodernism, Dmitri Shalin offers a counterpoint. In a letter dated October 31, 1996 to Epstein responding to *Faith and Image*, Shalin wrote:

> If the modern avant-garde artist is akin to a medieval holy fool, *iurodivyi*, then the postmodern arrière-garde conceptualist reminds me of a folksy jester from the same era – *skomorokh*. The difference between the two is telling: the former seeks to walk in the path of Christ and suspects devil's trickery in all mundane beauty, the latter is too much of a skeptic to walk in anybody's path (except in the path of his own linguistic shadow) and is inclined to dismiss beauty as something residing in the star-struck eyes of the beholder. The holy fool wants to reform this world, the jester seeks to expose its phoniness. The holy fool's outrages have a constructive purpose, the jester's irreverent gestures are strictly deconstructive. The jester's craft pokes fun not only at the official realities but also at the unofficial ones, including one's identity, seen as a linguistic artifact rather than a substantive self. This is not so much "holy foolery" as "tomfoolery." Still, holy fool and jester are kindred spirits. Both, you boldly state, offer healing and consolation.[378]

[376] Mikhail Epstein, Vera i obraz: religioznoe bessoznatel'noe v russkoi kul'ture 20-go veka (Tenafly, N.J.: Hermitage Publishers, 1994), 36.

[377] Epstein, 33.

[378] "The Shalin-Epstein Exchange on Russian Postmodernism," University of Nevada Las Vegas, https://cdclv.unlv.edu/archives/ncs/shalin_epstein96.html

For *A School for Fools*, even Shalin's distinction of holy fool from jester still guides an interpretation in the direction of holy foolery. Nymphea's shout is constructive, a positive affirmation of life and worth. It instigates a rebellion in the school, with consequences that last longer than a momentary carnivalesque irreverence.

While Russian postmodernists join other postmodern movements in questioning whether it is possible to represent divine or any reality, Bodin stresses that a distinction should be kept in mind between questioning the existence of representations of reality and questioning the existence of reality itself. She and Tatiana Goricheva both identify apophatism as another aspect of holy foolery appealing to Russian postmodernism. Apophatic theology, or negative theology, involves attempts to approach an understanding of God – or, if reimagined for secular purposes, truth or reality – through negative definition, in terms of what God or reality is *not*.[379] Goricheva's *Православие и постмодернизм* (*Orthodoxy and Postmodernism*) is one of the first scholarly works to argue for holy foolery's utility as a tool to understand Russian postmodernism, and draws from Likhachev and Panchenko's analysis of holy foolery through carnival. She writes that "The holy fool is the most contemporary, postmodern form of holiness" [Юродивые – самая современная, постмодернистская форма святости].[380] Written in 1991 at the very end of the Soviet era, the study centers the fool for Christ's sake's role as a faith-grounded critic of secular power, and places dissidents (who were often institutionalized in psychiatric hospitals for their political activities) in the contemporaneous footsteps of holy fools. In the Bakhtinian tradition, Goricheva characterizes the mocking laughter and grotesque behavior common to holy foolery and postmodern art as apophatic in nature: "The holy fool does not simply deny the objectivized, inert, mendacious world, and he does not simply propose an alternative to this world: he is an elusive fool, incalculable and evasive.

379 For more on apophatic theology, see Lossky.

380 Goricheva, 48.

He truly points to the Other, entirely invisible, completely apophatic God" [Юродивый не просто отрицает объективный, мертвый, изолгавшийся мир. И он не просто предлагает альтернативу этому миру: он дурак неуловимый, неисчислимый и исчезающий. Он поистине указывает на Другого, совершенно невидимого, совсем апофатичного Бога].[381] In "Апофатика и юродство в современной русской культуре," Maria Engstrom argues that postmodern authors (focusing specifically on Dmitrii Prigov and Vladimir Sorokin) detach both holy foolery and apophatic theology from their Orthodox contexts and transform them into rhetorical or literary devices.[382] In the context of postmodernism's questioning of reality on a fundamental level, the postmodern holy fool insists that (divine) reality *does* exist, but can only be understood through denunciation of what it is not.

Along theological lines, holy foolery and postmodernism also share a common investment in kenosis, or 'self-emptying' modeled on the self-emptying of Christ's will in order to become a perfect receptacle for divine will. Kenosis, according to George Fedotov, constitutes "the dominant motif in Russian spirituality."[383] Margaret Ziolkowski adds, ""the great appeal of kenoticism to Russian religious thinking over the centuries is borne out by the popularity of kenotic features among certain lay saints, namely the holy fools."[384]A holy fool practices kenosis through humbling oneself and detaching oneself from worldly possessions and social structures. Mark Lipovetsky in *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* sees a kenotic element in the negative and chaotic element of postmodernism as theorized in chaos theories in modern physics. In comparing holy foolery to postmodernism, he writes, "The holy fool, like the postmodern writer, enters into dialogue with

[381] Ibid., 57.

[382] Maria Engstrem, "Apofatika i iurodstvo v sovremennoi russkoi kul'ture," *Slovo* (Uppsala) 51 (2010): 129.

[383] George Fedotov, *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 14.

[384] Margaret Ziolkowski, *Hagiography and Modern Russian Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 75.

chaos in his attempt to find truth amidst filth and obscenity" [Юродивый, как и писатель-постмодернист, вступает в диалог с хаосом, стремясь среди грязи и похабства найти истину].[385] Nymphea's shout is also an emptying of the self; its constructive power can only manifest once it has built up inside him and been released into the empty barrel, then rising over the entire dacha settlement.

Since most of these scholars of holy foolery and postmodernism follow in the Likhachev-Panchenko tradition of viewing holy foolery through Bakhtinian carnival, theatricality [театральность] features prominently in the connections they find. Theatricality, a concept often used in postmodern theory in close connection with performance and performativity, unites holy foolery and postmodernism in the emphasis of self-conscious play of roles, conventions of communication, and spectation.[386] Bodin notes that, in addition to literary artists, performance artists such as Aleksandr Brener have made use of "a blurred definition of *iurodstvo*" in order to "mix Orthodoxy with a modern popular phenomenon that sometimes provokes irritation and anger in society," transposing the secular into the sacred.[387] Bodin also cites a counter-argument by poet and Orthodox scholar Olesia Nikolaeva, who recognizes only a superficial similarity between holy foolery and postmodernism in the area of performance or theatricality and denies that postmodernism could have any religious significance. The difference in their theatricality, she writes, is in purpose: "A holy fool's 'performance' is intended to praise God, whereas postmodern manipulations lie entirely in the sphere of human self-interest, severed from the Creator and Savior of the world" [Однако лицедейство юродивых имеет целью славу Божию, в то время как постмодернистские манипуляции лежат исключительно в сфере интересов человеческого я,

385 Mark Lipovetsky, "Russkii postmodernizm," 176.

386 For more on definitions of theatricality, see Fischer-Lichte.

387 Bodin, 360.

разорвавшего свои связи с Творцом и Спасителем мира].[388] In this disagreement, Bodin identifies the crux of postmodernism's transposition of holy foolery in the question of what postmodern art represents: "Do they represent merely themselves, as Nikolaeva maintains, or do they represent the world of God, as argue the postmodern scholars who identify the artists and their works more or less with holy fools."[389]

In addition to discussions holy foolery as a thematic element in *A School for Fools* and Russian postmodern fiction more broadly, Karen Rice McDowell writes on the reemergence of medieval poetics in her dissertation "The Reemergence of Medieval Word-Weaving in Sasha Sokolov's *Shkola dlia durakov*: Invoking the Word." McDowell argues that the novel, written in the highly ornamental style of "word-weaving" or *pletenie sloves*, presents three saints: Norvegov, the Sending Wind [Насылающий ветер], and Nymphea. She reads the work as a "contemporary hagiography," aiming to replenish Russian culture after several decades of Socialist Realism's hegemony through extolling virtues of integrity and imagination.[390] Citing Ziolkowski's *Hagiography in Modern Russian Literature*, McDowell writes that "Nymphea is a holy fool in the sense that his [feigned] madness both fosters humility in him and 'provides him with a persona which may speak the truth more directly than allowed by normal social conventions.'"[391] The qualities of that persona – the multiplicity and interweaving of narrative voice(s) and nonlinear storytelling – is common in postmodern fiction, but in this case they are understood as madness, mental illness, or otherwise pathological because of the setting at a specschool. Even among literary scholars who primarily read the student in a holy foolish role, there is a troubling pattern of stigmatizing psychological difference.

388 Olesia Nikolaeva, "Dar tvorchestva (vmesto poslesloviia)," in *Sovremennaia kul'tura i Pravoslavie* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Podvor'ia Sviato-Troitskoi Sergievoi Lavry, 1999).

389 Bodin, 361.

390 McDowell, 119.

391 Ibid., 244.

'Dedicated to a retarded boy'

In the introduction to *Tubercular Capital: Illness and the Conditions of Modern Jewish Writing*, Sunny S. Yudkoff writes that illness as a subject of inquiry "is not merely one of personal suffering but also one resonant with ethical implications for immigrants, patients, and government institutions," and that as scholars we should "be alert to the systems of power at play in the present literary-historical inquiry."[392] Literary scholars of *School for Fools* have largely failed to be alert to systems of power at play in psychiatric discourse and to honor psychiatric survivors and psych disabled people in the way they have written about Nymphea.[393] As this section will demonstrate, prominent scholarship on this novel as a rule dehumanizes people in life with psych disabilities through stigmatizing and sometimes outright abusive rhetoric, armchair diagnosis, and the treatment of psych disability as exclusively a narrative device or symbol without evident critical awareness that disability is inseparable from living people. Thanks in large part to disability activists and scholars, the imperative to acknowledge the humanity of psych disabled people is now beginning to be taken seriously in scholarship; however, this does not erase the harm done by scholarship in past decades, and a scholarly community committed to disability justice must be willing to confront its past.

Sokolov himself does not diagnose his narrator with any particular clinical or psychiatric language. Readers know that Nymphea is a student at a specschool and the character's experiences of bodymind are conveyed through narrative, but a medical gaze is not prominent at all in the text. Nevertheless, it is nearly ubiquitous in scholarship to refer to the student as schizophrenic

[392] Sunny Yudkoff, *Tubercular Capital: Illness and the Conditions of Modern Jewish Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 24.

[393] There are many terms to encompass the nebulous and frequently-shifting experiences common to C/S/X [consumer/survivor/ex-patient] communities, each with slightly different scopes and implications, including: mental illness, mental disability, neurodivergence, neuroqueerness, mental difference, psychiatric difference, neuroatypicality, etc. In this chapter I largely model Prendergast's usage of the term 'psych disability' and 'psych disabled.'

(sometimes 'a schizophrenic,' 'schizoid').[394] Additional, less common diagnoses include psychosis (Karriker) and dissociative identity disorder (Vergara). Even if diagnosing fictional characters were appropriate, the experience of bodymind portrayed in the narrative do not suit clinical profiles of schizophrenia from any period; the scholarship circulates misinformation as well as stigma. Reliance on misinformation, stereotypes, or myths about schizophrenia is often implicit, but sometimes overt, such as when Boguslawski incorrectly defines schizophrenia in a parenthetical phrase as "(split personality)."[395]

In addition to diagnostic speculation, literary scholars have used a wide range of dehumanizing and stigmatizing language when talking about the narrator, reproducing and reinforcing stigma against psych disabled people in life. The patterns of stigmatization are familiar from earlier parts of this dissertation. Much of it involves uncritically characterizing Nymphea as abnormal, as when Johnson calls the story "[Nymphea's] attempts to come to terms with his psychic abnormality vis-à-vis the surrounding world."[396] Karriker, in comparing Nymphea to the holy fool archetype, writes of "image of the student as a fool, as someone abnormal," without interrogating that second category.[397] There is also a pattern of referring to the narrator, because of his bodymind difference, as inherently disordered or chaotic. Danshina's article and Lipovetsky's chapter are both structured around chaos as a major thematic element — not in itself harmful, but in the overlap of chaos and the narrator's difference the rhetoric becomes stigmatizing, as when Danshina describes the novel as "journey through the chaotic mind of a deranged adolescent."[398] In the same passage of

[394] Cited scholars diagnosing the narrator with schizophrenia include Boguslawski, Freedman, Johnson, Lipovetskii, McDowell, McMillin, Simmons, and Vergara.

[395] Boguslawski, 92.

[396] Johnson, 207.

[397] Karriker, 610.

[398] Danshina, 367.

Johnson's article cited above, he writes that "Through the kaleidoscopically chaotic prism of the young man's schizoid mind we see a number of incidents reflecting both his disordered perceptions and his attempts to come to terms with his psychic abnormality vis-à-vis the surrounding world."[399] Lipovetsky writes that the narrator's very consciousness itself is disordered or ill: he writes that "chaos does not surround the narrator from without, as in *Moscow to the End of the Line*, but is found inside his ailing consciousness from the very beginning."[400] Lipovetsky further writes of "the creative chaos of 'student so-and-so's' sick consciousness" contrasted with the "sick social order" of the school, folding in psych disability with the institutions of power that disenfranchise them without acknowledging that imbalance of power.[401] Lipovetsky also writes that "The narrator's defining feature is that he is an *eternal adolescent*."[402] There is no reason to characterize the narrator's adolescence as any more eternal than any other adolescent character's, except the implicit stereotype of disabled people as eternal children, denied access to the civic personhood granted to adults.

In connection with abnormality, some of these same critics characterize the narrator as in some way defective or incompetent – a particularly strange denigration given that Nymphea's narrative voice, which makes up such a large proportion of the novel, is so richly poetic. McDowell calls the students of the specschool "poor, demented children" and refers to Nymphea's "mental limitations."[403] Tumanov, in comparing the narrator to Benjy of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, writes of the "mentally deficient protagonist" [умственно неполноценный герой].[404] Freedman calls him a "a mentally incompetent student" and writes of his "crippling ignorance and fear when

399 Johnson, 207.

400 Lipovetsky, 84.

401 Ibid., 89.

402 Ibid., 90. Emphasis original.

403 McDowell, 139-40, 181.

404 Tumanov, 138.

contemplating his potential relationships with women."[405] Freedman also calls Rosa Winova, another character in the novel, "a mental defective."[406] Boguslawski also calls the students of the school "mentally sick" and the narrator "mentally defective."[407] Karriker repeats the Ardis translation of the dedication as "dedicated to a retarded boy," without interrogating the term that was both medical and derogatory in the late 1970s when both the translation and Karriker's article were written.[408]

A handful of the scholars cited above also characterize schizophrenia as narrative device that allows the author to create an effect entirely removed from schizophrenic people in life. Danshina writes, "The mental condition of the narrator allows the author to undertake the most daring narrative and linguistic experiments."[409] In discussing Sokolov's "total dedication to being different, free from established rules, norms, and regulations," Boguslawski writes, "For the same reason the novel's hero is a schizophrenic. Schizophrenia (split personality) gives the author greater possibilities to demonstrate his artistic credo. It should be remembered that the ailment, which affects one's actions and perception of the world, and results in hallucinations, delusions, fantasies, flight of ideas, etc., is commonly linked to the problem of creative imagination and artistic genius."[410] Boguslawski then goes on to attribute to "many schizophrenics," without any grounding of this claim in either psychiatric research (often itself fundamentally dehumanizing) or schizophrenic people's own life-writing, "an unusual depth of perception of the surrounding world and an unusual talent to convey

405 Freedman, 27, 8.

406 Ibid., 8.

407 Boguslawski, 94-5.

408 Karriker, 160. For a brief history of terminology for intellectual and learning disability in professional discourse, see Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, "The words we used: the evolution of language." The term 'mental retardation' was only officially replaced with the term 'intellectual disability ' in American federal policy in 2015, under Rosa's Law.

409 Danshina, 367.

410 Boguslawski, 92.

their impressions in artistic terms."[411] This claim is based on nothing more than Freudian stereotypes, discredited even before Boguslawski published this article, about people with schizophrenia as supernaturally artistic but otherwise nonfunctioning as people in the civic realm because of a supposed lack of connection to reality.[412] It both romanticizes a highly stigmatized condition and removes it completely from the people who experience it, rhetorically transforming it into a metaphor for artistic talent and breaking the link to its original referent. Along similar lines, Freedman writes, "Our examination of the narrator's enchanted circles is an attempt to identify Sokolov's artistic devices and their relationship to his playful philosophical inquiries into problems of art and existence."[413] That artistic device is schizophrenia, "illustrated in the principal narrative mode."[414] And for Johnson, the device of schizophrenia is the main trait that sets the novel apart: "*Shkola dlia durakov* stands apart from these fundaments of the traditional syntagmatic novel by the device of having a madman as its narrator."[415] On one level, the claims of these scholars are correct: Sokolov uses his protagonist's extraordinary bodymind primarily as a device to explore other topics of interest. Missing from this analysis is consideration of the ethical concerns in portraying marginalized and stigmatized experiences one does not share and in commenting uncritically on this narrative device.

Emblematic of all the above uncritical and stigmatizing rhetoric is Cynthia Simmons's chapter on *A School for Fools* in *Their Father's Voice: Vassily Aksyonov, Venedikt Erofeev, Eduard Limonov, and Sasha Sokolov*. Simmons's book was published in 1993, but she bases her entire understanding of what she calls "pathological discourse" and "the thought-disordered schizophrenic" on Gregory

411 Ibid.

412 For more on this myth, see McNiff.

413 Freedman, 7.

414 Ibid.

415 Johnson, 212.

Bateson's 1956 "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia" – a work of medical discourse fully in step with an extremely dark period of psychiatric history, when hysteria and homosexuality were also legitimately diagnosable psychiatric disorders and 'treatment' was openly based in eugenics and incarceration. Simmons writes that "more impressive, even uncanny, is the degree to which this literary narrative reproduces a type of pathological discourse."[416] In describing the narrator's so-called 'pathological discourse,' Simmons writes of "the soul in an abnormal condition," the narrator as an "avatar of aberrant discourse," the narration's "inappropriateness as real-world communication" and its "flamboyant incoherence."[417] She writes that "We speak of the novel's dialogue in a figurative sense since a distinctive characteristic of the discourse of thought-disordered schizophrenics is its *failure*, at times, to meet the ordinary requirements of communication."[418] The entire novel, the core of its literary experimentation, is its shout of a new type; if the communication fails in Simmons's reading, it fails on the reader's end. That 'we' is telling: Simmons rhetorically precludes the possibility that her reader may take issue with uncritical use of abusive and eugenic mid-century psychiatry, let alone may be psych disabled themselves.

Simmons makes the assumption of an abled reader explicit in her chapter, such as when she writes about how "thought-disordered schizophrenic discourse differs from normal discourse," but all of the above scholars show that they are writing with a 'normal,' nondisabled reader in mind.[419] The assumption that one's audience could only be normal, could not possibly be the same people metaphorized out of existence in one's text, painfully alienates people who are psych disabled, crip, mad, psychiatric survivors, mentally ill, neurodivergent, neuroqueer, etc. and shuts us out of the

[416] Simmons, 127.

[417] Ibid.

[418] Ibid., 128. Emphasis original.

[419] Ibid., 129.

conversation. What else could I, an autistic scholar and psychiatric survivor, feel when I open the Ardis translation of *A School for Fools* and read, "To the retarded boy" — except viscerally relive experiences of pathologization and institutional violence? And how could I expect to be respectfully heard in a scholarly community that uses such stigmatizing language about me and my loved ones uncritically and in proliferation? For these reasons, I'm extremely hesitant to base my analysis of *A School for Fools* in the extant scholarship: not only do I find the above frameworks (most importantly) ethically unjustifiable, I have little confidence that studies intentionally founded on midcentury psychiatry's understanding of human dignity would contribute much of use to a reading founded on disability justice.[420]

'This is what we think'

What is critically needed in the literature on *School for Fools* and many other texts depicting many kinds of neurological difference is what Ben G. calls radical empathy for people who experience schizophrenia (etc.) from people who do not. In "On Radical Empathy and Schizophrenia," he uses Thomas Nagel's 1974 philosophical essay "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?" as a touchstone to call for an understanding of schizophrenia beyond the dismissive and pathological, "one that doesn't explain away the thoughts, beliefs, and visions of the person living through the experience by simply calling it a brain disease."[421] He concludes:

> If there is such a thing as what it's like for a bat to be a bat, and if we can never know exactly what this is, it sheds light on the inherent limitations of what it means to be human. The same can be said of understanding the experience of people living with psychosis: if we can never fully grasp what happens in those experiences, if we cannot know whether indeed it is

[420] During the revision of the close reading section below, I did return to the scholarship cited above in interest of thoroughly researching my passages of interest. As was true in researching the above section, the dehumanization of psych disabled people at the foundation of this scholarship consistently induced episodes of posttraumatic stress: I experienced racing heartbeat, numbness in my fingers, full body tremors, and flashbacks to psychiatric abuse. The stigmatization of mental illness in scholarship is not 'merely' an ethical concern; it causes tangible harm to marginalized readers and works to push disabled scholars out of the discipline.

[421] Ben G., "On Radical Empathy and Schizophrenia," in *Criptiques* (May Day Publishing, 2014), 226.

> a form of spiritual and psychic regeneration or a disease of the brain, at least we can try to understand these experiences on their own terms. We can do this by practicing a radical empathy which incorporates these experiences and builds a shared reality between family members and friends over time. Ultimately, a process like this enhances and makes more complex our understanding of what it is to be human.[422]

The following section responds to that call by amplifying writing by people with schizophrenia, psychosis, and other neurodiverse conditions about their experiences, so that we can take a step toward a practice of radical empathy in literary criticism of *A School for Fools*.

In "Chronically Ill, Critically Crip?: Poetry, Poetics and Dissonant Disabilities," crip scholar and poet Emilia Nielsen writes that a "desire to jolt people should remain a central concern of crip theorizing and activism," making an argument for the place of critical disability studies in literary conversations that places the perspective in a somewhat foolish position.[423] The jolt she wants to produce in her readers is "engendered by fierce love and fueled by curiosity" and in crip poetics she finds "pleasure too in evoking playfulness, in claiming what might otherwise be understood as a personal tragedy as a site of unexpected whimsicality."[424] Nielsen reflects on the postmodern process of meaning-making as co-constituted: as the significance of a holy foolish encounter is located in the encounter between fool and spectator, the reader takes her words and makes meaning from them either "through a crip perspective or as someone willing to be nudged, winced even, into another way of understanding the world."[425] At the connection of poetry and scholarship on experiences of chronic illness in particular, Nielsen writes that "Overwhelmingly, I also came to understand that the best people to do this scholarship are those living with chronic illnesses, not because other researchers are unable to uncover the realities of dissonant disabilities, but because I came to value

[422] Ibid., 226-7.

[423] Emilia Nielsen, "Chronically Ill, Critically Crip?: Poetry, Poetics and Dissonant Disabilities," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2016).

[424] Ibid.

[425] Ibid.

reading work that was as disruptive, unpredictable and unruly as the bodies and minds from which the work emerged."[426] While Nielsen writes from her own experiences of chronic illness, the pattern holds for the C/S/X [consumer/survivor/ex-patient] movement, sometimes also called the psychiatric survivors movement, encompassing a wide range of people who access psychiatric or mental health services, who have survived institutionalization and other psychiatric interventions, and/or who are ex-patients of psychiatric or mental health services: people who may recognize their own experiences in Nymphea.[427]

In Slavic literary studies, including but not limited to criticism of *A School for Fools*, it is our ethical responsibility to be nudged by crip shouts into another way of understanding bodymind difference. The casual cruelty with which the literary scholars cited above speak of psych disabled people as reflected in how they write about Nymphea arises in part because they conceptualize schizophrenia as a literary device, an abstract concept, rather than being inseparable from living people. C.D. Herrera, in his introduction to *Ethics and Neurodiversity*, writes:

> It seems undeniable that those of us who try to adopt a scholarly perspective on differences can pause and reflect on how we want to talk and write about them. At a common-sense level, we know that we can speak and write in a way that can make entire groups feel insignificant, unappreciated, and excluded. We also know that this risk can manifest in subtle ways, as when a well-intentioned essay or lecture might appear to gloss over or misunderstand the different priorities that people place on justice, for example, or the preference that some have for distinguishing between Us and Them. And it might seem convenient if we could treat such differences as though they are somehow outside of morality. But these things are what gives morality its point.[428]

Language matters when speaking about disability even in fiction, and literary scholars must take seriously the ethical considerations of speaking from outside marginalized people's experiences. Part

[426] Ibid.

[427] For example, Robyn Lewis Brown and Nev Jones assess three consequences for the absence of C/S/X perspectives in scholarship: "(1) relatively greater biomedicalization and (2) clinical professionalization of psychiatric disability compared with other forms of disability, and (3) barriers and obstacles to training and advancement in academia for doctoral students and faculty with psychiatric disabilities."

[428] C.D. Herrera, *Ethics and Neurodiversity* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2013), 5.

of that consideration should be learning from disabled people about our own experiences and respecting our agency as speakers, in whatever format we speak. In "Reassigning Meaning," Simi Linton writes, "The disability community has attempted to wrest control of the language from the previous owners, and reassign meaning to the terminology used to describe disability and disabled people."[429] Much of the pejorative language examined in the above section falls into the category Linton calls "nasty words," which "have generally been expunged from public conversation but emerge in various types of discourse."[430] Some falls into binaries of normalcy/abnormalcy, and some falls into the category of passivity versus control, "that people with disabilities are more dependent, childlike, passive, sensitive, and miserable and are less competent than people who do not have disabilities."[431] Linton writes that the "disciplinary and intellectual transformation" required in scholarship and other forms of public discourse depends on putting disability communities at the center of discussions on disability.[432]

A similar call is put forth in "This Is What We Think," a remarkable collaborative essay by Daniel Docherty, Richard Hughes, Patricia Phillips, David Corbett, Brendan Regan, Andrew Barber, Michael Adams, Kathy Boxall, Ian Kaplan, and Sayma Izzidien — some of whom are learning disabled, some university researchers, and some both. They write:

> We wanted to write an article in our own words. We think it's important that people get learning disabled people's point of view instead of listening to the lies from people in day services and people like that. We wanted to do an article like this, putting stuff down in writing about what we feel like, about what it's like for people who are learning disabled, what it's like to get bullied time and time again. [...] Things have changed; the world has

429 Simi Linton, "Reassigning Meaning," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 223.

430 Ibid., 227.

431 Ibid., 232.

432 Ibid., 236.

> turned now. It's time to stop it always being the professionals doing everything. We want people to listen to us; listen to us and learn from us.[433]

Among the barriers to full participation in life that disable learning disabled people, Docherty et al. include information that is not accessible, negative attitudes from professionals (care managers, day center staff, parents, teachers, etc.), people not listening, and jargon and offensive terminology.[434] The pairing of those last two together is telling: the psychiatrists like Bateson and scholars that cite similar work produce harm in the same category as strangers calling slurs on the street. Of pathologizing jargon, they write, "The services' language, like 'handicapped' and 'retardation,' the jargon words they use, they're not the choices of the learning disabled people themselves. Their jargon is a way of the professionals and others keeping us out."[435] For that reason, Docherty et al. write their article in rhetoric that is meaningful to them: with accessibility as the primary priority, powerful and poetic in its unabashed directness and simplicity. They write, as a subheader in all caps, "WE ARE HERE AND WE'RE GOING TO STAY. WE WANT TO BE LISTENED TO AND WE'RE NOT GOING TO GO AWAY."[436]

That same problem addressed in "This Is What We Think," of nondisabled professionals taking upon themselves authority on disability above direct contradictions of disabled people themselves, is also addressed philosophically in Linda Martin Alcoff's influential article "The Problem of Speaking for Others." Alcoff poses the question,

> As philosophers and social theorists we are authorized by virtue of our academic positions to develop theories that express and encompass the ideas, needs, and goals of others. However, we must begin to ask ourselves whether this is a legitimate authority. Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and, if so, what are the criteria for

433 Daniel Docherty et al., "This Is What We Think," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 433.

434 Ibid., 435.

435 Ibid.

436 Ibid., 436.

> validity? In particular, is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me?[437]

Alcoff recognizes two sources for the ethical dilemma of speaking for others: one in the growing recognition that "a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their social location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech," and another in the recognition that social location can be discursively dangerous as well as epistemically salient, or, "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for."[438] She argues against adopting the position that one should only speak for oneself and one's specific social location as the potential abandonment of political responsibility to use one's position of privilege to speak out against oppression and as abandonment of critical engagement with movements of resistance. Although Alcoff stresses that "the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise" and that "the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies," she rejects a wholesale retreat from speaking for others.[439] Instead, she urges for the careful development of strategies to speak for others in a way that advocates for their needs as they themselves speak them, in places they may not have access to. Of speaking for others, she writes, "We must ask further questions about its effects, questions that amount to the following: will it enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples?"[440]

[437] Linda Martin Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-2), 7.

[438] Ibid.

[439] Ibid., 29.

[440] Ibid.

Herrera poses a similar question to Alcoff when he asks, "What is and what should be happening when we apply labels and make choices in light of them?"[441] The most common label applied by scholars to Nymphea and *School for Fools*, as discussed above, is schizophrenic. Such an armchair diagnosis is not necessary for interpretive analysis of the novel: not only is a specific diagnosis never included in the text of the novel, the diagnosis of schizophrenia chosen by literary scholars does not closely match the kinds of experiences described in the text, even as professional arrangements of the patterns categorized as schizophrenia have varied considerably over the decades. Instead of a clinical description, schizophrenia operates in the literary scholarship as a symbolic shorthand for something closer to Romantic notions of madness. "Schizophrenia terrifies. It is the archetypal disorder of lunacy," writes Esmé Weijun Wang in *The Collected Schizophrenias*, a collection of essays about the author's own experiences of schizophrenia.[442] "People speak of schizophrenics as though they were dead without being dead, gone in the eyes of those around them. Schizophrenics are victims of the Russian word гибель (gibel), which is synonymous with 'doom' and 'catastrophe' – not necessarily death nor suicide, but a ruinous cessation of existence; we deteriorate in a way that is painful for others."[443]

Schizophrenia, Wang writes, is "nothing more or less than a constellation of symptoms that have frequently been observed as occurring in tandem."[444] In her critical examination of psychiatry, she writes from her own observation that psychiatry is even less an exact science than medicine generally. It relies on the psychiatrist's (or literary scholar's, in our case) personal judgement as the primary tool of diagnosis: there is no blood test or other marker to conclusively show schizophrenia

441 Herrera, 13.

442 Esmé Weijun Wang, *The Collected Schizophrenias: Essays* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019), 3.

443 Ibid.

444 Ibid, 10.

in the body. Wang personally found her diagnosis to be comforting: "A diagnosis says that I am crazy, but in a particular way: one that has been experienced and recorded not just in modern times, but also by the ancient Egyptians, who described a condition similar to schizophrenia in the Book of Hearts, and attributed psychosis to the dangerous influence of poison in the heart and uterus."[445] However, Wang also attests to the dangerous power of psychiatric diagnosis by doctors speaking for patients, given that their decisions hold great material consequences for patients. "Giving someone a diagnosis of schizophrenia will impact how they see themselves. It will change how they interact with friends and family. The diagnosis will affect how they are seen by the medical community, the legal system, the Transportation Security Administration, and so on."[446]

Wang's critique of psychiatry extends to the DSM, or *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association and currently in its fifth edition (commonly referred to as DSM-5 or DSM-V). The DSM-5, published in May 2013, made major changes to diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia and associated disorders. The update dropped the subcategories of paranoid, disorganized, catatonic, undifferentiated, and residual schizophrenias completely.[447] It also adjusted both the name of the disorder class from "Schizophrenia and Other Psychotic Disorders" to "Schizophrenia Spectrum and Other Psychotic Disorders" and the characteristic symptoms, which now read:

> A. Two (or more) of the following, each present for a significant portion of time during a 1-month period (or less if successfully treated). At least one of these must be (1), (2), or (3):
> 1. Delusions
> 2. Hallucinations
> 3. Disorganized speech (e.g., frequent derailment or incoherence)

[445] Ibid., 5.

[446] Ibid., 13-14.

[447] Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. "Impact of the DSM-IV to DSM-5 Changes on the National Survey on Drug Use and Health." Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016.

4. Grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior
5. Negative symptoms (i.e., diminished emotional expression or avolition).[448]

Of the other five diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia spectrum disorders, only one remained unchanged in the update. Wang writes about the DSM, "It is, like the Judeo-Christian bible, one that warps and mutates as quickly as our culture does. The DSM defines problems so that we can determine whether a person fits into them, or whether a person has lapsed out of the problem entirely – which is to say not that their life changes, even if their label does."[449]

In the transposition from clinical diagnosis to popular culture, Wang compares the way non-schizophrenics write of schizophrenia to stories of possession. "The story of schizophrenia is one with a protagonist, 'the schizophrenic,' who is first a fine and good vessel with fine and good things inside of it, and then becomes misshapen through the ravages of psychosis; the vessel becomes prone to being filled with nasty things. Finally, the wicked thoughts and behavior that may ensue become inseparable from the person, who is now unrecognizable from what they once were."[450] Eventually in the possession narrative of schizophrenia, the person becomes more disorder than human. "The mind has been taken over. The mind has lost the ability to make rational decisions. There's someone in there, but it's not whoever it is we formerly believed it to be. [...] it's still not your fault if you get it, but there's no fixing it, and though you may not intend to be a burden, you'll still be one until you die."[451] As a result, Wang comes to an accusation along similar lines to Docherty et al.: "We cannot be trusted about anything, including our own experiences."[452]

[448] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

[449] Wang, 21.

[450] Ibid., 29-30.

[451] Ibid., 38.

[452] Ibid., 39.

If the experiences narrated by Nymphea do not closely match the diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia, even in older clinical formulations, why do literary scholars unanimously diagnose him as schizophrenic? Catherine Prendergast writes of schizophrenia's appropriation by postmodernist movements in "The unexceptional schizophrenic: a post-postmodern introduction":

> Postmodern theory owes a great debt to schizophrenics — and to cyborgs, border-crossers, and other figures culturally designated as hybrid. But most belatedly, and most significantly to disability studies, the debt is owed to schizophrenics, those people who bear the diagnosis of schizophrenia, along with its legal, social, and rhetorical consequences. Without schizophrenics, postmodernity would struggle to limn its boundaries, for the schizophrenic in postmodern theory marks the point of departure from the modern, the Oedipal, the referential, the old. Postmodern theory has been indispensable to disability studies because it has allowed not only for a challenge to normativity, but also for the destabilizing of narratives of national progress, social order, and identity (Corker and Shakespeare). However, crucial texts of postmodern theory have only achieved these destabilizations by holding one identity stable: that of the schizophrenic.[453]

Prendergast analyzes the usage of the rhetorical figure of the schizophrenic, whether in celebratory fashion by Deleuze and Guatarri in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and Frederic Jameson in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* or in pathologizing fashion by Jean Baudrillard's *The Ecstasy of Communication*, as an appropriation by postmodern theory. Even in its more positive iterations, she writes, "this metaphorizing enacts what Susan Sontag would call 'rhetorical ownership' over schizophrenia."[454] The model for this stable cliché of postmodern theory, Prendergast argues, is a singular, exceptional schizophrenic: Judge Daniel Paul Schreber's 1903 *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. This memoir was analyzed by Freud in his 1911 *The Schreber Case*, later taken up by Deleuze and Guattari; it was also analyzed by Lacan in his lectures as recorded in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, later taken up by Jameson. As more autobiographical narratives of mental disability began to appear in publication, especially with the founding in 1994 of *Schizophrenia*

[453] Catherine Prendergast, "The unexceptional schizophrenic: a post-postmodern introduction," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 2, no. 1 (2008): 55.

[454] Ibid., 57.

Digest, authored primarily by schizophrenic writers, 'the schizophrenic' became less of an exceptional figure and more of a potential civic participant. This, Prendergast writes, "explains why the most blatant appropriations of the schizophrenic seem to end in the late 1980s."[455] That proliferation of schizophrenic life-writing represents a solution for Prendergast of postmodern appropriation of 'the schizophrenic.' "To see the 'ordinary' schizophrenic is, in short, to give up the stable schizophrenic. [...] A genuinely postmodern perspective would not insist that the schizophrenic rhetoric be fixed, but rather would allow for Bill MacPhee, Lisa Gibson, Vicki Yeung, and Daniel Frey to continue to engage in civic rhetoric, while being schizophrenic."[456] Or, as Petra Kuppers writes in "Performing Determinism: Disability Culture Poetry":

> See that the images you hold of us are not who we are.
> See that the images and sounds we all hold are who we are.
> See that we can make up sounds and images for all that we are, with blanks in between.
> See the blanks.
> See that these patterns do not necessarily make sense, even when repeated.[457]

Bacilli

The following two close reading sections take as inspiration the powerful affirmations of self, identity, community, and dignity by Prendergast, Wang, Docherty et al., Ben. G., and others in centering on Nymphea's mystical shout of a new type in Chapter Four, "Skeerly" [Скирлы] as a core motif. This section of the novel is titled after an invented fairytale recalled in the chapter; "Skeerly" is the menacing scraping sound of a prosthetic leg dragging menacingly across the forest floor. In the first part of the section, Nymphea recognizes the need for a transformative shout of a new type but hasn't found what exactly that shout should be yet. He recalls a memory of a different shout (of

455 Ibid., 60.

456 Ibid., 61.

457 Petra Kuppers, "Performing Determinism: Disability Culture Poetry." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 27 no. 2 (2007): 103-4.

an old or regular type), in which he ran through the hall of the specschool, shouting, *bacilli!*. Nymphea consults with his teacher and mentor, Norvegov, about repeating the shout bacilli; Norvegov's voice overtakes the narrative as he too recalls the shout *bacilli* as first demonic and pathological but then holy. Ultimately, the shout *bacilli* is not the shout of a new type; it is still beholden to institutional authority in the form of Norvegov's voice. And normative as Norvegov's perspective is, he all the same recognizes that this holy foolish shout is not for him to decide; the saintly wisdom in his affirmative answer is to is to cede that authority.

The chapter opens with two voices of the narrator disagreeing on the details of a remembered conversation with Acatov:

> "Now allow me to clear my throat, look you straight in the eye and pinpoint one detail from your cover letter. In it you said something to the effect that Acatov himself had reacted very favorably to our collection, but I don't recall us ever talking to him on this theme…"[458]
>
> Теперь позволь мне откашляться, посмотреть тебе прямо в глаза и уточнить одну деталь из твоего сопроводительного письма. В нем сказано, будто бы сам Акатов тепло отзывался о нашей коллекции, но я не припомню, чтобы мы беседовали с ним на эту тему –.[459]

The speaking narrator begins his story by way of correction. Past this introductory frame, a conversation between two selves, the story opens with Nymphea's father, emblematic of Socialist Realism and an entrenched ideological mindset. "One summer, at the dacha, on a Sunday when father had had us sitting since morning rewriting the lead articles from newspapers, so that we would have a better understanding of internal and external *polyticks,* I decided that you would get along fine here without me."[460] [Однажды летом, на даче, в воскресенье, когда отец с утра засадил нас разбирались в вопросах внешней и внутренней к а л и т к и, я решил, что ты

458 Sokolov, *A School for Fools*, 133.

459 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 97.

460 Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 133.

прекрасно справишься здесь и без меня].[461] The narrative voices depart: one stays at the desk copying newspapers, and the speaking narrator sets off to visit the naturalist Acatov, father to Nymphea's beloved Veta Arkadievna.

On the way, the narrative voice switches from first-person ("the dog runs up and sniffs me, but today I'm not afraid of it" [собака подбегает и обнюхивает меня, но сегодня я не боюсь ее]) to second-person ("You walk around the house on the thick grass"[462] [Ты обходишь особняк вокруг, по густой газонной траве][463]). This shift in grammatical person could signal a perspective shift back to the narrator left copying newspapers at the desk, who now recalls the episode to the narrative voice who experienced it; or it could signal an additional step outside of the self, now adding a third voice to the narration. Either way, the narrative voices are not neatly split; the authority of speech is passed back and forth across voices and times. Directly following this perspective shift, the narrator – whichever voice now speaks – encounters the empty barrel that inspires the shout.

> Only one barrel is completely empty, it contains neither water nor insects, and a happy thought occurs to you: to fill it with your shout. Long do you stand there, bent over the dark cylindrical abyss, running over in your selective memory the words which best reverberate in the emptiness of empty chambers. For example, if – thrown out of class – you are running through the school corridor when classes are in progress, and deep in your core a desire is born to shout in such a way that your shout will freeze the blood of your mendacious and debauched teachers, so that interrupting their speeches in mid-word they will swallow their tongues and be transformed – to the amusement of the idiot-students – into pillars of chalk, or pillarettes (depending on their height), you can't think up anything more delightful than the cry: bacilli! What do you think, mentor Savl?[464]
>
> Лишь одна бочка совершенно пуста, в ней нет ни воды, ни насекомых, и к тебе является счастливая мысль – наполнить ее криком своим. Долго стоишь ты, наклонившись над темной цилиндрической бездной, перебирая в своей избирательной памяти слова, которые лучше прочих звучат в пустоте пустых

[461] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 97.

[462] Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 134.

[463] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 98.

[464] Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 135.

> помещений. Таких слов немного, но они есть. Например, если – изгнанный с урока – бежишь ты по школьному коридору, когда в классах идут занятия, и внутри естества твоего родится желание кричать так, чтобы крик твой леденил кровь лживых и развратных учителей твоих, и чтобы они, оборвав речь свою на полуслове, глотали бы языки и обращались на потеху идиотам-ученикам в меловые столбы и столбики (в зависимости от роста), то не придумаешь ничего восхитительнее вопля: бациллы! Как вы считаете, наставник Савл?[465]

In this first of several expressions of the shout, the action remains hypothetical. It is a happy thought and a desire, imagined in terms of 'if.' The desired effect of the shout is on the teachers, one of the main sources of institutional authority in his life, that they will be first shocked frozen and then transformed. This imagined version of the shout parallels the function of a holy fool's speech: to shock the wicked (here, 'mendacious and debauched') to such a degree that they are confronted with divine truth in an unexpected form and are changed both in spirit and in action. The imagined transformation of the teachers into pillars of chalk also echoes the Biblical tale of Lot's wife in Genesis 19, who disobeyed God's commandment by looking back at the condemned city of Sodom as they fled and was transformed into a pillar of salt in punishment. The pillar of chalk image recurs especially regarding Veta Arkadievna, one of the teachers at the school and the object of Nymphea's affection, who is often associated with epithets of chalk. The cry that the narrator imagines to interrupt mid-word the teachers' wickedness in this first instance is *bacilli,* a scientific term for the morphology of rod-shaped bacteria – likely a word recalled from one of the teachers' classes, and in a word parodying the pathologizing institutional worldview that turns difference into potentially infectious disease.

The student, not yet confident in the choice of his shout, turns to Savl Norvegov for confirmation. Norvegov then takes over the narrative voice and also the parameters of the shout. He begins, "Dear student and comrade so-and-so…"[466] [Дорогой ученик и товарищ такой-то…

[465] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 98-9.

[466] Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 135.

].[467] Norvegov, in his characteristic saintly-archaic voice, answers, "I have rarely been witness to the kind of ultramundane terror which your mad cry caused the pedagogues and the students, and even the deaf-mute stoker, for it is said somewhere by someone: deaf man, the time will come and you will hear"[468] [я нередко оказывался свидетелем того, в какой нездешний ужас приводил этот безумный ваш крик и педагогов, и учеников, и даже глухонемого истопка, ибо где-то и кем-то сказано: глухой, придет время – и услышит].[469] In Savl's reply, he sidesteps the student's question and retells the memory himself, but with significant changes in narrative. In his telling, the shout in question moves from the hypothetical shout into the barrel to the remembered shout of *bacilli* in the halls of the specschool, and this shout of the old type freezes the blood not just of teachers but also of the students (who were 'amused' in the student's recollection) and the Deaf stoker. Savl goes on to recount these three recipients of the shout in the rhetorical style of *pletenie sloves* as analyzed by McDowell, so that he becomes a saintly witness to the effect of Nymphea's shout.

The first affected is the Deaf stoker of the furnace, about whom Savl invokes repeated Biblical language of Deaf granted hearing (cured) through Christ.[470] Savl elaborates:

> Did I not see the capacious shovel with which he tirelessly hurls coal into the insatiable, hellish furnaces during the cold seasons, did I not – I ask – see the capacious shovel fall out of the hands of the miserable old man when the time of your cry came, the time for the deaf to hear, and he, turning to me with his face besooted and horrible in the dancing flecks and reflections of the flame, his ulcerated and unshaven face, he acquired for a moment the gift of speech, and right after you, shaking his hung-over head, he shouted – no, he bellowed the same word: bacilli, bacilli, bacilli. And so vast was his anger, and so powerful his passion, that the fire in the furnaces was extinguished by his bellow.[471]
>
> Разве не видел я, как совковая лопата, которою неустанно швыряет он уголь в ненасытные адовы топки в течение холодных сезонов, разве – спрашиваю я – не видел я, как совковаая лопата выпадала из дланей несчастного старца, когда наставало время

[467] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 99.

[468] Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 135.

[469] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 99.

[470] See for example Isaiah 35:5, Mark 7:35-37, Matthew 11:5, and Luke 7:22.

[471] Sokolov, *A School for Fools*, 135-6.

> вашего крика, время – глухому слышать, и он, обернув ко мне обуглившееся и страшное в танцующих бликах и облесках пламени, изъязвленное и небритое лицо свое, обретал на минуту дар речи и следом за вами, мотая похмельной головой, кричал – нет, он рычал – то же слово: бациллы, бациллы, бациллы. И столь велик бывал гнев его, и так сылна страсть, что огонь в топках погасил от рыка его.[472]

In this testimony, the furnace, driving force and literal fuel of the institution, is cast in the role of hell, all-consuming and terrible. The time of the student's cry is equated to 'the time for the deaf to hear,' like angelic trumpets signaling the end of days when miraculous cures are proclaimed: the Deaf will hear, the Blind will see, the Lame will walk.[473] If the specschool is driven by hellfire, the stoker himself also seems horrible to Norvegov, with his unseemly face reflected in the flame of the furnace: if the shout freezes the blood of teachers, and Savl Norvegov is also a pedagogue of the specschool, then the awakening of this other disabled shouter would also take on the deeply unsettling, even quasi-demonic appearance of the holy fool. The hellish furnace is extinguished by the stoker's shout of recognition or solidarity, defeated by the power of his anger and passion.

The second group affected by the shout *bacilli* is the teachers: Norvegov continues, "And did I not see the teachers of their special school, who are used to a lot, turn pale and the cards, the playing cards that they were holding in their hands turned into leaves of a forest willow, which has the ability to draw out pus, and they, the pedagogues, moaned in horror"[474] [И разве не видел я, как бледнели при вашем крике привычные ко многому учителя спецшколы, и карты, игральные карты, что держали они в руках, обращались в листочки лесного бредовника, имеющего свойство вытягивать гной, и они, педагоги, стонали от ужаса].[475] These teachers are 'used to a

[472] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 99.

[473] The miraculous cure is a very common New Testament motif, especially in the Gospels. Notable examples include Luke 7:22, "And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (and its parallel verse in Matthew 11:5) and Matthew 15:31, "so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel."

[474] Ibid., 136.

[475] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 99.

lot,' a phrase that turns the students' disabilities and expressions of their experience into a burden or suffering on the teachers' part that must be endured and ignored. Because they have allowed themselves to become apathetic, the extreme disruptive measures of a foolish or crip shout are necessary to shake them from their distractions and actually hear the voice of their student. The narrator remarks of the miraculous transformation that the willow leaves have the ability to draw out pus, turning the demand of treatment from student/patient to teacher/authority and creating the capacity to draw out the injustice or evil of indifference that has infected them. Pus is both a sign of infection and of healing, the remains of white blood cells that have been collected by the immune system at the site of infection. The shout *bacilli* transforms reveals the infection of passivity or apathy in the face of institutional injustice and also provides the means of healing, but that work has to be done internally first.

The third group affected by the shout is the remaining students of the school, whom Nymphea remembers as amused by the shout but whom Norvegov remembers differently:

> And did I not see the faces of your yellow pupils, which are infinitely obtuse anyway, become even more obtuse from your shout, and all of them opened their mouths – even the most capable of them and those who seemed almost normal, suddenly opened their mouths in an answering, albeit mute, cry, and all the dolts of the specschool howled in a monstrous, deafening chorus, and the sick yellow saliva flowed from all these frightened psychopathic mouths.[476]

> А разве не видел я, как лица ваших соучеников, и без того бесконечно тупые, становились от вашего вопля еще тупее, и у всех, даже у самых приспособленных к учебе, и у тех, что казались почти здоровыми, вдруг в ответном, хотя и немом, крике отверзались рты – и все недоумки спецшколы орали чудовищным онемевшим хором и больная желтая слюна текла из всех этих испуганных психопатических ртов.[477]

This description betrays horror on the part of Norvegov himself even moreso than his recount of the furnace-stoker, although he rhetorically distances himself from the other, sinful teachers in the

476 Ibid., *A School for Fools,* 136.

477 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 99.

second part of his testimony. Throughout the novel he is depicted as a saintly figure, through the transformation of his name from Saul (Savl) to Paul (Pavl), through his speech in *pletenie sloves* or word-weaving, through his death and posthumous presence, and through Nymphea's unwavering faith in his mentor. This memory, however, displays a horror and contempt of the marginalized unbefitting a holy man. These disabled students joining Nymphea and the Deaf stoker in shouting are painted by Norvegov as demonic in their pathology: sickly yellow, psychopathic, infinitely obtuse, dolts – even those who seemed *almost normal*, with all the pathologizing baggage a word like normal carries in this context, are transformed by the cry. Their cry, as Norvegov tells it, is somehow both mute and deafening, disabled and disabling, flowing from their monstrous mouths like a vector of infectious disease, as though Norvegov fears he might also 'catch' their pathology. In Alcott's words, he – like the scholars who reinforce stigma of psych disability – has failed to speak ethically for others.

Despite this portrayal of the *bacilli* shout as demonic and pathologically infectious, Norvegov immediately turns to speak of the shout as something holy, even if a kind of holiness out of reach for him as a saint of a different type. He concludes his reply:

> So don't ask me in vain what I think about your fierce and spellbinding shout. O, with what rapturous effort and pain I would shout, if it were my lot to shout even half of your shout! But it isn't my lot, how weak I am, your mentor, before your talent, given from on high. So shout then – most capable of the capable, shout for yourself and for me, and for all of us, deceived, defamed, dishonored and stupefied, for us, the idiots and holy fools, the defectives and schizoids, for the educators and the educatees, for all those to whom it has not been given and whose salivating mouths have already been shut, or will soon be shut, for all those who have been innocently muted, or are being muted, tongues torn out – shout, intoxicated and intoxicating: bacilli, bacilli, bacilli![478]
>
> Так не спрашивайте меня понапрасну, что думаю я о неистовом и чарующем вашем крике. О, с какою упоительною надсадой и болью кричал бы я, если бы дано мне было кричать лишь вполовину вашего крика! Но не дано, не дано, как слаб я, ваш наставник, перед вашим данным свыше талантом. Так кричите же вы – способнейший из способных, кричите за себя и за меня, и за всех нас, обманутых, оболганных,

[478] Ibid., *A School for Fools,* 136-7.

> обесченных и оглупленных, за нас, идиотов и юродивых, дефективных и шизоидов, за воспитателей и воспитанников, за всех, кому не дано и кому же заткнули их слюнявые рты, и кому скоро заткнут их, за всех вины онемевших, немеющих, обезъязыченных – кричите, пьяня и пьянея: бациллы, бациллы, бациллы![479]

Having recalled Nymphea's shout bacilli in a much different tone than Nymphea himself does, Norvegov's answer to his pupil's question "What do you think, mentor Savl?" is that the question is in vain; he defers his authority to affirm back to Nymphea, "most capable of the capable." It seems strange that after portraying Nymphea's shout bacilli as "sick yellow saliva" dripping from the "frightened psychopathic mouths" in a "monstrous, deafening chorus," he would then venerate the same shout as a gift from on high. He too recognizes the need for a shout of a new type: he answers that he would do it himself, if it were his lot. Earlier in this testimony, his narration of the shout bacilli distances him from his apathetic colleagues while betraying his own disgust and horror of abnormalcy; he includes himself (and "all of us") among the marginalized "defectives and schizoids" who so frightened him with their howling. Where exactly Norvegov rhetorically positions himself in the social-political structure of the institution shifts and is at times unclear, just as disability itself is not a binary of disabled and not-disabled, but all the same Nymphea's shout will be for him, the students, the teachers, the furnace-stoker, and the reader. Norvegov's phrase "for the educators and the educatees" levels that power structure; the howl of joy and protest is a moral education for the teachers who are transformed by it, and its transformative power leaves no one unchanged. So too do calls for disability justice improve the lives of everyone, wherever they are positioned in the complex nexus of ability and disability.

However, shouting is a holy foolish act; and the divine talent of shouting is granted to Nymphea, not Savl. In this final turn to the affirmative, Norvegov recognizes the abject and the sacred at the core of the holy foolish paradox as well as Nymphea's agency to make his shout

[479] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 99-100.

without appeal to authority, institutional or spiritual. Norvegov encourages his pupil to shout, "bacilli, bacilli, bacilli," but that is not the shout of a new type, which Nymphea chooses in the end of his own accord. Norvegov cannot choose the shout of a new type but can only echo the old shout; this moment confirms Nymphea's power as a holy fool to discover for himself the disruptive, horrible, joyful, liberatory, crip shout of a new type.

I'm Nymphea!

Even if the shout *bacilli* is perceived by Norvegov and the other teachers as monstrous and pathological, it is for Nymphea and the other specstudents an amusement and a natural expression of autonomy; the act of shouting itself is more important than the content. As Nymphea searches for a shout of a new type to fill the empty barrel at Acatov's house, he searches for a shout that is meaningful in message as well. Like Docherty et al. for their shout of a new type for scholarship, "WE WANT TO BE LISTENED TO AND WE'RE NOT GOING TO GO AWAY," Nymphea chooses his words carefully:

> In the emptiness of empty chambers there are a few other words which will reverberate fairly well too, but having gone over them in your memory, you realize that not one of the ones known to you suits this situation, for in order to fill the empty Acatov barrel, a uniquely special new word is essential, or several words, inasmuch as the situation strikes you as exceptional. Yes, you say to yourself, here we need a shout of a new type.[480]

> В пустоте пустых помещений неплохо звучат и некоторые другие слова, но, перебрав их в памяти своей, ты понимаешь, что ни одно из них, известных тебе, в этой ситуации не подходит, ибо для того, чтобы наполнить пустую акатовскую бочку, необходимо совершенно особое, новое слово, или несколько слов, поскольку ситуация представляется тебе исключительной. Да, говоришь ты себе, тут нужен крик нового типа.[481]

The repetition of *empty* and *emptiness* recalls the kenosis that Fedotov and Ziokowski above named the dominant motif of Russian spirituality and one of the primary features that gives holy foolery its

480 Ibid., *A School for Fools,* 137.

481 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 100.

long-lasting popularity. The empty vessel invites filling with a shout, from within the filler's own body; filling there barrel thereby also involves an emptying of the self, as if pouring the word from one vessel to another. Furthermore, this is an exceptional situation of great significance, and in reverberating the word will fill not just the barrel but the space beyond. Recalling the shout *bacilli,* Nymphea knows that his shout has transformative power, and aims for more than a momentary disruption.

Although he reflects carefully on the gravity of this opportunity, he does not deliberate about the word or message. That comes through intuition or spirit, as if the shout was ready and waiting to be emptied out of him:

> That's why you don't want to reflect further on what to shout into the barrel – you shout the first thing that comes into your head: I'm Nymphea, Nymphea! – you shout. And the barrel overflows with your incomparable voice, releasing its surfeit into the beautiful dacha sky, toward the tops of the pines – and the voice rolls over the stuffy dacha mansards and attics which abound in all kinds of junk, over the volleyball courts where no one ever plays, over the hutches containing thousands of fattened rabbits, over garages redolent of gasoline, over verandas with their toy-bestrewn floors and smoking kerosene lamps, over the gardens and heather barrens surrounding the dacha settlements: eya, eya-eya-eya-yayayaya-a-a![482]

> Вот почему ты не желаешь больше размышлять о том, что кричать в бочку – ты кричишь первое, что является в голову: я – Нимфея, Нимфея! – кричишь ты. И бочка, переполнившись несравненным гласом твоим, выплевывает излишки его в красивое дачное небо, к вершинам сосен – и по дачным душным мансардам и чердакам, набитым всяческим барахлом, по волейбольным площадкам, где никто никогда не играет, по вольерам с тысячами ожиревших кроликов, по гаражам, провонявшим бензином, по верандам, где не полу разбросаны детские игрушки и чадят керосинки, по огородам и вересковым пустошам вкруг дачных поселков – несется эхо – излишки твоего крика: ея-ея-ея-ея-яяяяя-а-а![483]

The first thing that comes into the narrator's head to shout is a self-definition and self-affirmation: in naming himself, he asserts his own agency. The name *Nymphea* turns into the sounds *eya*, then *ya* [the Russian word 'I'], then *a* – not a degeneration or deformation but a refinement of sound fusing

[482] Ibid., *A School for Fools,* 137.

[483] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 100.

identity and name. Here, there is no voice of Norvegov to distort the shout in his retelling from a normate perspective; Nymphea shouts without thinking or without asking. Instead, the sound of the shout reverberating beyond the barrel and into the heavens is majestic and beautiful. It is contrasted with things that are stale: stuffy attics, abandoned tennis courts, pollution, litter. In the settled ugliness of the dacha settlement, the ringing shout is truly something new, and something that can escape the confinement of the institution. It floats past the settlements and into the natural environment beyond, spilling over in its abundance of voice.

With that shout of a new type echoing over the dacha complex, the narrative returns to the split experience being retold in narration: that of the student copying newspapers, and that of the student holding a conversation with Acatov. The father hears his son shouting and awakens from his hammock: "who's shouting there, damn him, mother, I heard your spawn bellowing somewhere on the pond, didn't I tell him to do some work"[484] [кто там кричал, будь он проклят, мать, мне послышалось, где-то на пруду орал твой ублюдок, разве я не приказал ему заниматься делом].[485] Like with Norvegov and the Deaf stoker's bellow, the father perceives the joyous shout of a new type as something demonic or horrifying, as both the holy fool's behavior appears demonic to those who cannot see its purpose and as psychiatric consumers, survivors, and ex-patients are demonized as something horrifying and dangerous to 'normal' people. The violence of institutional normalization is shown in the writing student's shaved head and contorted posture: "the diligence is expressed in the way you bend your closely cropped head to the side and contort your back absurdly, as if you had been smashed apart, yes, as if someone had thrown you onto the rocks from a lofty cliff, and then come and smashed you some more, using the adjustable pincers which clamp

[484] Ibid., *A School for Fools,* 138.

[485] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 100.

red hot ingots – writing"[486] [старание выражено в том, что ты склонил свою наголо стриженую голову набок и нелепо изогнул спину, будто тебя всего изломали, да, сбросили на камни с высокого обрыва, а затем подошли и еще больше изломали с помощью кузнечных щипцов, которыми держат раскаленные болванки – пишешь].[487]

In contrast to that violent image, the narrative voice then transitions to the other perspective, implying that this other experience is equally, if not more, real and significant. "But father only sees what he sees, he doesn't know, doesn't guess, that it is only you sitting at the desk, while at this moment the other you is standing beside Acatov's barrel, revelling in your soaring shout"[488] [Но отец видит лишь то, что видит, он не знает, не догадывается, что за столом сидишь один ты, а другой ты стоишь в тот момент возле акатовской бочки, радуясь своему летучему крику].[489] The perceptive power of state-aligned authority, the seeing-knowing power to determine reality, is limited at its single point in comparison with the power granted by the narrator's multiple selves to revel in the shout. The shout of a new type, his name and 'I' and the simple power of an outright cry, are more healing and fulfilling than the violence of institutional intervention in the Foucauldian combination of psychiatric ward and school.

In his conversation with Acatov, Nymphea builds toward a declaration of his intention to marry Veta, Acatov's daughter and a teacher at the specschool. It is from this long but coherent chain of associations and memories that the chapter title is pulled: he tells Acatov a story about Sheina Tinbergen, a Jewish woman and assistant principal at the specschool whom he hates, and a record she plays of her late husband Yakov reading *Skeerly,* a frightening children's fairytale about a

486 Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 138.

487 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 100.

488 Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 138.

489 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 100.

bear with a prosthetic leg ("But the trouble is that this bear is an invalid, a cripple, he's minus one leg…"[490] [но беда состоит в том, что медведь тот – инвалид, калека, у него нету одной ноги][491]) who carries off a girl made of chalk and "does something with her there, exactly what is unknown, it's not explained in the fairytale, it ends with that, it's terrible, sir, one doesn't know what to think"[492] [что-то там с ней делает, неизвестно что именно, в сказке не объясняется, на том все и кончается, ужасно, сударь, не знаешь, что и думать].[493] 'Skeerly' is, according to Nymphea's retelling, the terrible sound of the prosthetic as the bear walks through the woods and the sound he hears when he thinks about an unknown man "doing something there in a hotel room with my acquaintance"[494] [что-то делает там, в номере гостиницы, с моей знакомой][495] – referring to Veta, whom he associates with chalk. The sound makes him sick with hate, and it blends fears and anxieties in connection with both disability and sexuality. Throughout this entire imagined conversation with Acatov, Nymphea is desperate to be taken seriously as a potential suitor for Veta, belying a fear that any outward marker of abnormality or characterization by others as abnormal would ruin his chance for happiness.

The imagined responses to his plea for acceptance is answered in contradiction by the two figures of authority whom Nymphea most respects. When Nymphea implores Acatov whether he is too outwardly ugly for his feelings to shine through, Acatov replies, "What nonsense, [...] you're quite normal, quite, I imagine there are a lot of young women who would agree to go through life arm and arm with you – and who would never regret it"[496] [Какая чепуха, [...] вы совершенно

490 Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 144.

491 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 105.

492 Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 145.

493 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 106.

494 Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 145.

495 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 106.

496 Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 152.

нормальны, совершенно, я предполагаю, многие молодые женщины согласились бы пройти с вами по жизни рука об руку – и никогда бы не пожалели].[497] The reassurance is not that he's handsome or good-looking but that he's *normal*, that there's nothing fundamentally wrong with him and that there is a possibility of a full, fulfilling life ahead.

Norvegov, however, issues a warning:

> "although the indescribable howl that is being generated in the depths of your being is splitting you apart, and is ready to burst out at any instant, splitting and cracking you like an early April bud and turning you completely into your own shout – I Nymphea Nymphea Nymphea, eya-eya-eya, ya-ya-ya, a-a-a, – you cannot, you have no right to frighten this nice young woman. For if you do shout, she will drive you away…"[498]
>
> хотя тебя распирает вызревающий в глубинах твоего естества неописуемый вопль, и он готов вырваться наружу в любое мгновение, и тогда ты лопнешь и раскроешься подобно ранней апрельской почке и весь обратишься в свой собственный крик: я Нимфея Нимфея Нимфея ея-ея-ея я-я-я а-а-а, – ты не можешь, ты не имеешь права пугать эту молодую душевную женщину. Ибо если ты закричишь, она прогонит тебя прочь…[499]

This warning contains two lines of reasoning against the possibility of a relationship for Nymphea, whose identity is merged with his shout. The first is that he has no right to frighten her: positing that the very core of his being is inherently frightening or threatening, and that another's comfort takes priority over the threat of encountering abnormality. This is a pathologizing and normalizing impulse, as Norvegov displayed earlier in his reaction of disgust at Nymphea's shout, and contradicting his earlier charge to 'shout for yourself and for me, and for all of us, deceived, defamed, dishonored and stupefied, for us, the idiots and holy fools, the defectives and schizoids…' The second is a warning of consequence: if you do shout, she will drive you away. This driving away is consistent with the usual response of witnesses to a holy fool's disruptive, often frightening performance. It seems that for Norvegov, it is acceptable and imperative to shout 'for all of us'

497 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 111.

498 Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 164.

499 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 120.

impacted by the disabling systems of power that produce such injustice; what is not acceptable is to shout for personal reasons, in hopes of a fulfilling or even normal life.

All the same, Nymphea tells Acatov that he has no intention of stopping. He declares, just before declaring his intention to marry Veta, "I came to you not in order to shout into the barrel, although I am inclined to see exalted meaning in this occupation, and I will never give up shouting into barrels and with my shout I will fill the emptiness of empty chambers until I have filled them full, so it won't be excruciatingly painful… "[500] [я пришел к вам не для того, чтобы кричать в бочку, хотя в этом занятии я склонен видеть высокий смысл, и я никогда не брошу кричать в бочки и буду заполнять криком своим пустоту пустых помещений, покуда не заполню их все, чтобы не было мучительно больно…].[501] Whether it frightens away a future romantic interest or not, and no matter who the shout is for (if anyone), Nymphea will shout because it relieves pain, and both the relief of that pain and the filling of emptiness is an action that carries higher meaning.

The very ending of the novel, a conversation between the narrator and the author, affirms that shout. The section begins, "Student so-and-so, allow me, the author, to interrupt your narrative again."[502] [Ученик такой-то, позвольте мне, автору, снова прервать ваше повествование].[503] That address transforms by the end to the student's chosen name, and the prose maintains a mystical quality. "Let's go, – says Nymphea. Merrily grabbing and recounting pocket change, slapping each other on the shoulders and whistling foolish songs, we walk out into the polyped street and in some miraculous manner are transformed into passersby"[504] [Давайте, – говорит Нимфея. Весело болтая и пересчитывая карманную мелочь, хлопая друг друга по плечу и насвистывая

[500] Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 147-8.

[501] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 108.

[502] Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 228.

[503] Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 169.

[504] Ibid., *A School for Fools*, 228.

дурацкие песенки, мы выходим на тысяченогую улицу и чудесным образом превращаемся в прохожих].[505]

Concluding remarks

Nymphea's shout of a new type fills not only the empty barrel, the vessel primed and ready to hear it, but also rings above the quotidian business-as-usual of the dacha settlement with its disruptive force. Its self-naming and affirmation of 'I am' is not only an assertion of agency and worthiness in the context of an institution and family that sees him pathologically and possibly contagiously deviant, it is also a celebratory and unifying cry to the other students. Without ceding authority to narrate the shout, there is no one (with the possible exception of the reader) to render it horrifying or deviant. This is the same shout that sits at the overlap of holy foolery and crip perspectives: the disruptive and destabilizing shout of 'we are worthy.' As a holy fool and a disabled protagonist, Nymphea leads the reader to see the beauty and sanctity in what seems from a normative perspective to be frightening, ugly, sick, or disturbing.

Both the contrast of the shout *bacilli* with the shout of a new type and the contrast of scholarship on *A School for Fools* with life writing by psych disabled people bring to the forefront ethical considerations of speaking for the self and for others. It's our responsibility as literary critics to follow that lead, and to recognize and critically examine how our connections to others are cut short by the dehumanization of such normative pathologization of bodymind difference. Especially as, as Ben G. writes, we cannot achieve perfect empathy in understanding another person's experience, we have an obligation to hear the shouts of others – Docherty et al., Wang, people in our own lives – with compassion. In discussion of fiction, the way we speak of disability in the

505 Ibid., *Shkola dlia durakov*, 169.

imagination reflects and influences how we think of disability in life. Norvegov hears but misrepresents Nymphea's shout; our obligation is to do better.

Conclusion

This dissertation aims to answer the question: what is the role of the holy fool archetype in Russian literary constructions of ability and disability? Taking into account a range of texts varying in time period and genre, as well as a range of interpretive tools and perspectives from disability theory, I have identified some patterns in the overlap of holy foolery and disability. First, holy foolery has remained a relevant cultural phenomenon for authors centering bodymind difference in their works. Second, holy foolery is mobilized as a protesting counternarrative against social-political processes of compulsory normalization and pathologization of difference. Third, it operates as a provocative demand for people othered and marginalized by these processes of normalization and pathologization to be treated with full humanity, and to be recognized as worthy and sacred. Fourth, these functions of holy foolery in narratives about bodymind difference have a great deal in common with the purposes of contemporary disability theory; for this reason, disability is an effective and fruitful lens through which to study holy foolery in Russian literature.

In Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1831) and *A Comedy about Tsar Boris and Gishka Otrep'ev* (1824-5), the role of the holy fool in the literary construction of dis/ability is to embody truth in an environment structured around lies and rumors. The fool brings to the forefront tensions of truth in word and body and has the potential to disrupt a normative perspective on truth. In this chapter, I follow Chester Dunning and Caryl Emerson's recommendation to read both versions together without granting either canonical primacy, and I read the play(s) in the chronotope of Emerson's 'tragicomedy of history' as the genre formulation that best encompasses Pushkin's genre blending. The holy fool of *Boris Godunov*, Nikolka, is closely modeled on the prominent holy fool of folk legend, Nikola Salos, about whom Pushkin likely would have read in Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*. Pushkin's Nikolka is commonly read as a moral voice or anchor in the uncertain moral

landscape of the play, speaking for the people who, at least in the published version, do not speak for themselves as a collective. The narrative of the play relies on disability which is not represented (the epileptic tsarevich Dmitrii, the 'feeble-minded' Tsar Fedor I, etc.), with the notable exception of Nikolka, whose excessively-signifying bodymind difference is the core of his character. The holy fool functions as narrative prosthesis: he is not written with the same complex subjectivity as central characters such as Godunov and Otrepiev, but unlike other simple characters such as Shuisky or Varlaam, Nikolka's characterization is defined by his bodymind difference. The narrative of the play and much of its humor is built around pretending, lies, rumor, and misinformation. This unreliability of truth in word or speech is written in tension with truth located in the body. Nikolka the fool is a microcosm of that tension. He pretends to be mad for Christ's sake, but his pretending is holy rather than sinful. In an inversion of every other character, his word is a reliable sign in that he is understood to speak for the people or directly to Tsar Boris's conscience, but his body is an unreliable sign in that by his very role he is understood to be pretending. How characters interact with him, from the old woman's benevolence to the boys' cruelty to Boris's guilt, reveals the higher truth of their conscience even if the truth of fact (did Tsar Boris order the tsarevich to be murdered?) remains ambiguous.

In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868-9), the role of the holy fool in the creation of dis/ability is to counterweight the emergent processes of normalization of bodies in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. Dostoevsky himself was engaged in researching epilepsy in his personal life and closely followed European developments in medical knowledge. At this time, the paradigm shift of normativization resulted in broad pathologization of bodymind difference such as epilepsy (in contrast with earlier paradigms of *morbus sacer* as possession or a divine curse) and produced both a desirable, even imperative class of 'normal' citizens and undesirable classes of people regarded as defective or dangerous because of their abnormal bodies, including the medical institutionalization

of 'idiocy' and 'idiots' as a coherent group. By bookending *The Idiot* with Prince Myshkin's institutionalization in a Swiss sanatorium, Dostoevsky characterizes such normativizing and pathologizing processes as foreign (European) and morally suspect (Catholic and secular), in opposition to Orthodox Russianness. Myshkin himself is identified both in the narrative and by critics alternately as a holy fool and as an idiot (ill, defective, disabled); a satisfactory interpretation of this 'positively good man' must take into account both these elements of his character. The protagonist's abnormality creates disruption in the high society of St. Petersburg that considers him a child, a medical curiosity, dangerous, and an outsider; his holy foolish message of radical Christian love goes ignored by his 'normal' companions – including the novel's narrator – because it comes in the form of pre-seizure aura, pathologized and stigmatized as illness or madness. The novel does not present cure as a desired scenario for Myshkin; his return to Switzerland at the end is tragic, not hopeful. While Myshkin's disability brings him great pain, it also brings him to a complete, mystical awareness of self, God, and love.

In the posthumously-published poetry of Sophia Parnok (composed 1928-1933), including the Vedeneeva cycles *Ursa Major* (1932-33) and *Useless Goods* (1933), the role of the holy fool archetype is to anchor the chronically ill poet in a limitless timeline, stretching back from creation into the Heavenly kingdom, and to establish her place in a long lineage of Russian poet-prophets. A significant portion of current scholarship on Parnok works to examine the development of lesbian consciousness in the lyric persona; critical attention to the dynamic of illness provides a means to interpret the prevalent and sometimes strange element of temporality in Parnok's late poetry through crip time. In these late poems especially, advanced illness unmoors the lyric persona in time: she is young and old all at once, with an expectation of an early death and a sense of both running late and running out of time too early. The holy foolish role she takes on, in the particular form of the Romantic poet-prophet charged to burn wayward readers' hearts with the Word, brings that crip

experience of time into divine order and secures the poet a place in a poetic and spiritual tradition. When censors and publishers in her own time were unwilling to hear a voice like hers and she had no time left to wait, she sought to write in an 'eternal, timeless' language that would last forever. In *Ursa Major*, the poet grieves for the 'normal' life's timeline she could have had, and she seeks other possible ways of being in time in which she can live in sync with her beloved. The end of the cycle takes a turn toward doubt that the poet's earthly love is worthy of the divine poetic gift, that eternal language. *Useless Goods* brings that conflict between earthly time and eternal time to the forefront. It records a cyclical process of passion, grief, and distancing as the poet experiences a slow death from lifelong illness, bids farewell to her earthly love, and transitions into the next lifetime.

In Sasha Sokolov's *A School for Fools* (1973), the role of the holy foolish characterization of the multi-voiced narrator is to shout in a fuller expression of life and agency in a social and institutional system that views him primarily as a pathology. Holy foolery made a resurgence among postmodern writers and artists, who were compelled by the archetype's iconoclasm, apophasis, theatricality, and exposure of false perceived realities. While scholarship on *A School for Fools* extensively examines the novel's engagement with both postmodernism and spirituality, it does so at the expense of an ethical approach to bodymind difference. Whether explicitly or implicitly, it bases its understanding of mental illness on abusive psychiatric discourse, resulting in stigmatizing and eugenicist rhetoric alongside a treatment of psych disability as a purely narrative device for the purposes of aesthetic experimentation. This approach does not produce analysis useful for a reading from a disability justice perspective, and more importantly causes harm to psych disabled people in life. Psych disabled activists and scholars have pushed against this dehumanization, including of postmodern theory's appropriation of schizophrenia as a uniquely stable identity, since at least the 1970s, especially through life writing and other means of counternarrative. Since the scholarship on *A School for Fools* is largely inaccessible through its hostility to psychiatric survivors, this chapter

provides a model for analysis not built on psychiatric discourse. In Chapter Four, "Skeerly," the narrator declares the need for a "shout of a new type." He recalls an incident of shouting bacilli with transformative power in the specschool, but in appealing to his teacher and mentor, Pavl/Savl Norvegov, he loses the power of narrating the memory as Norvegov's voice takes over the narration. While Norvegov recognizes the power of the shout bacilli to unite other disabled characters, the Deaf furnace stoker and the specstudents, in shouting as well, he finds it horrific and disturbing. *Bacilli* is not the shout of a new type; when the narrator chooses to fill the empty barrel at Acatov's with the first thing that comes into his head, he shouts, *I'm Nymphea*, a self-naming that refines into a single sound, *a-a-a*. Like life writing by psych disabled people, the shout of a new type asserts the agency and full humanity of the speaker, who is so often spoken over.

This dissertation contributes a new approach to thinking about embodiment in Russian literature, through a theoretical framework hybridizing overlapping elements of holy foolery and disability theory. This crip-foolish framework also introduces crucial concepts from disability theory to scholarly conversations in Russian literature, building on existing work in Russian medical humanities and emphasizing justice for disabled people in life. The incorporation of holy foolery into a disability studies approach localizes the theoretical tools and makes their application to literary texts more attentive to cultural specificity; the incorporation of disability studies into an approach based in holy foolery brings to the forefront the political dimensions of bodymind difference. The two approaches overlap in a call to recognize the inherent worth of people marginalized by compulsory ablebodiedness and in a call to action against injustice. As a model for future scholarship, it provides just one method out of many possibilities for applying disability studies to Russian literature.

I plan to further develop and expand this project into a book publication, with several major revisions and additions. I expect it will be useful to develop the theoretical overviews on holy

foolery and disability studies into a chapter in its own right, in which I can examine in more detail, for example, key differences between holy foolery in hagiography and literature and efforts within disability studies to globalize the discipline beyond its original Western European and North American contexts. In future development there are many opportunities for expansion into twenty-first century texts, sampling from prose, poetry, or drama; one particularly promising direction is Liudmila Ulitskaia's novel *The Kukotsky Enigma* [*Казус Кукоцкого*, 2001], which invites a rich examination of bioresearch ethics and reproductive justice. In general, I plan to continue to pursue work at the intersections of Russian literary studies and disability studies and hope I can inspire others to do the same.

To fellow researchers, I strongly recommend familiarizing oneself with the topic of disability both in cultural studies and in life outside of research. In Slavic studies in particular, disability studies presents opportunities for intersectional nuance in both queer studies and postcolonial studies, as well as exemplifying the links between cultural production and social-political concerns so crucial to our discipline. Most importantly in my view, disability studies urges us to keep justice for living people in our own communities and far away at the heart of research in the humanities.

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