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## Revolutionary Ideologies and Poetic Realities: The Politics of Narrative Ambiguity in Twentieth-Century Russian and Mexican Fiction

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Revolutionary Ideologies and Poetic Realities: The Politics of Narrative Ambiguity in  
Twentieth-Century Russian and Mexican Fiction

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## Introduction

“From the beginning, revolutionaries were linguistic magicians.”  
—James Billington, “Fire in the Minds of Men” (105)

In times of revolution, reality becomes theatrical. Individuals develop into characters, and history becomes mythology. In essence, life transforms into a literalized fiction. Novels written during the time of revolution appear as surreal, fantastic, and altered versions of reality. However, these authors create ambiguous portraits of reality that comment on a socio-political actuality. By artistically utilizing novelistic devices which formally comment on thematic historical content artists and writers express a unique relationship to the concept of revolution.<sup>1</sup> Because revolutions seek to instigate a fundamental change in the political, social, or ideological nature of a nation, writers during times of revolution often artistically mirror this historical alteration within their literature. In this study, I investigate three works of fiction which formalistically present a complex relationship towards the idea of revolutionary transformation, in the Russian Revolution (1917) and in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).

Yuri Olesha’s *Envy* (*Zavist’* 1927), Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1950), and Andrei Platonov’s *The Potudan River* (*Reka Potudan’* 1937) all depict different representations of revolution as a socio-political concept, while employing similar narrative devices in order to create textual ambiguity. I investigate the intricate relationship between the artistic complexities of each text and the method in which they function politically. The artistic intricacies of these texts force, while simultaneously refuse, a strictly political or artistic interpretation. In this way, these works of fiction present revolutionary methods of narrative expression, problematizing any clear interpretation of their political or narrative content. These texts struggle to articulate ideas that resist conventional uses of language. The authors write these texts through a speech of

silence, through words that are limited by their meaning, through voices that do not know how to speak of an unimaginable world. What language exists for the inconceivable? How can established speech describe unprecedented realities? No conventional novelistic structure can organize the chaotic reality of the life that they seek to describe.

The importance of studying the ideologies, methodological implementation, and efficacy of revolutionary transformation cannot be understated. Revolutions write history. In all continents of the world since the beginning of time, revolutions, revolts and rebellions terminated an old order in favor of a new paradigmatic shift.<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric of our television programs, global newspapers, and Internet forums expresses the modern faith in revolution today.<sup>3</sup> The most recent Egyptian and Libyan Revolutions, in addition to the numerous ongoing revolutions throughout the Arab World—from Bahrain to Jordan, from Yemen to Iraq—conceptualize revolution as a means of positively activating change. To speak generally of revolutions is difficult and serves to elucidate little about their efficacy, since each revolution possesses its own goals, ideologies, and methods of implementation.<sup>4</sup> What is important in my investigation of the intersection between revolution and literature concerns the aesthetic portrait of the struggle with ideology and the problematic relationship with history. The citizens experiencing a revolutionary upheaval, like the characters in these revolutionary literary works, express the difficulty of existing in a world in-between worlds, a reality not yet formed, a past already destroyed.

In all three texts, the author, narrator and chronological plot are masked through language. This is done by creating multiple narrative voices, non-linear structure of times, unidentifiable narrators, a distinct lack of motivation in the characters, and a world view that is often further obfuscated behind hidden realities. By intentionally writing fiction that structurally

defies a linear narrative progression and any clear understanding of the characters, these authors create a narrative ambiguity that revolutionizes the politics of artistic representation. Within these stories, events are magical, characters are ghosts, and the plots are elusive. During a period of great political, social and existential uncertainty, these writers artistically express the ambiguous and chaotic life that surrounds them. Thus, these works thematically bind themselves to a specific historical revolution, while simultaneously revolutionizing language, narrative structure, and fantastical motifs to articulate the ineffable and the unknown.

In order to introduce my chapters effectively, the historical background of the Russian and Mexican Revolutions and the socio-political climate during which Olesha, Rulfo, and Platonov were writing must be explained. Each chapter of my study focuses on one of the three texts, which artistically reflects their political significance for the Russian Revolution or the Mexican Revolution. The first chapter explores Yury Olesha's novella *Envy*, a work that mirrors the political theatricality and ambiguous reality during the 1920s in Soviet Russia. The second chapter investigates Juan Rulfo's novella *Pedro Páramo*, a work that reevaluates the concept of revolution as a progressive transformation, specifically in the Mexican Revolution. The third and final chapter analyzes Andrei Platonov's *The Potudan River*, a text that delineates the after-effects of the Russian Revolution on the consciousness of its citizens, on the people's existential desire to keep living.

To address Olesha's novelistic and artistic successes, *Envy* requires knowledge of the historical context in which Soviet authors were writing and the literary critics' basis for judging literature. By the early twentieth century, art and literature in Russian society had become subordinated to political life. The political turmoil at the onset of the October Revolution of 1917 stifled the creative freedom of writers, artists, and intellectuals, which eventually led to

literature's devaluation with respect to the economic and social concerns of Marxist and Communist ideologies. Leon Trotsky, as one of the major political figures of the time, took on a dual role as both politician and literary critic, seemingly equating his political attitudes with his aesthetic criticism. Literature was only considered valuable insofar as it functioned as an instrument for state politics, a position that inherently rejected the artistic merit of novels in favor of literature that operated as political propaganda. In *Literature and Revolution* (1924), Trotsky claims "art can be revived only from the point of view of October. He who is outside of the October perspective is utterly and hopelessly reduced to nothing, and it is therefore that the wiseacres and poets...are nobodies" (25).

The new place of art in Russian culture was in no way determined by the leading intelligentsia or authors of the time, but rather imposed as a form of revisionism by political leaders. Trotsky's analysis of nineteenth-century Russian literary critic V.G. Belinsky's "historic role" as a critic conveys this revisionism, in which Trotsky repositions Belinsky in the twentieth century, transforming the role of a literary critic into one of a politician—ostensibly blending art with politics (Trotsky 209).<sup>5</sup> For Trotsky, as a foremost leader of socialism in Russia, the Party was what defined literary realism—if the art was not about or for the Revolution it was not art because it did not accurately reflect the Soviet values that the Party was promoting. The imposed political agenda functioned to subordinate the artistic merits of literature, by censoring literature's ability to express any non-political aspects of life.<sup>6</sup>

In Soviet Russia, literature operated as a pedagogical tool to instruct the masses on the new cultural values and ideologies of Communism during the 1920s. In 1925, the Politburo—which was the executive committee for the communist political party, whose members included I.M. Vareikis, Nikolai Bukharin, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Fedor Raskolnikov and Grigori



Lelevich—issued a statement regarding the Party policy on literature that modified Trotsky’s proposal to restructure literary and artistic organizations to fit the Party’s goals. The report, published in *Pravda* on July 1, 1925, provides a clear insight into how the Party viewed and shaped the production of art and literature in Soviet society:

Communist criticism must mercilessly fight counterrevolutionary manifestations in literature, expose changing-land-mark liberalism, etc., and at the same time display the utmost tact, caution, and tolerance with regard to all those literary strata which may join and are joining the proletariat. Communist criticism must drive out of its usage the tone of literary command. This criticism will only have a profound educative significance when it bases itself on its ideological superiority. (qtd. in Clark 43)<sup>7</sup>

By perceiving literature as either revolutionary or counterrevolutionary, the Party forced literature into an active political role. The Party treated art and literature as if they were an actualized threat. Literary strata sympathetic to the proletariat were treated with “utmost tact, caution, and tolerance.” On February 19, 1924, a critic for *Pravda* wrote: “we can and should regard literature as a weapon, and an altogether powerful weapon to affect the reader’s consciousness and will” (qtd. in Brooks 23). The Party sought a new form of literary criticism that judged literature not based on “the tone of literary command,” but rather on its “ideological superiority.” In this way, the Party defined good literature as necessarily presenting the “superior” communist values.

Many authors and artists during the 1920s faced harsh censorship and exile in the subsequent decade defined by Stalin’s Reign of Terror, such that their works were often condemned after their original publication.<sup>8</sup> If Soviet critics saw negative manifestations of Party politics in literature, then the authors faced slanderous reviews in the leading Soviet newspapers and were often deprived of their ability to write freely. During the 1920s when Olesha wrote *Envy*, and during the 1930s when reviews of the novella were becoming numerous, the author’s fate remained uncertain. In 1936, Olesha expressed concern for his future in light of the Party’s

violent reaction against a fellow artist: “In connection with the article in *Pravda* against Shostakovich, I am very concerned about the fate of my picture, which is supposed to come out on the screen any day now. My picture is many times more left-art than Shostakovich. What if they open fire on me with all their weapons?” (qtd. in Clark 478). Only one year after Olesha’s statement was printed, the Party’s response to Olesha was evident—the party confirmed Olesha’s fear for his fate as an author. The political censors condemned Olesha’s novella for its “antihumanism” and “reactionary stylistic tendencies” and halted further publication of *Envy* (Ingdahl 9). Furthermore, the government silenced Olesha, as the supposed creator of political blasphemy, by exiling him to Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan.<sup>9</sup> After WWII, Olesha returned to Moscow and was able to publish again in 1956, three years following Stalin’s death. Olesha died on May 10, 1960, leaving behind few published works, but ultimately escaping the political persecution that was inflicted upon many artists during his time.<sup>10</sup>

In many ways, *Envy* reflects the state of political uncertainty in Soviet Russia during the 1920s. The novel first appeared in 1927, a year in which the catastrophic future of the Soviet Union under Stalin remained uncertain, yet Russian society sought change from its legacy of political turmoil and relentless censorship.<sup>11</sup> For the group of individuals that Trotsky names the “fellow-travelers,”<sup>12</sup> the sense of being between two worlds was both a literal reality and a literary reality. Trotsky notes how, “in the dualism of the point of view of these ‘fellow-travelers,’ which makes them doubtful of themselves, there is a constant artistic and social danger” (58). Given the historical background of his novella, Olesha complicates the Party’s demand for an “ideologically conscious output of fine literature” (Clark 41) by avoiding any conclusive political statement. In Olesha’s novella, neither the bourgeois individualism of the old era nor the collective communism of the new era is favored. By exclusively interpreting

literature based on its political relevance, Trotsky ultimately denies novels any genuine artistic merit. The supposed ability of a novel to possess an “artistic” danger forces literature to reflect a political statement, since Trotsky equates a novel’s potential “social danger” with an “artistic” risk.

Given the historical context for literary criticism and the contested state of literature in Soviet Russia during the time when Olesha was writing *Envy*, the novella functions as both as an artistic expression and as a historical document from the time of the Revolution in Russian history. As critic Andrew Barratt states in *Yurii Olesha's Envy* (1981): “This was a period of nervous expectation...the power struggle amongst the party leaders had brought with it a disturbing spirit of extremism to many aspects of Soviet life, the signs of which were becoming more apparent with every month” (Barratt 2). In many ways, *Envy* accurately encapsulates the general atmosphere of 1927, seemingly conveying a truthful account of Soviet reality, yet paradoxically unlike the type of art that promoted the Party’s communist values—the type that Trotsky demanded.

Unlike Olesha’s work, Rulfo’s novella was not written during an on-going revolution and Rulfo did not face the same problems of censorship and the demand for artists to promote communist ideologies which artists living during the Russian Revolution were forced to endure. Important ideological differences between the Mexican Revolution and the Russian Revolution must be articulated in order to present Rulfo’s unique connection to the concept of revolutionary transformation. While Olesha writes during and about the ideological struggle in the Russian Revolution, Rulfo thematically speaks of the Mexican Revolution from a post-war perspective in order to artistically articulate a new postulation on the efficacy and limits of the Revolution. Rather than portraying a modernizing Mexico with the advent of industrialism and capitalism

during the middle of the twentieth century, Rulfo intentionally presents an image of Mexico that is not focused on the future, but rather on its revolutionary past. The fact that Rulfo wrote his novella three decades after the Mexican Revolution, attests to the ongoing need to revise the historical outcome and future implications of the Mexican Revolution. In this way, Rulfo's text imaginatively advocates for a redefining of the revolutionary paradigm as inherently *progressive*, by questioning whether the supposedly progressive nature of the Mexican Revolution truly radicalized and modernized Mexico, specifically in Mexico's marginalized peasant villages.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the repression of artistic creativity in favor of promoting communism in Russia, the Mexican Communist Party (founded in 1911), along with various other national communist parties (like the French Communist Party), called "for a new revolutionary aesthetic that would preserve the freedom of the artist" (Lewis 61). When Stalin declared in 1932 that artists and writers "are the engineers of the human soul,"<sup>14</sup> he empowered Soviet writers with the responsibility to construct the Soviet consciousness. Russia's Revolution, presented as a political and social revolution, was equally an enforced cultural revolution that strongly influenced the type of artistic production throughout the twentieth century. In contrast, the Mexican Revolution possessed varied political and social goals, and was far less concerned with artistic representations created during its Revolution.

In order to discern how Rulfo's artistic uniqueness provides a commentary on the Mexican Revolution, it is important to first define the original goals of the Mexican Revolution.

As Peter Calvert states in his essay "The Mexican Revolution: Theory or Fact?" (1969):

The precursors of 1910 said they wanted a social revolution in Mexico. People in ruling circles in Mexico today assume that they got what they wanted ... What was it that the precursors wanted? Some... wanted political power. Others believed that the redistribution of political power would follow a redistribution of wealth, and still others were concerned only with lifting the effect of political power from their own sector of interest, be it agrarian tenure or industrial organization. To achieve any of these ends it

was first necessary to terminate the authority of the regime of Porfirio Díaz. It was not, it should be noted, necessary in all cases to replace it with another comparable authority, yet that is in fact what has happened in the long term. (51-52)

The need to “terminate the authority of the regime of Porfirio Díaz” defines the socio-historical climate of Mexico in 1910 as inherently revolutionary. However, as Calvert expresses, many individuals in modern Mexico “assume that they got what they wanted,” which importantly raises the question of the efficacy of the Revolution. Because some of the social revolutionaries in Mexico “wanted political power,” the Mexican Revolution possessed an inherent struggle to effectively bring about revolutionary change for the entire nation. Once revolutionaries overthrew the political authority of the Díaz regime, the government was replaced “with another comparable authority,” suggesting not a social upheaval and violent political change, but merely the transferring of power from one regime to another.

Yet the Mexican Revolution presented itself as a specifically *progressive*, forward-thinking revolutionary movement that would instigate real social change, and not merely a titular alteration in political leadership. Historian Claudio Lomnitz, in *Death and The Idea of Mexico* (2005), describes the perception of the Mexican revolutionaries, who saw the Revolution as progressive and forward-looking: “The Mexican Revolution of 1910-20 thought of itself as giving birth to a ‘New Man.’ ... Salvador Alvarado, Yucatán’s revolutionary firebrand, represented the Mexican people as a slumbering giant, and the revolution as a sort of alarm clock that would make the people rise not to some new world-historical era but to its place at the table of progress” (Lomnitz 396). Similarly, Lomnitz expresses the desired progressive nature of the Mexican Revolution and its emphasis on the newfound use of technological innovations:

The scale of the killings was unprecedented, and it reflected in a perverse fashion the depth of Porfirian progress. The Mexican Revolution was the first Mexican war in which troops moved massively by rail. It was the first war funded by a booming export economy (guns for cattle, guns for oil). It was the first Mexican war that relied heavily on

movement and trade on the U.S. border. It was also the first to use photography and film as mechanisms of publicity. (384-85)

Despite the reliance on industrial progress and various uses of technology that were employed during Mexican Revolution, Rulfo's novella ignores these historical and technological advancements. In *Pedro Páramo*, Rulfo situates his story not in the year 1955—the year it was written—but in the midst of the Mexican Revolution during the early twentieth century. Rulfo further complicates the ability to historically ground his text by refusing to articulate any of the technological or scientific advancements that were so historically relevant to the Mexican Revolution. In this way, Rulfo's novella provides a commentary on the supposedly “progressive” nature of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>15</sup>

While the Mexican Revolution defined itself as progressive and forward-looking, the resultant changes in power did not demonstrate a radicalized new social order: “In many areas of Mexico, the Revolution destroyed traditional methods of social control only to a limited degree. The old networks of control were often simply appropriated by the ‘new men’ who emerged during the course of political struggle in the years following the overthrow of Díaz” (Carr 10). Current studies of the Mexican Revolution perceive the Revolution as being truly revolutionary “only to a limited degree.” Thus, Rulfo suggests a contemporary need to redefine revolutionary methodologies and question the efficacy of the Revolution by looking back to Mexico's ambiguous history. In Rulfo's work, the Mexican Revolution exists as the backdrop for his story, while it is simultaneously ignored—*as if* it had no effect on the characters in his work, as if, taken literally, the Mexican Revolution did little to change the living conditions of the poor agrarian communities in modern Mexico. In this way, *Pedro Páramo* presents a theory of revolution that proffers the revision of historical fallacies in the modern world.

The need for historical revisionism in the case of the Mexican Revolution can be partially ascribed to the ambiguity of the state authority. As Barry Carr states in his essay “Recent Regional Studies of the Mexican Revolution” (1980):

The weakening of the central state, particularly evident during the period of 1910-1917, created a power vacuum that was filled by new forms of authority exercised by a multitude of local military commanders, *cabecillas*, and *caciques*. Research on revolutionary *caudillismo* at least has been obliged to wrestle with a number of questions posed by this temporary fragmentation of the authority of the central state. A pivotal issue in the debate concerns the degree of continuity between the new forms of authority and those of the old Porfirian order. (3-4)

The new forms of authority that arose because of the weakening of the Mexico’s centralized government are questionably different from “those of the old Porfirian order.” Because of this, it is important to speculate about Mexico’s history and establish an accurate portrayal of the previous orders that the Revolution sought to overturn. As Carr later states, “the tendency to treat communities as discrete units on the margin of regional or national political and economic structures is another problem. As a consequence of this distaste for ‘historicism,’ relatively few village or community studies have made any effort to reconstruct the historical processes that have made the present what it is” (5-6). Because an accurate definition of a nation’s “present” circumstances is contingent on its past as well as its future goals, Mexico must “reconstruct the historical processes” in order to elucidate the present.

While Rulfo’s novella redefines “revolution” as a paradigmatic shift towards revising history in the Mexican Revolution, Platonov’s *The Potudan River* provides a critique of the effectiveness of the Russian Revolution. Platonov’s story comments upon the Soviet literary censorship employed during the Russian Revolution, specifically at the height of Stalin’s Reign of Terror. While Olesha’s novella and Platonov’s story were both written during the Russian Revolution, the narrative ambiguity of each work functions in politically different ways.

Platonov's story was written a decade after Olesha's novella—during a drastically different moment in the Russian Revolution. The cult of Stalinism reached its height in the 1930s, especially during 1936-1938 when Platonov wrote *The Potudan River*, which were years “marked by three show trials of leading Bolsheviks, and by the Great Purge” (Clark 139). While the Russian Revolution during the 1920s is characterized by political uncertainty in the wake of Vladimir Lenin's death in 1924 and Trotsky's excommunication in 1928, Stalin had risen to full power by the 1930s.

As historian Katerina Clark states in *Soviet Culture and Power* (2007): “From 1930 until his death in 1953 there was virtually not a single ideological (and therefore cultural) question before the Politburo in which the decision was not made by [Stalin], or was made without his knowledge (and therefore assent)” (140).<sup>16</sup> It is significant to note, however, that Stalin's rise to power was not the creation of a dictatorship. As Clark rightfully notes, several historical documents<sup>17</sup> “indicate a vote among Politburo members and though, admittedly, Stalin never lost the votes recorded here, still there are often votes cast for the opposing position” (140). Nonetheless, the thirties represented a turn in cultural policy towards nationalism, significantly reflected in the official imposition of Socialist Realism on literature.

The 1930s was a decade that drastically transformed the state of literature, both because of the official imposition of Socialist Realism and because the year 1937 marked the height of the Great Terror. Clark states:

On 23 April 1932, the Politburo passed a resolution that abolished all independent writers' organizations and founded the single Union of Writers, stipulating that analogous measures should be taken in all other branches of the arts. Thus in effect Socialist Realism was to be a “method” not just for literature but for an entire bureaucratically centralized culture. Culture and Soviet power were finally hitched together. (139)



By enforcing Socialist Realism<sup>18</sup> not only as a literary "method," but simultaneously for "an entire bureaucratically centralized culture," the literary definition of *realism* was equated with Party rhetoric. As a result, issues of censorship, investigations, and symbolic watchmen were more prominent during the 1930s in Soviet Russia: in its reality, and in its literature.<sup>19</sup>

While *Envy* reflects the political uncertainty during the 1920s and negotiates the destruction of an old order with the anticipatory arrival of a new era, *Pedro Páramo* expresses the need to revise Mexico's history and redefine the paradigm of the Mexican Revolution as inherently progressive. Standing in historical contrast to both of these novellas, *The Potudan River* elucidates the ambiguous nature of the past, present, and future of Soviet Russia during times of great uncertainty, without any hope for a positive future. As Clark states:

1936 saw another significant shift in cultural policy, the turn to nationalism. The Communist Party had come to power with an ideology that rejected the old regime and all it stood for, and the prerevolutionary regime was variously labeled a "prison of the ethnic nations," a hateful empire, a police state, and a backward country; but in this year a campaign was launched to struggle against what was called an "irreverent attitude towards the past." (249)

Like Mexico, Soviet Russia transformed its history into mythology. The "turn to nationalism" unified Soviet culture with Soviet power, established a single ideology that "rejected the old regime." Maxim Gorky, head of the Soviet Writers Union, attempted to create cultural competence through the publication of encyclopedias detailing very recent historical accounts, which illustrate the transformation of history into cultural myth. Clark states: "We will also note Gorky's proclivity for encyclopedism, for putting out series of books that were intended to provide a comprehensive history of some sociological category or event. Gorky instituted and headed a number of such ventures after his return to Soviet Russia, *History of the Civil War* being, predictably, the most important" (Clark 180). Like Gorky, Platonov provides a portrait of

the Russian Civil War in his story, which he ambiguously frames as the soldiers' return from war.

Ultimately, the imposition of Socialist Realism on national literature, and the fictionalization of Russia's history, culminates in the terrifying accounts of the arrests and purges. Despite the documented regulations of Socialist Realism that detailed the consequences of censorship, exile, or even death throughout the 1930s, "the expressed attitudes on the part of intellectuals towards the Soviet regime were generally not the reason for their arrest. Otherwise put... there was a strong element of the arbitrary in who was repressed and who not" (Clark 318). In this way, Platonov's story critiques the methodology of the Soviet Party whose arrests of artists and intellectuals was not based on factual evidence against them but rather on "a strong element of the arbitrary." Likewise, Mikhail Svetlov—a Soviet poet—expresses the terrifying account of artists living in Russia during the 1930s:

What's going on? They are nabbing everyone, literally everyone. It's terrifying. The arrests are assuming hyperbolic dimensions. The Peoples' Commissars and their dep[uties] have moved to Lubyanka [headquarters of the secret police]. But what is both ludicrous and tragic is that we are walking around as this is going on and don't understand a thing. Why, what is it for? All I understand is that there has been an epochal shift, that we already live in a new epoch, that we are just the pitiful remnants of the epoch that has died, that there is nothing left of the old Party, there's a new Party with new people. They have replaced us. ... These are not court trials but organized killings, so what then could we expect from them? There's no Communist Party any more, it has been transformed and has nothing in common with the proletariat. (qtd. in Clark 318)

Platonov lived, wrote, and ultimately was silenced in this world of "hyperbolic dimensions" in which not even its citizens could "understand a thing."<sup>20</sup> What Platonov's work most effectively discusses is how "the practical problems of people everywhere are proving ever more untouched by the arrogant simplicity of the revolutionary faith. Simply to survive, humanity may have to find ways of evolving beyond revolution and even beyond politics" (Billington 111). Olesha's novella tries to negotiate revolutionary change, Rulfo's work redefines the essence of

revolutionary transformation, and ultimately, Platonov's text suggests that revolutions can inhibit survival. In this way, for these three authors writing about times of revolution, ambiguity functioned both as their primary aesthetic principle and as their historical reality. Now that I have discussed the historical background for the Russian Revolution during the 1920s pertinent to Olesha's text, the concerns of the Mexican Revolution relevant to Rulfo's novella, and the changed climate of the Russian Revolution for Platonov's story, I can recapitulate my arguments for each chapter in this study.

In my first chapter, I discuss Olesha's artistic expression of the tension between the destruction of the old world after the October Revolution (1917) and the expectant dawn of a new era—a period that lived in nervous anticipation of the horrifying reality to come. *Envy* circumvents the prescribed purpose of Soviet literature to depict pro-communist themes by presenting an ambiguous relationship to Soviet reality in 1927. *Envy* complicates the thematic problem of family dynamics in the new era. Through the use of linguistic mirroring, Olesha's characters blur together, creating a collective family. Similarly, Olesha subordinates the literal events of the novella to poetic, dreamlike diversions within the story. This act of subordination ostensibly mirrors Trotsky's subordination of literature in favor of politics. Yet, Olesha simultaneously problematizes a simplistic application of revolutionary themes in the novella by *mimicking* the Party's political tactics via the non-linear structuring of time within the text, while intentionally creating an ambiguous relationship to the Party's beliefs. *Envy* presents both pro-Soviet characters and anti-Soviet characters, thus complicating any obvious political interpretation of his work. Through these multiple acts of subordination—individual families to a collective Soviet family, and the literal events of the story to poetic diversions—Olesha's work artistically echoes the subordination of art to politics in Soviet Russia. Likewise, Olesha blurs

chronological time with narrative time in *Envy* in order to subordinate the plot of the story to the *process* of writing. In this way, Olesha revolutionizes artistic representations of historical realities, in order to represent the literal Revolution surrounding him.

Once I discuss the theme of family dynamics in the new era, and the non-linear structuring of time in Olesha's story that obfuscates the plot, I discuss how *Envy* uses language to write history in two ways. Firstly, Olesha obfuscates the fictional history of his characters within his story, resisting a comprehensible portrayal of the past for the reader. Secondly, Olesha thematically discusses historical realities in Soviet Russia within his fictional work. However, by writing Soviet Russian history in his novella, Olesha parodies the rewriting of history. In this way, Olesha presents *Envy* and Soviet history as mirrors of each other. Similarly, Olesha employs linguistic and thematic repetition in his novella to retell the same fictional events in his work—essentially rewriting the narrative history of his own text—thereby providing a meta-textual commentary on his work. By retelling the same events in his novella at various moments in the narrative, Olesha shows not a progression in the narrative, but rather the use of repetition to alter the meaning of repeated phrases. In this way, *Envy* lacks a singular understanding of its plot. Ultimately, Olesha presents the political reality during the 1920s in Soviet Russia as inherently theatrical.

In my second chapter, I explore the artistic ambiguities in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. Rulfo obscures the main thematic oppositions in the novella, by blurring silences and voices, memory and forgetting, the living and the dead. By obfuscating the distinction between the characters' existence as dead versus alive, Rulfo creates a collective voice that destroys the characters' individual existences metaphorically. Additionally, the uniquely fragmentary structure of Rulfo's work eliminates the distinction between the main thematic oppositions.

Rulfo creates an indefinite distinction among the main oppositions in his text, in order to mirror the agency and *paradoxical limits* of the dead characters in his work. The destruction of individual existences that occurs metaphorically through the repetitions in diction, the fragmentation of the narrative structure, and the non-linear construction of narrative time within the novella creates a collective voice among all of the characters. However, in the second half of the novella, the destruction of individual existences occurs *literally* within the work, as it is revealed to the reader that all of the characters are dead (and have been dead) since the beginning of the text.

Yet once it is revealed that the characters are dead, Rulfo gives agency to the dead to revise their past history. In death, the dead characters can speak, recount memories, and have their voices heard, thus providing multiple versions of their past history in the narrative. In this way, Rulfo gives agency to the dead to question historical fallacies. The blurring of oppositions in the first half of the novella—in which the characters are ambiguously presented as dead or alive—reverses the use of oppositions in the second half of the text. Once the characters know themselves to be dead and acknowledge their ghostly existences to the reader, Rulfo provides his dead characters with the agency to *mediate* conflicting oppositions *in death*, in their present post-mortem state.

The title character of Rulfo's novella represents a typical revolutionary *cacique* during the Mexican Revolution. By negotiating conflicting perspectives of the town's history in the narrative—a town ruled by a corrupt *cacique*—Rulfo questions the historical representation of the Revolution. Rather than looking forward towards an optimistic future, from the onset of Rulfo's novella, the characters seek to understand their past, to revise history. In this way, Rulfo questions the nature of the Revolution as *progressive* and creates a paradigmatic shift that seeks

to revise history, rather than looking towards the future for revolutionary change. Yet by making his characters capable of possessing agency to revise historical fallacies only in *death*, Rulfo exposes the limits of agency given to silenced voices: only within the fantasy of the dead being heard can history be revealed. Ultimately, Rulfo blurs thematic oppositions through a mirroring of language, fragmentation of narrative structure, and ambiguous textual plot, to create a fantastic story that necessitates an impossibility (the dead speaking) in order to create an artistic and symbolic paradigmatic shift. In Rulfo's work, agency requires death, while death renders any agency given to his characters literally impossible. Therefore, Rulfo revolutionizes fantastical motifs in order to question the nature of the Mexican Revolution as inherently progressive.

In chapter three, I discuss the narrative ambiguities in Andrei Platonov's *The Potudan River*. His text employs a subjective and unknown narrator to control the identities of the characters and to misrepresent the world in the story. Because the language of the narrator is intentionally in opposition to the content of what is being narrating, Platonov creates an uncertain understanding of the main events in his text. In this way, the plot of Platonov's text is subordinated to the inability to articulate the narrative. By employing contradictions, false assumptions, and intentional misrepresentations of the characters, the narrator symbolically represents the voice of Soviet authority. The narrator attempts to silence the characters' individual identities in favor of imposing a single, collectivized identity.

However, only once the narrator ostensibly silences the main character—who, interestingly, seemingly desires to censor himself—is the main character given agency again. While the narrator assumes that the main character desires to live even while he is silenced, Platonov presents his main character with an apathetic attitude towards life. By failing to provide either a reason why the characters should keep living or a method for how they can continue to

exist, the narrative voice represents the failure of the Soviet regime to account for the lives of its citizens. By presenting characters that are silenced by the narrator, Platonov's story is effectively neither anti-Soviet nor pro-Soviet. Without a voice, one cannot articulate an opinion about the Revolution. Ultimately, Platonov's work suggests that nothing came of the catastrophe of Revolution. Chaos invoked stasis.

## Chapter 1 The Doubling of History and Literature: A battle for truth in Olesha's *Envy*

I would like to say something else now. I am talking about things which seem negligible, and I am ignoring public events. These events were very important and they occupied my attention all the time. But now they are rotting away, their story is dead, and the hours and the life which were then mine are dead too. What is eloquent is the passing moment and the moment that will come after it. The shadow of yesterday's world is still pleasant for people who take refuge in it, but it will fade. And the world of the future is already falling in an avalanche on the memory of the past. —Maurice Blanchot, *Death Sentence* (46)

Yuri Olesha's *Envy* (*Zavist'* 1927) intentionally employs ambiguities in the text to defy any conclusive interpretation, thereby establishing the novella as one of the most significant artistic and socio-political works in Soviet Russian literature. Divided in two parts, the novella artistically expresses the struggles of a young man, Nikolai Kavalеров. Resisting the communist values of the approaching era, Kavalеров yearns for the sentimentalism he lost in the old era. The first half of the novella is told from Kavalеров's subjective consciousness. He perceives the world around him through a poetic lens, artistically describing any of the literal actions throughout the first section of Olesha's work. After drunkenly being thrown out of a saloon, Andrei Babichev—a model Soviet citizen—picks Kavalеров off the streets and brings him to his home, where Kavalеров works for Babichev as a copyeditor. Kavalеров envies Babichev's successes in the new world, as Kavalеров struggles to find acceptance in the unemotional and uncertain future of the new world. The second half of the novella, told from the subjective perspective of an unidentified narrator, describes the relationship between Babichev, Kavalеров, and Babichev's brother, Ivan. With Ivan, Kavalеров seeks revenge for everything he lost in the old era: the sentimentalism, the emotions, the family, and individuality. Kavalеров becomes a part of Ivan's "conspiracy of emotions," which seeks vengeance for the old era that was like a



mother to them and take revenge for himself against Babichev and a man named Volodya, who represents the ideal Soviet youth: strong, impersonal, and mechanical. By the end of the novella, the plot of Olesha's work remains unclear, as the main events in the text are recounted multiple times from numerous perspectives. Ultimately, Olesha's work describes the difficulty of artists caught between two worlds: between the end of an old era, and the approaching revolutionary arrival of Soviet collectivism.

In a 1935 review of "Current Russian Literature," Gleb Struve discusses the reception of *Envy* by Soviet critics: "There was an air of novelty and freshness about this novel and an accent of compelling sincerity and earnestness, which made the bulk of Soviet criticism welcome it most enthusiastically—it was only on second thought that the orthodox Communist critics began to have their misgivings about its social and political purport and import" (Struve 644). The presumed "sincerity and earnestness" in the novella speaks to the authentic artistic structure in *Envy*, rather than its uncertain political conviction. *Envy* does not frankly favor the communist values inherent to Andrei's character, nor the values of the old era imbued within Ivan's character. Yet, Struve's review of the novella intimates that *Envy* promotes the new era, ultimately giving Olesha a positive review. Struve writes: "The new triumphs over the old. But the problem of the place of certain human feelings and values in the Communist society, which occupies Olesha, remains unsolved. In the conflict between the individual and the collective, between Romanticism and Realism, the apparent victory is on the side of the collective and of Realism" (347). Essentially, Struve defines the only ambiguity in *Envy* as the emotional uncertainty regarding where "the place of certain human feelings" can exist in the new era, and the problem ultimately "remains unsolved." However, I perceive Olesha's novella as purposefully resisting the arrival at any definite political statement by ambiguously presenting

both sides of all oppositions in the text. It is possible that Struve strategically wrote this positive review in order to safeguard Olesha from the Soviet critics, who over time, “began to suspect him of a deliberately distorted portrayal of the *new* in the Revolution” (Struve 648). The “deliberately distorted” representation of the new era in *Envy* ought to have instigated extreme contention among Soviet critics, in light of Russian society’s historical feelings of both respect and fear of art’s ability to shape the minds of its citizens.

The primary themes of Olesha’s novella are all of a seemingly political nature. *Envy* is primarily structured as a dispute between oppositions: the individual versus the collective, man vs. machine, capitalism vs. communism, the family home vs. the political family, artist vs. worker, romantic emotions vs. indifference, idealism vs. realism, and the old era vs. the new era. The ambiguity produced by the constant fluctuation between these oppositions cause the reader to struggle for understanding, feel unsure of whom to trust, and uncertain of what to believe. In this confusion for the reader, the novella echoes the leading Soviet newspaper of the times, *Pravda*, in its obfuscation of truth that favored “revolutionary pedagogy” (Brooks 23). In this sense, *Envy* mirrors the reality of Soviet Russia in the 1920s, which denied the public any clear and truthful account of its leaders or the living conditions of its citizens, ultimately failing to provide its people with the most basic human right: freedom.

However, a strictly political interpretation would deny *Envy* its novelistic merit as art, and further problematize the role of the literary critic as a social commentator. In this chapter, I question how Olesha both adheres to and artistically resists conveying the type of literature that the leaders of the Party demanded from its writers. Through the political symbolism of family dynamics, Olesha advocates for an artistic revolution in the coming decade. Olesha fights in this artistic revolution by defying normative modes of storytelling, through the deliberate disjuncture

between *Envy's* narrative time (the movement of time, as the reader experiences the novella) and the chronological progression of plot (the time within the novella's story). Furthermore, Olesha utilizes the displacement of time and plot in the structure of *Envy* to provide a space to discuss the problems of historicity—both in terms of how the novella presents its own history and in terms of how the novella portrays a parodic version of Soviet history. Ultimately, Olesha redefines *reality* in his novella by presenting Soviet political reality as intrinsically theatrical.

In the following section, I discuss Olesha's use of metaphorical language to describe Kavalеров, Babichev, and Ivan's feelings about the future place of family and home in the new era. Kavalеров, the twenty-seven year old artist in Olesha's novella, faces numerous political, social, and artistic struggles—like the author himself.<sup>1</sup> Kavalеров shares the same age as both the author himself—Olesha was twenty-seven when he wrote *Envy*—and the year in which he lives, 1927. In this regard, Olesha intrinsically ties Kavalеров to his own identity as an artist and to his existence in the particular space and time of Moscow in 1927. Many critics interpret Kavalеров's struggle to find a place in the new world as ultimately favoring the communist party. Indeed, through a straightforward analysis of the text, some critics have interpreted the character of Andrei Babichev as Kavalеров's savior in the new world, who provides Kavalеров with a sofa to sleep on and supposedly functions as his replacement father. Yet, a closer analysis of the relationship between Kavalеров, as wholly representative of the old era, and Babichev, as representative of the ideologist promoting the new era's values, yields a more complicated relationship at work. In his novella, Olesha reverses the relationship between Kavalеров and Babichev: the *young* Kavalеров is nostalgic for the *old* era, while the *old* Babichev excitedly prepares for the *new* decade. I will elucidate this relationship by discussing how the various interactions among all the characters in the novella are problematic, because Olesha blurs,

inverts, or obfuscates the distinction between characters that possess a personal relationship versus a political bond with one another—often reversing the normative expectation.

## I. Family Dynamics and Finding a New Home—The individual’s struggle for existence in the new era

Despite the attempts of many critics to view Olesha’s novella as either conforming to or defying an accurate representation of the Soviet family, in fact Olesha complicates the problem of family dynamics by portraying the problem ambiguously and refusing to provide a solution. Critic Milton Ehre, in his essay on “Utopia and Dystopia in Olesha’s *Envy*,” suggests that Kavaleroov views Babichev as his surrogate father, Babichev’s sofa as his replacement bed, and the new life Babichev offers him as a utopia. Ehre states: “The sofa he offers to the homeless Kavaleroov (and later to Volodya) is a simulacrum of paradise, a Cockaigne of milk and honey: ‘I observe...how the ringing bubbles from the submerged depths become rolling grapes, how a succulent bunch of grapes springs up, an entire vineyard thick with bunches, a sunny road beside the vineyard, warmth’” (603). While Ehre’s analysis rightly points out Kavaleroov’s struggle to find security in the new era, Ehre wrongly interprets Kavaleroov’s observations of the sofa as a paradisiacal utopia. Ehre’s analysis is heavily based on the paradisiacal connotations of the words “ringing bubbles,” “rolling grapes,” “succulent,” etc., while wholly ignoring the larger context in which this speech from Kavaleroov is taken. Instead of describing Babichev’s sofa as a paradisiacal replacement bed, Kavaleroov artistically imagines the couch as a canvas to express his inner thoughts:

На диване я совершаю полет в детство. Меня посещает блаженство. Я, как ребенок, снова распоряжаюсь маленьким промежутком времени, отделяющим первое изменение тяжести век, первое посолование от начала настоящего сна. Я снова умею продлить этот промежуток, смаковать его, заполнять угодными мне мыслями и, ещё не погрузившись в сон, ещё применяя контроль бодрствующего сознания, —уже видеть, как мысли приобретают сновиденческую плоть, как пузырьки звона из подводных глубин превращаются в быстро катящиеся виноградины, как возникает тучная виноградная гроздь, целая ограда, густо замешанные виноградные гроздья; путь вдоль винограда, солнечная дорога, зной... (18)

[On the sofa I fly off into childhood. Bliss descends upon me. Like a child, I again know that brief interval of time between the initial drooping of eyelids, the first dropping off, and the beginning of real sleep. Once again I can draw out that interval, savor it, fill it with thoughts that suit me, and before I plunge into sleep, still exercising control over my waking consciousness, I can see my thoughts take on the flesh of dreams, transformed like bubbles rising from deep underwater to turn into fast rolling grapes, a hefty bunch of grapes, a whole fence full of thickly tangled bunches: a path alongside the grapes, a sunny road, heat... (28)]

The sofa itself does not provide the comforts of home, but rather exists as a site for his fantasies; his “thoughts that suit” him essentially transform into symbolic food. Interestingly, Kavalero’s thoughts are described as being “thickly tangled” and “rising from deep underwater,” inherently suggesting his inability to communicate—perhaps artistically—his perceptions. The sofa can be viewed, as Ehre argues, as a paradise, in the sense that the sofa gives Kavalero a place to express his inner thoughts and exercise control over his “waking consciousness.” However, the bed offers no comforts of abundance, which is Ehre’s main point. In fact, the release of his thoughts (which turn into dreams) suggests a complicated mix of “tangled” emotions and perceptions. Olesha does not describe Kavalero as feeling at home.

In his essay “The Theme of Sterility in Olesha’s *Envy*,” critic William Harkins notes another way in which family dynamics transform in the coming era. Harkins’ analysis interprets Andrei’s communist utopia as a political family, in which the state becomes transformed into mother and father. Ehre, in dialogue with Harkins, incorporates a Freudian analysis, suggesting

that in Babichev's transformation of the family unit, "Babichev unwittingly introduces the deadly anxieties of what Freud called 'the family drama' into the utopian quest. If Babichev's utopia is the projection of a child's fantasy of unlimited nourishment and omnipotence, it also carries along with it all the terrors of childhood" (Ehre 604). Ehre's incorporation of Harkins' analysis sheds great light on the ambiguous struggle between family and politics in *Envy*.

Harkins explains:

Does Andrei seek to destroy the family because he himself has no family? In his youth he became a radical and went abroad, leaving the home of his mother and father, a priggish and conservative high-school principal. His radicalism may well have originated as a revolt against family ties. And now we grasp the underlying principle behind his career and his goal: by assuming for himself the role of mother as well as father, he seeks to eliminate these functions and relationships in private life. The state itself shall become mother and father. (Harkins 446)

However, this is not Babichev's utopia. Rather, it is Kavalero and Ivan who seemingly transform the state into mother and father. Inversely, Babichev transforms the state into a literal son—but wholly symbolic not of a family member, but symbolic of his love for the state.

Babichev, Kavalero, and Ivan all possess a shared vision that the state represents the maternal, by providing nourishment and security. It is not Babichev who views the coming of the new era as a paternalistic utopia, but Ivan and Kavalero—except, that for them, the old era is seen as a mother to them, and since its destruction they have sought vengeance for their lost parent. Ivan discusses the envy that comes with the burgeoning of a new era as he mentions to Kavalero both of their maternal relationships to the old world: "Вы расплату за себя можете соединить с расплатой за эпоху, которая была вам матерью...Почетно оставить о себе память как о наемном убийце века. Прищемите вашего врага на пороге двух эпох" (71) [You can combine revenge for yourself with revenge for the era that was a mother to you... Leave behind an honorable memory of yourself as your era's hired assassin. Squeeze your enemy between one

era and the next (104-105)]. In their plan, Kavalеров and Ivan metaphorically wish to capture their enemy (Andrei and Volodya, respectively), to retain them between two worlds, between “one era and the next.” This plan would metaphorically destroy the new era that Andrei is building, the new era that Volodya’s character symbolizes.

In his essay, Ehre presents the problematic contradiction of simultaneously desiring a personal family, while viewing the state as the new collective family. When speaking of Babichev, Ehre states: “Nostalgic for family life, aching for a son, he seeks not so much to destroy the family as to project it into political life” (Ehre 604). However, by projecting the family into the political sphere Babichev seeks to destroy the concept of a family. By changing the essential nature of individual families into one collective family where the state functions as both mother and father (as Ehre continues to explain), Babichev does seek to destroy the family, or at least the old era’s definition of *family*. When Kavalеров first hears of Volodya, Babichev describes the man as like a son to him. Yet, Babichev’s short and fragmented speech describing Volodya, ultimately fragments his life story, destroying the previous familial bond between Volodya’s true father and Babichev as his replacement father in the new era: “—Да нет. Просто молодой человек. Студент. Вы спите на его диване, — сказал он. — Дело в том, что это как бы сын мой. Десять лет он живет со мной. Володя Макаров. Сейчас он уехал. К отцу. В Муром” (13-14) [Oh, you know. Just a young man. A student. You’re sleeping on his sofa, he said. In point of fact, he’s like a son to me. He’s lived here for ten years. Volodya Makarov. He just went away. To see his father. In Murom (22)]. If the family represents a group of people inherently connected by an ancestral lineage, then Babichev desires to destroy the old era’s concept of a family by redefining *family* as a group of individuals who share a common place, not a common blood.

Rather than describing this man who is supposedly like a “son” to him, Babichev qualitatively lists Volodya’s general characteristics, which lack any semblance of sentimentality or feeling of longing towards Volodya who is “just” a young man, and yet simultaneously is “like a son.” By breaking up Volodya’s history into fragmented generalities, Babichev removes all sentimentalism and lovingness, as if he were simply listing facts, not describing at great length and with great passion this remarkable man, whom he considers to be like a son to him. Likewise, Babichev harbors these youths not with a specific intention to destroy the family, but with the intention of making them a part of his new collective family. Babichev’s dream for a collective family directly relates to the communist ideals of a collective society, specifically rejecting any bourgeois individualism of the prerevolutionary times. Babichev imagines Volodya as the ideal youth who looks up to the Soviet state as its family, not to any individual person.

Interestingly, Volodya looks up to Babichev as his ideal model for the Soviet man, just as Babichev views Volodya as an ideal youth. In a letter he writes to Babichev, Volodya idealizes Babichev as his savior: “Как хочется с тобой поговорить! Подражаю тебе во всем. Чавкаю даже, как ты, в подражание. Сколько раз думаю о том, что вот-де как повезло мне! Поднял ты меня, Андрей Петрович” (43) [How I wish I could talk to you! I imitate you to my utmost. I even chomp and chew like you do. So many times I’ve thought about how lucky I’ve been! You lifted me up, Andrei Petrovich (64)]. Although Volodya’s letter presents an ostensibly sentimental attitude towards Babichev, the emphasis on *imitation* intrinsically connotes a collective society where no man individually stands out. Volodya’s imitation of Babichev does not suggest that he views Babichev as his role model, but rather that Volodya views Babichev as the catalyst for the communist transformation of individuals in society—through imitation, all men share a single identity. In this way, both Volodya and Babichev look to each other to lose



their individual identities, as both characters view the other as representative of the ideal Soviet man. The father-son relationship no longer possesses a hierarchy of power. Rather, both father and son mutually depend on one another for imagining the political future of the Soviet state as communist. Although Babichev and Volodya rhetorically identify the other as a son and father figure respectively, the basis for their familial relationship lies in the political world as the new state family, not the old era consisting of individual families.

Replacing an old father with a new surrogate is a recurrent theme in the novella,<sup>2</sup> suggesting a further displacement between the old era's concept of family and the new era's politicized family.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Kavaleroev acts as the surrogate for the son of the new era, Volodya, but only on the basis that Babichev was content that “диван не пустовал” (75) [the sofa was not going empty (110)]. This suggests not a dehumanization of society in the new era, but rather a repositioning of societal values—Babichev is still humane, since he was not obligated to pick Kavaleroev off the streets. His only motivation was the sentimental remembrance of Volodya, which functions as the reason why Babichev stopped the car:

“Напоминание об отсутствующем слетело к нему с того, лежащего на решетке. Оно приказало ему дернуться и нагнуться к шоферу. «Да ничего же нет между ними общего!» — едва не воскликнул Андрей. И действительно, никакого не было сходства между лежащим и отсутствующим. Просто он живо представил себе Володю” (75) [The man on the grate reminded him of the absent man. He jerked to attention at the sight and leaned toward the driver. No, they have nothing in common, Andrei nearly cried out. And indeed, there was no similarity between the man lying there and the man who was absent. It was simple: he had a vivid picture of Volodya in his mind (109)]. Babichev's sentimental reaction towards Kavaleroev, who “reminded him” of Volodya, intimates Babichev's familial relationship to the state.

Babichev does not rescue Kavaleroov in the new world, but rather momentarily mistakes him for “the absent man,” Volodya. By confusing the man of the new world (Volodya) for the man who yearns for the old world (Kavaleroov), Olesha vis-à-vis the character of Babichev describes the lack of individualism in the new era, as Babichev strips both characters of their individual identities.<sup>4</sup>

Olesha’s decision to create a protagonist who desires individuality in the new world, and who is not realistically described as living happily, seemingly works against Trotsky’s conception of what fine literature should depict. Kavaleroov feels an expectation to be happy and grateful for Babichev’s help in the new era, which directly mirrors “the elevation of gratitude and dependence” (Brooks 27) on political leaders in Soviet Russia. Brooks notes, “Stalin was the ultimate beneficiary of this theft of agency from individual citizens, and his supremacy was epitomized in the 1930s by the slogan, ‘Thank You, Comrade Stalin, for a Happy Life’” (27). Although the slogan did not take solid form until the 1930s, the idea that ordinary individuals owed something to the communist party for their well-being was present throughout the 1920s. However, Kavaleroov does not ultimately adopt a similar gratuitous attitude towards Babichev, suggesting that the anarchist character of Kavaleroov represents an anti-communist protagonist. Yet, the choice to make an ostracized artist the protagonist of the novella (at least for the first half of *Envy*) is complicated by the reader’s empathetic attraction towards Kavaleroov and simultaneous pitying of this rejected, dejected man.<sup>5</sup>

Kavaleroov and Ivan’s struggle for acceptance in the new era expresses their inability to regain what they lost in the old era. Constantly focused on their own individualism, their personal fights against the new era, Ivan and Kavaleroov lost the genuine sentimental values of the old era and now exist between two worlds: living partially in the lost old world of feelings

and partially in the new world where they struggle to become fully acclimated into society.<sup>6</sup> Ivan represents the old era in his sentimentalism, yet he does not seem to fight for his daughter, for her return to their family together. Ivan still upholds the façade that he is fighting for the family he lost, although it is clear that he does not actually desire it anymore—his fight is merely a show, a carnival, an act, since his fight is futile. When Ivan goes to Valya’s window, he tells her, “— я за тобой пришел” (21) [I’ve come for you (33)]. Ivan does not wait for Valya’s reply, but rather runs away when she tries to reach him:

— Я прошу тебя, Валя, вернись! Просто: сбеги по лестнице.  
Он подождал.  
Остановились зеваки.  
— Не хочешь? Ну, до свидания.  
Он повернулся, поправил котелок и пошел серединой переулка в мою сторону.  
— Подожди! Подожди, папа! Папа! Папа!  
Он ускорил шаги, побежал. Мимо меня. Я увидел: он не молод... Смешноватый, полненький человек бежал с подушкой, прижатой к груди. Но ничего в том не было безумного. (21-22)

[I beg you, Valya, come back. It’s easy: run down the stairs.  
He waited.  
Gawkers were stopping.  
Don’t you want to? Well then, goodbye.  
He turned around, righted his bowler, and started down the middle of the street in my direction.  
Wait! Wait, Papa! Papa! Papa!  
He picked up speed and began to run. Past me. I saw he wasn’t young... A silly-looking, tubby little man was running with a pillow pressed to his chest. But there was nothing crazy about it. (33)]

However, textual evidence supports my view that it is not Babichev (as Ehre states), but rather his brother Ivan who is blatantly nostalgic for family life. Holding his daughter’s pillow against his chest, Ivan pleads for Valya from a distance: the distance of the old era that is unreachable, as he feels compelled to run away when she tries to catch up. Raised completely in the new era, Valya’s father cannot rescue her and he clearly does not want to. Despite his obvious pleas for her to return, despite his supposed “begging” for her to “come down,” Ivan gives up and walks

away without even fighting for Valya. Ivan begs Valya to return home, but conceals his nostalgia for family life, by “running” away from her as if he did not care. Nevertheless, Ivan ultimately exposes his nostalgia for the daughter he lost, by sentimentally running away “with a pillow pressed to his chest.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the reason why Kavalero views Ivan’s theatrical and ingenuous plea for his daughter Valya as a completely normal situation is because reality is being transformed into a theatrical world of literature. Olesha redefines reality as intrinsically bound to the world of literature: where normal events can rise to epic proportions, and strangeness is natural from the distance of language on pages.

Read within the larger social context of Soviet Russia—where the children took on the parental role by fighting in the Revolution while the parents waited at home, stuck in the old era—this displacement between rightful parents and children can be seen as an obfuscated reality of the Russian Revolution. Ivan *wants* Valya, but knows he cannot have her in the new world. Brooks notes how “Bolsheviks promoted a world in which actual families and homes counted little; thousands of pages of newspapers from the 1920s contain hardly a single picture of a family or of a child with a parent” (25). For Ivan to attempt to reconnect with Valya directly goes against the Party’s politics. The act of defiance was seen as so unusual that “gawkers were stopping.”

Olesha’s fiction can perhaps be seen as closer to reality than merely a fictitious representation of one. Brooks describes the reality of the political atmosphere in Soviet Russia as closer to a theatrical performance than the word *reality* might suggest: “Although the social order still lacked the sacralization and ritualistic practices it subsequently acquired, the lights in the theater of Soviet public life were dimming. An extraordinary political performance was about to begin” (Brooks 53). Although inverted in its political intentions, Ivan’s plot to gain vengeance on

the new era mirrors the Soviet party's theatricality: "Тут должна разыгаться драма, одна из тех грандиозных драм на театре истории, которые долго вызывают плач, восторги, сожаления и гнев человечества" (69) [Here a drama must unfold, one of those grandiose dramas in the theater of history that have inspired lament, ecstasy, sympathy, and fury of mankind. Without even knowing it, you are a bearer of a historical mission] (101)]. It appears almost uncanny how the theatrical reality of Olesha's novella, written in 1927, was becoming the political reality in the proximate years.

## II. The Chronotope of *Envy*: Bakhtin, narrative time, and chronological time

Olesha uniquely structures the novella not according to the chronological plot of the story being told, but rather according to the deliberate disjuncture between narrative time and chronological time.<sup>8</sup> The narrative defies normative sequential modes of storytelling, by favoring a method of storytelling in which the literal events of the story are subordinated to the process of explanation via language. Olesha subordinates the events of the novella to poetic, dreamlike diversions within the story, ostensibly mimicking Trotsky's act of subordination, which favored politicized literature over artistic literature. Yet, if Olesha were mirroring Trotsky's subordination of art to politics, would not the literal events in *Envy* be favored over the poetic imagery?<sup>9</sup> The seemingly imitative connection between Olesha's literary techniques and Trotsky's political tactics in the 1920s is only apparently reflective, since the text suggests a more deviant relationship at play.<sup>10</sup>

Olesha exacerbates the main tensions in his novella through the non-linear structuring of time. *Envy* has a unique “chronotope” which is defined by Bakhtin as, “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 84). According to Bakhtin, “these distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel” (263). The main political themes of the novella enter into a larger discourse in *Envy* through their numerous manifestations from all the characters in the text, creating a dialogue of disparate opinions.

In Ehre’s analysis of *Envy*, he specifically discusses the chronotopic structure of the novella. Furthering his analysis, I suggest that a connection exists between the structure of the novella and its relationship to the specific theme of the collective family vs. individualism. The new era promoted the collectivized political family, while the old era valued bourgeois individualism and personal familial connections. Ehre takes notice of a very important structural presence regarding the complexities of time, images, and language in the novella, which function independently of plot and characters:

Narrative evolves in time; pictorial arts freeze a moment. Stories follow patterns of necessity or probability, and the author, given certain characters and situations, may feel himself bound to continue in a fashion apparently not all of his own making, as if the story were “writing itself.” The metaphor, self-contained and uncontingent, may appear as the realm of absolute freedom. Parallel to his story, Olesha creates a world of images relatively independent of the narrative, metaphors that he conceived of as timeless emanations of the imaginations. In the drafts to one of his stories he wrote, “We must be able to stop the moment. We shall stop it.” (Ehre 608)

In my opinion, it is unclear whether Ehre is speaking specifically of Olesha in his description of the author who “may feel himself bound to continue in a fashion apparently not all of his own making, as if the story were writing itself.” It is a seemingly valid claim that once given a set of

characters and situations the story will develop according to the dictates of those characters' inner motivations and the limits they face in the given situations. However, by conceiving the narrative story in this way, Ehre denies the author the freedom to defy the normative processes of storytelling. Olesha's narrative does *not* evolve in chronological time. Because Olesha intentionally blurs chronological time with narrative time, *Envy* is a text in which an intentional attention is given to the *process* of telling the story. In a sense, *Envy* has no narrative—there is no beginning, middle, or end to the story. Rather, the same situations—even the same *words*—repeat themselves throughout the novella, using language as a metaphorical motif. By this, I mean that language functions in the same way as images—both are used to halt the flowing of the narrative, to distort the narrative's sense of time and place.<sup>11</sup>

Olesha employs a slow pacing of time within the novella to create suspense and delay the reader's understanding of information or speeches, thereby creating a hierarchy between the *long* periods of narrative time devoted to articulating Kavalero's dreams, versus the *few* words that explain the literal events in the novella. Towards the end of the first section of Olesha's work, Kavalero recounts a memory in which he fantasizes about a man he saw from a far distance. Kavalero begins his delusions, stating: “Однажды и я добрый час простоял на углу” (39) [Once I stood on the corner for a good hour (57)]. The narrative continues with Kavalero romanticizing the scene, as he describes a man that he names “Том” (39) [Tom (58)]. Kavalero states:

Я живо представлял себе этого Тома. Юноша, озирающий город. Никому не известный юноша уже пришел, уже близок, уже видит город, который спит, ничего не подозревает... Так в романтическую, явно западноевропейского характера, грезу превратился во мне звон обыкновенной московской церковки... В дверях, держа котомку в руке, весело улыбающийся (японской улыбкой), точно увидевший сквозь дверь дорогого, взлелеянного в мечтах друга, застенчивый, чем-то похожий на Валю, стоял Том Вирлири. (40)

[I had a vivid picture of this Tom. A youth looking out over a city. A youth unknown to all draws near, sees the city, which is sleeping and suspects nothing... Thus, the ringing of an ordinary Moscow church was transformed inside me, in my romantic, obviously Western European dream... In the doorway, holding a knapsack in his hand and smiling gaily (a Japanese smile), exactly as if he had seen through the door the dear friend cherished in his dreams, stood a shy young man who reminded me of Valya: Tom Virleelee. This was the young troublemaker, Volodya Makarov. (58-59)]

Kavalerov's dream-like visions transform in the slow-paced narrative time into the first meeting between the antagonistic characters, Kavalerov and Volodya. By stopping the narrative time to capture Kavalerov's "romantic, obviously Western European" dreams, Olesha delays the secret that Kavalerov's perceived man, "Tom Virleelee," is in fact "the young troublemaker, Volodya Makarov." Olesha subordinates the truth of who Kavalerov gazes upon to the long description of an imaginary man, which forces the final realization—that Tom Virleelee is in fact Volodya Makarov—to appear insignificant to the reader, comparatively. By slowing the narrative pace of the story, Olesha via Kavalerov presents the reader with a detailed portrait of Volodya before the author reveals Volodya's identity to the reader. The multiple depictions of the same character within the novella present to the reader an ambiguous portrait of Volodya. Additionally, because Tom Virleelee "reminded" Kavalerov of Valya, Olesha blurs the identities of Valya and Volodya, who together represent "Tom Virleelee" for Kavalerov. Although no literal action took place to generate a new perception of Volodya, Kavalerov's fantasies function to distort the original understanding of this character.

As a novella, it is helpful to consider the structure of time in *Envy* with reference to Bakhtin's analysis of the Greek tragedy.<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin notes how in the construction of the Greek tragedy, "no changes of any consequence occur, internal or external, as a result of the events recounted in the novel. At the end of the novel, that initial equilibrium that had been destroyed by chance is restored once again. Everything returns to its source, everything returns to its own



place” (106). Similar to *Envy*, the literal events of the story merely set the stage for the novella, but do not produce “changes of any consequence.” Rather, Olesha’s novella emphasizes the *process* of telling the story, through *Envy*’s purposeful disjuncture between narrative and chronological time.

For example, the main event in the novella—Babichev picking the drunken Kavaleroﬀ off the street—is first told in the fourth chapter of the novella from the subjective perspective of Kavaleroﬀ’s narration, at which point the event had occurred “две недели...назад” (11) [two weeks ago (18)]. Kavaleroﬀ then retells the same story in the eleventh chapter, this time influenced by his new feelings of hatred toward Babichev. This act alters the reader’s first version of the event, through Kavaleroﬀ’s biased and negative rhetoric: “Вы пожалели меня, подобрали пьяного” (33) [You pitied me and took in a drunk (50)]. Kavaleroﬀ does not express the idea that Babichev was maliciously “pitying” him in the first account of the event, making it a subjective opinion that had been revised. In addition, the omniscient narrator of the second section of *Envy* states in the fourth chapter: “Кавалеров рассказал Ивану о том, как выгнало его из своего дома значительное лицо” (66) [Kavaleroﬀ told Ivan about how he had been driven out of his own home by an important man (98)]. Once again, the same event has changed. It was not Kavaleroﬀ’s “own home” that he was “driven out of,” but rather Babichev’s *sofa* that Kavaleroﬀ was occupying until Volodya returned. Lastly, the event is recounted again by the unknown narrator in the fifth chapter of the second section of the novella, but this time the story is told from Babichev’s perspective, while using the narrator’s voice to create a sense of objectivity.<sup>13</sup> Through the multiple retellings of the main event in the story at different narrative moments in chronological time, the event takes on new meaning in its repetition and alteration through a non-linear structuring of the narrative time in the story. As Bakhtin suggests, no

changes of any consequence occur in the literal event in a novel—only the *language* used to describe the event over the narrative chronotope of the novel is altered, ultimately affecting the *reader's* perception of the main event.<sup>14</sup> The primary event in *Envy* becomes ambiguous by the end of the novella, through the constant repetitions and variations on the main event.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, the unidentified narrator in the second section of the novella uses his masked identity and knowledge of the characters to alter the reader's preconceived understanding of the characters. Specifically, the unknown narrator uses parentheses to distinguish between presumed important and unimportant information in the text, creating a hierarchy among the characters. However, the parenthetical textual information often describes *important* information that changes the understanding of the text:

Отец был в кухне. (Он принадлежал к мрачной породе отцов, гордящихся знанием кое-каких кулинарных секретов и считающих исключительной своей привилегией, скажем определение количества лаврового листа, необходимого для какого-нибудь прославленного по наследству супа, или, скажем, наблюдение за сроком пребывания в кастрюле яиц, коим положено достигнуть идеального состояния, — так называемых «яиц в мешочке».) (53-54)

[His father was in the kitchen. (He was one of that gloomy clan of fathers who takes pride in his knowledge of certain culinary secrets and who considers it his exclusive privilege, say, to determine the number of bay leaves necessary for some famed soup that had been handed down from generation to generation, or, say, to observe how long eggs should remain in the pot in order to achieve the ideal 'coddled' state.) (80)]

The narrator uses the word “say” to provide examples of possible scenarios that Ivan's father might have been engaging in while he was “in the kitchen.” The narrator suggests that Ivan and Andrei's father was part of a “clan of fathers” that takes pride in tradition, in passing down secrets “from generation to generation.” This attitude is wholly antagonistic to Andrei, whose character does not believe in tradition, since Andrei wants to rid the state of all families, all clans. Yet, a connection between Andrei and his father exists in their mutual love for culinary endeavors. While Andrei dreams of building the communal dining hall “two-bits,” which will

destroy all culinary secrets harbored in family traditions, his father “takes pride” in family culinary traditions.

Furthermore, the language that the narrator uses to describe Andrei’s father intentionally mimics Andrei’s words to describe Volodya, thereby blurring the distinctions between Andrei and his father, making them appear more alike than dissimilar. The words “ideal,” “coddled,” and “state” all are reminiscent of Andrei’s description of Volodya. Andrei states: “мы лелеем тот новый мир, так я лелею его” (73) [we’re coddling this new world the way I coddle him. He’s precious to me as an embodied hope (107)]. Volodya, literally, is the “ideal ‘coddled’ state” that Andrei’s father describes in terms of eggs in a pot. In this example, Olesha creates a space in the narrative where no chronological plot progression occurs. Rather, the narrator alters the reader’s perception of Andrei, his father, and Volodya by using language to mimic phrases from other characters in the novella, in order to blur all three individual characters into one collective character.

At this point, it is noteworthy to point out a flaw in Ehre’s parenthetical statement that Babichev gave Volodya the sofa “later” (603). Although seemingly a minor point, Ehre’s confusion between narrative time and chronological time elucidates the novella’s use of chronotope to blur the identities of all the characters. Andrei does *not* give Volodya the sofa “later.” Yet, because the construction of time in the narrative is non-linear, the reader only finds out *later* that it was Volodya’s couch first. As the narrator states, Kavalero was merely occupying it until Volodya returned: “Николай Кавалеров был поднят, были выслушаны бредовые его слова. Андрей привез его к себе, втащил на третий этаж и уложил на диване Володи, устроил ему постель и укрыл пледом по шею; тот лежал навзничь с вафельным следом решетки на щеке. Хозяин отошел ко сну в благодущии: диван не пустовал” (75)

[They lifted Nikolai KavaleroV up and listened to his ravings. Andrei brought him home, dragged him to the fourth floor and put him to bed on Volodya's sofa, tucked him in, and pulled the blanket up to his neck. He lay there on his back, the grating's waffle impression still on his cheek. His host walked off to bed in a state of contentment: the sofa was not going empty (110)]. It was originally Volodya's sofa, but as this passage suggests, Andrei did not care so much who was sleeping there, so long as the bed was being filled. In this regard, Babichev appears like a maternal animal, simply filling its nest with a proxy egg. We only learn by the end of the novella why and where Volodya had gone: “В тот год весной Володя уехал на короткий срок повидаться с отцом в город Муром. Отец работал в муромских паровозостроительных мастерских. Прошло два дня разлуки, и в ночь на третий день ехал Андрей домой” (74-75) [That spring Volodya went away for a while to visit his father in Murom. His father worked in the Murom locomotive-building shops. After two days of separation, on the night of the third day, Andrei was riding home (109)]. It is on this ride home that Andrei finds KavaleroV on the street, and decides to let him sleep on Volodya's couch.

Ultimately, this suggests that KavaleroV is not a son to Babichev in the same way that Volodya functions as one. Thus, Ehre's argument that Babichev presents KavaleroV with a sofa, a home, and an abundance of sustenance is flawed. Because the chronological time does not move in accordance with the narrative time in the text, the chronological events become displaced—such that Ehre mistakenly states that he will give Volodya the couch later. This confusion between chronological time and narrative time blurs the events of the story such that the ambiguity obscures all characters, events, and details, which ultimately produces a tangled historical narrative.

The disjuncture between narrative time and chronological time forces the reader to become conscious of the large gaps of time that lack any chronological plot development. At the end of the first section of the novella, Kavalеров looks at the life around him through a street mirror. When speaking of Ivan's image in the mirror, Kavalеров notes: "Я продолжал думать про оптические обманы, про фокусы зеркала и потому спросил подошедшего, ещё не узнав его: — С какой стороны вы подошли? Откуда вы взялись? —Откуда? —ответил он. —Откуда я взялся? (Он посмотрел на меня ясными глазами.) Я сам себя выдумал" (49) [I continued to think about optical illusions and mirror tricks and so asked this man before I recognized him: Which direction did you come from? Where did you come from? Where? he repeated. Where did I come from? He looked at me with clear eyes. I dreamed myself up (73)]. Soon, following Ivan's words "I dreamed myself up," the chronological plot of the narrative halts until the fourth chapter of the second section, when the narrator eventually continues the plot. Describing Ivan and Kavalеров, the narrator states: "Они отошли от зеркала" (66) [They moved away from the mirror (98)]. By pausing the narrative in chronological time, the eventual continuation of the narrative functions as a meta-textual reference to where the story had left off. In this way, Ivan and Kavalеров appear not as real people, but rather as literary caricatures that can be manipulated via Olesha's authorial control over the narrative time. Within the created space between the continuations of the chronological time in the novella, the narrative time provides a gap in the story for the narrator to introduce Ivan's character and family, which affects the perception of the other characters through these additional details. Because the chronological plot of the story remains static, the narrative details more superfluous stories than literal events, which incites confusion for the reader between the literal actions in the story and the recounted memories from the unknown narrator.

Throughout the second section of the novella the narrative time halts the logical progression of a described event, by presenting different moments of the event at different times in the narrative in a non-linear sequence. Often, the reader will find out about the event before it logically appears in the chronological plot of the narrative. For example, the reader learns that, “Иван находился под арестом десять дней” (62) [Ivan was under arrest for ten days (93)], before the narrator divulges the *reason*: “Кавалеров открыл рот, чтобы сообщить главное: у нас общий враг, вы благословили меня на убийство вашего брата, — но не сказал ни слова, потому что к столу их подошел человек, пригласивший Ивана, немедленно и не задавая вопросов, следовать за ним. Он был арестован, о чем известно из предыдущей главы” (71) [Kavalerov opened his mouth to tell him the most important thing: We have a common enemy, you’ve given me your blessing to kill your brother. But he didn’t say a word because a man came up to their table and invited Ivan to follow him immediately, no questions asked. He was arrested, as we know from the preceding chapter (105)]. The narrator meta-textually refers to the disjuncture in time, by blatantly stating where in the narrative time of the novella the event occurred for the reader. This forces an ambiguous understanding of the chronological events in the novella, since the narrator does not describe Ivan’s character according to a linear progression of chronological time.

In another instance, the reader finds out the circumstances for Ivan’s interest in Kavalerov *after* the narrator reveals Ivan’s knowledge of Kavalerov, “завистник” (66) [the envier (97)]. During the first conversation between Ivan and Kavalerov in the story’s narrative time, Ivan begins to question Kavalerov on his emotions. In dialogue with Kavalerov, Ivan states: “— Наша судьба схожа, — продолжал Иван. — Дайте мне вашу руку. Так. Приветствую вас. Очень рад вас видеть, молодой человек. Чокнемся. Так вас прогнали,

Кавалеров? Расскажите, расскажите” (68) [Our fates are similar, Ivan continued. Give me your hand. I greet you. I’ve very glad to see you, young man. Let’s have a toast. So, you were driven out, Kavaleroḡ? Tell me all about it (100)]. However, Ivan discloses Nikolai Kavaleroḡ’s name to the investigator *before* this meeting, according to the narrative time of the novella. In the third chapter of the second section of the text, Ivan and the investigator discuss Ivan’s conspiracy of emotions, ending with the following exchange: “Иван: Вас интересует чувство, носителем которого он является, или его имя? Следователь: И то и другое. Иван: Николай Кавалеров. Завистник” (66) [Ivan: Are you interested in the emotion whose bearer he is or in his name? Investigator: Both. Ivan: Nikolai Kavaleroḡ. Envier (97)].

The chronological structuring of time in *Envy* does not move in accordance with narrative time, causing disruptions in the logical understanding of the story’s plot. Because Ivan only learns of Kavaleroḡ’s envy *after* he recounts such details to the investigator in the narrative time of the story, the narrator presents the reader with an ambiguous portrayal of Ivan, whose actions do not seemingly have any basis or motive. Olesha intentionally uses time to obscure the realities of the present moment in his novella, which mimics the similar manipulation of time during the 1920s in Soviet Russia. According to Brooks: “The gaps between past, present, and future vanished in the press’s near mystical account of Soviet life. Time became a path through the present, not to the present, which explains the official obsession with commemorative dates and the ‘historic’” (Brooks 79).

Ultimately, the structural use of time in the narrative obscures any sort of linear development of the plot. Olesha’s statement, “we must be able to stop the moment,” is echoed not only in images as Ehre suggests, but also in the language that moves in and out of the present, the narrative shifting between past, present and possible futures. This echoes Bakhtin’s

theory of dialogism, using words as the connecting force of history, allowing literature to be in constant dialogue with the past, present and future of any society's literary history. The text consists of written images, dreams, visions of the past and future, and repetitions shown from multiple narrative perspectives. Few events or situations are described literally in the novella. Rather, Olesha's work is mainly comprised of fantastical observations, recounted memories, and dreams by Kavaleroov—all of which exist outside the chronological plot of the story, thus emphasizing the narrative time over the chronological sequencing of the literal actions in the story.

### III. Rhetoric of History and Non-history: The obfuscation of fictional histories and parodying of Soviet history

Family dynamics inherently possess historicity. To understand man, we must understand his origins. However, the Russian Revolution instigated a redefining of Russia's historical past, which is mirrored in *Envy* by the ambiguously presented historical origins of all the characters. In Soviet Russia's attempt to destroy its history and substitute a romanticized version of the nation's origins, individual family histories were simultaneously erased—creating a collective Soviet family with a *single* past history.<sup>16</sup> In *Envy*, the personal histories of individual characters utilize mythical and ambiguous rhetoric to describe the past in an intentionally fictional manner. By using ambiguous language to describe historical events, Olesha incorporates a falsified or disguised past to alter the present conditions and future possibilities within the world of his text. Ultimately, this mythologization of history in *Envy* echoes the Soviet Party's manipulation of



history to control the uncertain future of the nation. By censoring the real histories of Andrei and Volodya, while parodying Soviet reality in the personal histories of Kavalero and Ivan, Olesha expresses the necessity of an accurate history to understand the present moment.

In Kavalero's narration during the first section of the novella, he observes his present surroundings specifically in terms of their relation to the past. In this manner, Kavalero dramatizes the past and present actuality in order to prophesize a potential future. When observing Babichev, Kavalero sees Andrei's history actualized on his physical body:

Свиток чужой судьбы развернулся передо мною. Прадед Бабичев холил свою кожу, мягко расположились по туловищу прадеда валики жира. По наследству передались комиссару тонкость кожи, благородный цвет и чистая пигментация. И самым главным, что вызвало во мне торжество, было то, что на пояснице его я увидел родинку, особенную, наследственную дворянскую родинку, —ту самую, полную крови, просвечивающую, нежную штучку, отстающую от тела на стебельке, по которой матери через десятки лет узнают украденных детей. (10)

[The scroll of someone else's fate had unfolded before me. Old man Babichev had cared for his skin; the pads of fat had been softly distributed over his aging torso. My commissar inherited this thin skin, noble color, and pure pigmentation. And most important, what evoked real triumph in me, was the fact that on his waist I saw a mole, a special, inherited, aristocratic mole, the very same kind—blood-filled, a transparent, tender little thing that stood away from his body on a stem—by which mothers recognize stolen children decades later. (16)]

The word "scroll" possess a biblical connotation of a text that contains the historical origins of man and the world. Kavalero connects the word "scroll" and its historical connotations to the future of "someone else's fate." In this sense, Kavalero utilizes the "scroll" of history to understand the future "fate" of Babichev. For Kavalero, the "scroll" represents a man's physical appearance that inherently displays one's historical origins. Kavalero emphasizes how his "commissar" had "inherited this thin skin, noble color, and pure pigmentation," forcing his present identity to be reliant on his ancestral lineage.

Furthermore, Kavaleroov seeks to alter Babichev's identity in the present by pointing out Babichev's "inherited, aristocratic mole," which links Andrei to the bourgeois aristocracy of the old era, which makes Andrei's connection to his current position as an ideologue of the new era uncertain. Because Babichev seeks to destroy individual families in favor of one collective political family, Kavaleroov's statement suggests that Babichev cannot fulfill his ultimate goal, since he possesses a familial specificity, "by which mothers recognize stolen children decades later." Similar to Valya and Volodya who appear as stolen children in the novella, Olesha relates Babichev as another potentially orphaned child. Interestingly, it is Babichev who steals Valya from her father (Ivan), and Volodya from his father (who is in Murom). In this regard, Kavaleroov connects Babichev's physical representation of his past to the eventual future reality of Soviet Russia—in which mothers *did* use such physical specificities to recognize their children, when the government placed children under the care of the state and took them from their families.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the reality of Olesha's statement via Kavaleroov regarding the "stolen children" is hauntingly accurate.

The narrator's rhetoric mirrors the Soviet presentation of history during the 1920s, which transformed the past into a theater of history that would be the basis for constructing an official view of the future. Brooks explains how the Soviet press used information to deliberately falsify reality and history: "Not all participants in the Soviet press may have agreed about what was taking place in the country, but the state prevented the disruption of the prevailing official view and provided an overriding motive for participation. In this respect, Lenin and his colleagues launched the performative culture in 1917 when they established the monopoly on information" (Brooks 69). The multiple narrators in *Envy* demonstrate this "monopoly on information," by

censoring the reader's knowledge of certain narrative histories and mythologizing the reality of Soviet histories in the novella.<sup>18</sup>

For example, Ehre suggests that *Envy* fails to provide Volodya's history, thereby making his character less understandable because he lacks an origin. However, in fact Olesha presents a *romanticized* version of Volodya's history within the text, by employing ambiguous and mythologizing rhetoric—thus transforming history into mythology. In the second part of the novella, the unknown narrator interrupts the linear plot of the story to recount how “a commissar and a boy” first met. Throughout the description, the narrator provides unmistakable clues that insinuate that Babichev was this “commissar” and Volodya was this “boy.” This ambiguous anecdote, presented as a fairytale, describes the progress of their relationship, how the boy “стал комсомольцем” [became a Young Communist], and how “мальчик жил при великане” (73) [the boy lived with the giant (107)]. By making the “boy” and “Commissar” nameless, their historical connection to one another remains ambiguous. What follows the short anecdote of how the two met is a long history of Volodya Makarov—but without his specific name attached, naming him only as a “boy.”

Without going into full detail of how this history is specifically Volodya's history, I will merely provide a few key points of evidence. First, we know from several accounts that Volodya is living (and has been living) with Babichev. The narrator here tells us, “Мальчик жил при великане, рос, вырос, стал комсомольцем и стал студентом. Он родился в железнодорожном поселке, был сын ремонтного литейного рабочего” (73) [The boy lived with the giant, grew, grew up, became a Young Communist, and went to the university. He'd been born in a railway village, the son of a linesman (107)]. We also know that the reason why Kavalеров is sleeping on Volodya's couch is because Volodya went to visit his father in Murom,

who worked in a “паровозостроительных мастерских” (75) [locomotive-building shop (109)]. The narrator states: “его полюбили товарищи, его полюбили взрослые. Его иногда беспокоило то, что он всем нравится” (73) [his comrades loved him, adults loved him. He sometimes worried that everyone liked him (107)]. Although the narrator is not objective in his opinions, throughout the text Babichev also talks about Volodya’s likeability, how everyone loves him, and how he symbolizes “the new man.” This new man, by no coincidence, also prides “товарищества” (73) [camaraderie] as “чувство... в нем самым сильным” (73) [his strongest emotion] (108). What follows is a long speech that the narrator says, “he said” (referring to the boy), suggesting that these are Volodya’s words. Within this highly complex and interesting speech, “he” makes it clear that he is speaking to Andrei, saying: “Не смейся, Андрей Петрович. Я говорю: главным чувством человека должно быть понимание времени” (74) [Don’t laugh, Andrei Petrovich. I’m saying that man’s main emotion has to be an understanding of time (109)].<sup>19</sup> Ironically, Volodya emphasizes one’s “understanding of time,” when Volodya’s ambiguous past leaves the reader with no understanding of his character’s history.<sup>20</sup>

The narrator’s account of the first meeting between Babichev and Volodya combines historical time with a sense of mythological time, ambiguously expressing the truth of their first encounter, while also amplifying the importance of this event by emphasizing the timelessness of the event. The truth of when Babichev and Volodya first met hides behind the story’s ambiguous sense of time, since it was “давным-давно, в темную ночь” (73) [long long ago, one dark night (107)]. The vague time markers of “long ago” and “one” night create a generalized sense of time, since they could have met a few years ago or hundreds of years ago. The mythologizing rhetoric transforms the nature of this historical account into a fairytale, which masks the reality of Babichev and Volodya’s first meeting and the reasons for bonding so closely to one another.

Additionally, the space of the story seemingly possesses a magical quality, as both the commissar and the boy were “проваливаясь в овраги, по колено в звездах, спугивая звезды с кустарников” (73) [swallowed by a ravine, up to their knees in stars, frightening the stars out of the shrubbery (107)]. This metaphorical historical account is extremely poetic, as if it were KavaleroV subjectively recounting a poetic fairytale, instead of the narrator. (KavaleroV similarly delights in exposing a hidden past, by focusing on Babichev’s clothing, groin, birthmark, and scar—all symbolic representations of Babichev’s hidden history). The narrator continues the story, stating: “Увидевшие подумали б: бежит один —великан, припадающий к земле, и мальчика приняли б за ладонь великана” (73) [Anyone who saw them would have thought that the giant, who kept falling to the ground, was fleeing, and they would have taken the boy for the giant’s hand. They had bonded forever (107)].<sup>21</sup> The word “forever” implies a sense of eternal importance, forcing this mythologized event to take on greater significance through its presentation via ambiguous rhetoric.

The combining of historical time with mythological time is described by Bakhtin in his discussion of the Greek tragedy: “In every aspect of his natural world the Greek saw a trace of mythological time; he saw in it a condensed mythological event that would unfold into a mythological scene or tableau. Historical time was equally concrete and localized—in epic and tragedy it was tightly interwoven with mythological time” (Bakhtin 104). In *Envy* historical events hide under their mythological doubles, as if “a trace of mythological time” was present in the historical event.<sup>22</sup> The narrator describes the present relationship between Volodya and Babichev specifically in terms of their historical bonding and similar future goals in the new era. In Soviet reality “what had vanished or, more exactly, became compressed between two dream

worlds was the present” (Brooks 78). Likewise, the present moment is subordinated to a mythologized past and a romantic envisioning of the future within *Envy*.

Additionally, Olesha employs a specifically literary rhetoric to describe Ivan’s history:

Сочинен был рассказ о том, как пришел на свадьбу к инкассатору, на Якиманку, неизвестный гражданин (в котелке, указывались подробности, потертый, подозрительный человек—не кто иной, как он, Бабичев Иван) и, представ перед всеми в самом разгаре пира, потребовал внимания, с тем что-бы произнести речь— обращение к новобрачным. (61)

[A story was composed about a citizen, a stranger (who wore a bowler, according to the details, a shabby, suspicious man, none other than Ivan Babichev himself), who went to a wedding for a bill collector, on Yakimanka, and presenting himself at the very height of the feast, demanded everyone’s attention for his speech—an address to the newlyweds. (91)]

The narrator intentionally presents the history of Ivan Babichev as a “story” that someone “composed.” In fact, only via the narrator’s parenthetical comments can the reader gain certainty that this “citizen, a stranger” is Ivan. The narrator subordinates the individual specificity of this person to a mythologized legend of this man, turning history into myth, man into character.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the hyperbolic rhetoric in the narrator’s description of Ivan—who “demanded everyone’s attention,” “presenting himself at the very height of the feast”—makes Ivan appear closer to an exaggerated comic or character than a representation of a real person.

In other instances, Olesha presents real historical events within his fictional work, in order to distort historical accuracy and provide the novella with the opportunity to revise history. Olesha presents Kavalero’s history through his subjective memories, often functioning as important moments in a larger history beyond Kavalero’s personal history. Kavalero recounts his childhood memory of witnessing a dying president encased in a glass cube. The rhetoric of this specific historical account echoes an actuality for Olesha during the 1920s, when Vladimir Lenin died and was similarly preserved in a glass cube. Kavalero states:

Вспоминаю из давних лет: я, гимназист, приведен в музей восковых фигур. В стеклянном кубе красивый мужчина во фраке, с огнедышащей раной в груди, умирал на чьих-то руках... Умирал президент, дышал, закатывались веки. Медленно, как часы, шла жизнь президента. Я смотрел как зачарованный. Прекрасный мужчина лежал, задрал бороду, в зеленоватом кубе. Это было прекрасно. Тогда услышал я впервые гул времени. Времена неслись надо мною. Я глотал восторженные слезы. Я решил стать знаменитым, чтобы некогда мой восковой двойник, наполненный гудением веков, которое услышать дано лишь немногим, вот так же красовался в зеленоватом кубе. (19-20)

[I remember from years gone by, as a schoolboy, I was taken to the wax museum. In a glass cube a handsome man in a frock coat with a smoking wound in his chest was dying in someone's arms... The president was dying, breathing, his eyelids were fluttering. The president's life was passing as slowly as a clock. I watched spellbound. A magnificent man lay there, his beard thrust forward, in a green-tinted cube. It was magnificent. Then for the first time I heard the rumbling of time. Time was racing overhead. I swallowed ecstatic tears. I decided to become famous so that someday my wax double, replete with the rumbling of the ages, which only a few would be given to hear, would pose just like that in a green-tinted cube. (30-31)]

Kavalerov's memory of the wax museum presents an illogical historical account of "французский президент Карно, раненный анархистом" (19) [French President Carnot, wounded by an anarchist (30)]. Kavalerov's memories recount a truthful historical reality, to a degree, since President Carnot served as the president of France from 1887 until 1894, when he died from a gunshot triggered by an anarchist. However, President Carnot's body was not preserved in a wax museum as Kavalerov's memory states. Additionally, it is important to point out Kavalerov's contradiction that President Carnot was living, "breathing," while also existing in the "wax museum." Kavalerov compares himself to this president and desires his own "wax double," thereby making the president's condition of being alive, dead, or made of wax wholly ambiguous. The symbolism of a glass cube is also comparable to literature itself. The novella that we peer into contains wax doubles of real people, and the novella functions as a double of history.

In his memory, KavaleroV keeps the French president alive, his life “passing as slowly as a clock,” which functions against the historical reality of the president dying instantly by a single bullet. KavaleroV’s memories change history, and the rhetoric functions to blend multiple historical events. The words and images of a “glass cube,” “wax double,” and “magnificent man” more accurately describe the historical reality of Vladimir Lenin’s death. When describing the debate in 1924 on how to memorialize Lenin, architect A.V. Shchusev states: “Vladimir Ilich is eternal...How shall we honor his memory? How will we mark his grave? In architecture the cube is eternal. Everything proceeds from the cube, the entire range of architectural creation. Let the mausoleum, which we will erect as a monument to Vladimir Ilich, derive from a cube” (qtd. in Tumarkin 189). Historically, Lenin was preserved in a cube just as the French President Carnot was preserved for eternity in a “green-tinted cube” in KavaleroV’s memory. Two historical realities blend in KavaleroV’s childhood memory to produce KavaleroV’s wish to become famous one day, like these two men. By incorporating real historical events into KavaleroV’s memories, Olesha uses symbolic rhetoric to transform literal history within the novella, providing an alternate version of reality that stands in opposition to the ambiguous Soviet reality represented by *Pravda*.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the novella, Olesha via KavaleroV attempts to alter Soviet history in the story, thereby mimicking the Party leader’s transformation of Soviet history to benefit Party goals. KavaleroV uses his present surroundings to leap into childhood fantasies, in which he fights to change the historical presence of the new era within the space of the novella’s history—a past time when the fight was still possible. In his essay, Ehre wrongly interprets KavaleroV’s vision of Anichka’s bed as a paradise, when in fact the bed represents the *battleground* for KavaleroV to alter history. Ehre states that Anichka (as Andrei’s double) “offers KavaleroV a



paradisiacal bed: Above him hung heavy clusters of grapes; Cupids pranced, apples tumbled from horns of plenty. Besides unlimited abundance, these beds offer fulfillment of infantile fantasies of omnipotence. If he were a child on Anichka's magnificent bed, Kavalero would daydream, he would not have to obey either space or time or weight or gravity. He would be like a king" (603). Ehre states that Anichka's bed allows Kavalero to have childhood fantasies in which he is freed from the constraints of adult society and "would not have to obey" any rules as "a king." However, a closer look at the text intimates that Kavalero dreams that as a child he could return to the old era and fight the battle on which he presently is on the losing side, the struggle between ideologies.

Except, in Kavalero's fantasies, he—not Babichev—would be the king. Kavalero imagines:

...А тогда, не подчиняясь ни расстояниям, ни масштабам, ни времени, ни весу, ни тяготению, я ползал бы в коридорах, образовавшихся от пустоты между рамой пружинного матраца и бортами кровати; таился бы за колоннами, что теперь кажутся мне не больше мензурок; воображаемые катапульты устанавливал бы на барьерах ее и стрелял бы по врагам, теряющим силы в бегстве по мягкой, засасывающей почве одеяла; устраивал бы под зеркальной аркой приемы послов, как король только что прочитанного романа; отправлялся бы в фантастические путешествия по резьбе —все выше и выше —по ногам и ягодицам купидонов, лез бы по ним, как лезут по статуе Будды, не умер охватить ее взором, и с последней дуги, с головокружительной высоты, срывался бы в страшную пропасть, в ледовитую пропасть подушек. (76)

[...but then, surrendering neither to distances, nor scales, nor time, nor weight, nor gravity, I would have crawled in the corridors formed by the gap between the bedspring and the bed frame; I would have hidden behind the columns that now seem no bigger than measuring glasses; I would have set imaginary catapults on its barriers and fired at my enemies losing strength in their flight across the soft, sucking ground of the blanket; I would have arranged receptions for ambassadors under the mirrored arch, like the kind of the novel I'd just read; I would have embarked on fantastic journeys over the carving—up and up—over the cupids' legs and buttocks, I would have crawled over them the way people crawl over the statue of Buddha, unable to take it in with one glance, and from the last arch, from that dizzying height, I would have hurled myself into the terrible abyss, into the pillows' icy abyss. (112)]

Quite unlike a “paradisiacal bed,” KavaleroV essentially imagines a battlefield, in which he “fired at [his] enemies,” “arranged receptions for ambassadors,” and would not surrender to “distances, nor scales, nor time, nor weight, nor gravity.” For KavaleroV, the fight against the new era is a fight for the bed—the fight for one’s home and place of comfort. However, KavaleroV realizes the battle is futile. The new era has arrived with Andrei, Volodya, and Valya, and he can only look at the bed and dream of what he “would have” done. However, KavaleroV’s resistance to “distances,” “scales,” and “time,” suggests a blurring of the past, present, and future to create a space in time where all historical possibilities can be expressed through poetic imagery. Interestingly, KavaleroV compares himself to “the king of the novel I’d just read,” suggesting a meta-textual reference to part one of the novella, in which the king is presumably Andrei Babichev.<sup>25</sup> KavaleroV often notes how Babichev possesses a Buddha-like presence, suggesting that he is going to glorify cupid and the angelic figures of love and sentimentality, rather than worshipping a false political god in Babichev. As KavaleroV earlier notes when he watches Babichev jump out the window to reach Ivan: “Определенно бушуют деревья. Тень его Буддой низвергается на город” (15) [The trees were definitely raging. His Buddha-like shadow came crashing down on the city (24)].

While in KavaleroV’s childhood fantasies on Anichka’s bed he imagines himself climbing to the top of the statues in the same way that “people crawl over the statue of Buddha,” in reality KavaleroV witnesses Babichev “crashing down.” Babichev appears as an idol that is being knocked down and replaced in the new era; the fantasy of Babichev as a Buddha-like God is merely a fiction. In his fantasies, KavaleroV states that he “would have hurled [himself] into the terrible abyss” in much the same way that Babichev hurls himself into city streets. In this sense, a connection can be made between the way that Babichev fights for the city as a

representative of the political sphere in the new era, and the way that Kavaleroḃ (in his fantasies) fights for the old era, the pillows, the beds, the sense of home and family. Their two characters have become blurred in Kavaleroḃ's fantasies, both seeking to rewrite history.

*Envy* employs a dialogic chronotope by using Kavaleroḃ's past memories to affect his present circumstances, using history to change the perception of the present in the novella. Kavaleroḃ does not seek unlimited nourishment and omnipotence like Babichev's utopian dream, but rather he seeks the values of the old era in the present moment—the individual specificity of family life, not the comforts of living in general, but the sentimental feelings of attachments, of familial love, of objects possessing a nostalgic feeling. Kavaleroḃ, in his letter to Babichev (which he never sends), writes:

Вы окружили меня полотняными простынями. Гладкость и холодок ткани как будто и были рассчитаны на то, чтобы смирить мою горячность, унять беспокойство. В моей жизни даже появились костяные пуговицы пододеяльника, и в них — только найди нужную точку— плавало радужное кольцо спектра. Я сразу признал их. Они вернулись из давным-давно забытого, самого дальнего, детского уголка памяти. Я получил постель. Само это слово было для меня таким же поэтически отдаленным, как слово «серсо». Вы мне дали постель. С высот благополучия спустили вы на меня облако постели, ореол, прильнувший ко мне волшебным жаром, окутавший воспоминаниями, негорькими сожалениями и надеждами. (33-34)

[You wrapped me in linen sheets. The smoothness and coolness of the cloth seemed calculated to soothe my fevered state and ease my fears. A blanket cover's bone buttons even came into my life, and in them—you just had to find the right spot—swam a ring of the rainbow. I recognized it right away. It had come back from a long-forgotten, very, very distant childhood corner of my memory. I found *a place to lay my head*. This very phrase was for me as poetic as the word *hoopla*. You gave me *a place to lay my head*. From the heights of well-being you brought down a cloud of a bed for me, a halo that clung to me with magical warmth, wrapping me in memories, bittersweet regrets, and hopes. (50)]

Babichev invokes for Kavaleroḃ a memory of his childhood comforts of warmth and sense of home by giving Kavaleroḃ a sofa. However, Kavaleroḃ does not romanticize the *object* of the sofa as evoking “a long-forgotten” memory. Rather, it is a *phrase*; Kavaleroḃ reincarnates the old

era's poetic language in the present, which is "wrapping [him] in memories, bittersweet regrets, and hopes." The sofa itself does not remind him of his past. Rather, the poetic line, "*a place to lay my head*," places Kavalero's consciousness simultaneously in past "memories," present "regrets," and future "hopes." In this sense Olesha uses poetic language and literature to discuss history, in order to suggest that literature is the connecting force with which to understand the past. Kavalero's mental association between the poetic word "hoopla" and the phrase from his childhood, "*a place to lay my head*," is significant in how the association alters the present meaning of his nostalgic words. The connotation of his "poetic" word inherently implies misleading talk or chaotic uproar. By relating the "poetic" phrase "*a place to lay my head*" that describes Babichev's generosity towards him with the word "hoopla," Kavalero is pointing out the misleading nature of language to generate sentimental feelings from the past within the present moment.<sup>26</sup>

Babichev's paternalistic state, his nurturing character and omnipotence, as Ehre rightly notes, incite "all the terrors of childhood." Babichev functions as both a paternal and maternal figure in the novella, as "Baba" denotes a female crone or peasant woman. The feeling of protection that Babichev gives Kavalero reminds him of a *phrase* signifying a *feeling* lost from childhood. Kavalero notes, "the coolness of the cloth seemed calculated to soothe my fevered state and ease my fears." Its calculation is not loving, but precisely that—calculated, predetermined, not for any specific individual, but calculated as if man could be understood through scientific, quantitative calculations. Indeed, the preciseness with which the blanket soothed Kavalero evoked "a long-forgotten, very, very distant childhood" memory of a phrase. The "cloud of a bed" that Babichev gives to Kavalero is not a real bed, but a cloud filled with memories of a lost bed, of a lost family, and of the lost era.

The terror, however, is not a childhood trauma, as Ehre suggests. Rather, Kavalero's anxieties stem from the bed's ability to conjure a poetic phrase that is misleading in the present moment, since it does not hold the same significance in the present as it did in the past. A trauma is created when the loss of the past comes into contact with doubles of that loss in the present—it is then that anxieties take form, and the inability to reach what is lost turns into a trauma and leads to isolation in poetry, images, and a *literary* sense of reality.<sup>27</sup> These moments describing Kavalero's history, through his memories, function to displace Kavalero's history from the past, and place it in the present to affect his surroundings. Ultimately, Olesha uses this method to suggest that history functions as a way to alter present circumstances and can provide a better understanding of the present, through an analysis of the present reality's relationship with the past.

Lastly, historical accounts in *Envy* play a significant role at the very end of the novella, when the main event becomes historicized and transformed into a theatricalized version of the novella's history. The narrative ostensibly repeats itself in the last chapter, as the narrator articulates: “Ночью Кавалеров вернулся домой пьяный...Пока спал он, вдова хозяйничала: она закрыла кран, раздела спящего и починила его подтяжки” (98-99) [that night Kavalero came home drunk...While he slept, the widow was keeping house: she turned off the tap, undressed the sleeping man, and mended his suspenders (144)]. The original event in the novella, Babichev picking the drunken Kavalero off the streets, repeats itself at the end of the novella—with Anichka replacing Babichev as his double. As the narrator continues his description, the doubling of the original event in the novella transforms into a “comedy,” a performance of the true history of the *novella's* events. The narrator states: “Наступило утро. Сперва ничего Кавалеров не понял. Как пьяница-нищий в комедии, подобранный богачом и принесенный

во дворец, он лежал, очумелый, среди незнакомой роскоши” (99) [Morning came. At first KavaleroV didn’t know what was what. Like the drunken beggar in the comedy who is taken in by a rich man and brought to his palace, he lay there, hung over, amid unaccustomed luxury (144)]. The narrator transforms real events in the novella into a theater of history. The repetition of the same event forces a new perception of the original event to take place for the reader. KavaleroV was and is “the drunken beggar in the comedy,” and Babichev is this “rich man.” In this way, Olesha transforms the story in his novella into a history. Furthermore, the resulting history is then turned into a performative “comedy” or piece of theater based on this history. Thus, the cycle completes itself: stories become historical, history becomes mythologized, and history eventually transforms into a theatrical reality—where the past history and present reality are doubles of one another.

The repetition of the same events in the narrative shows not a progression of the narrative, but a continual process of repeating language to ultimately carry new meaning. The irony of Olesha’s use of language is that no matter how many different ways the same event is described—via KavaleroV, Babichev, and unknown narrators—the story itself is never explained. Words do not adequately justify the happenings in the story, if taken literally. *Envy* is a novella about the *process* of telling of a story—a novella about a novella. In this sense, Olesha’s use of language in literature takes on a new function: it artistically portrays a scene, but like images, it describes everything, but literally tells us nothing. It is a kaleidoscopic vision of a world in flux, during an unstable time and place.

Olesha renders the reality in *Envy* as fictional, just as the political reality in Soviet Russia during the 1920s had become theatrical. Ivan states that within the reality of *Envy*’s plot, “должна разыгаться драма, одна из тех грандиозных драм на театре истории, которые

долго вызывают плач, восторги, сожаления и гнев человечества. Вы, сами того не понимая, являетесь носителем исторической миссии” (69) [a drama must unfold, one of those grandiose dramas in the theater of history that have inspired lament, ecstasy, sympathy, and fury of mankind. Without even knowing it, you are a bearer of a historical mission (101)]. Perhaps in this sense, Olesha’s novella portrays the theatrical political reality of Soviet Russia that the Politburo attempted to obfuscate through *Pravda*—ironically, through “truth.”

Chapter 2 The Recuperation and Paradoxical Deconstruction of Silenced Voices:  
 Revolution as a Paradigmatic Shift towards Revising History in *Pedro Páramo*

He realized that he was riding on an endless and silent train and that his head was caked with dry blood and that all his bones ached. He felt an intolerable desire to sleep. Prepared to sleep for many hours, safe from the terror and the horror, he made himself comfortable on the side that pained him less, and only then did he discover that he was lying against dead people. —Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (306)

Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) is a structurally complex text that obfuscates the reader's understanding of the plot from the beginning of the narrative. The reader ostensibly follows the narrator of the first half of the novella—Juan Preciado—as he journeys into the depths of the town of Comala in order to find his father, Pedro Páramo. The first lines of the novella provide the original motivation for Juan's journey: "Vine a Comala porque me dijeron que acá vivía mi padre, un tal Pedro Páramo. Mi madre me lo dijo. Y yo le prometí que vendría a verlo en cuanto ella muriera" (17) [I came to Comala because I had been told that my father, a man named Pedro Páramo, lived there. It was my mother who told me. And I had promised her that after she died I would go see him (3)].<sup>1</sup> However, Juan soon realizes, from the first person he meets in Comala—a man named Abundio—that Pedro Páramo is dead. Likewise, everyone Juan encounters is a ghost of Comala's past. By the middle of the novella, it is evident that everyone in the novella is dead, including Juan Preciado himself.

It is only after Juan seemingly dies in Comala that the reader becomes aware that Juan's "journey" into the chaotic depths of this dead town is being told post-mortem, as a memory from his grave. The text subordinates Juan's journey narrative to a spoken conversation with another—with a woman with whom Juan shares his grave, Dorotea. The entire first half of the



novella functions as a speech, a response to Dorotea's question that originally propagated Juan's recollected journey to Comala: "¿Qué viniste a hacer aquí?" (66) [Why did you come here? (60)].<sup>2</sup> In this way, the text alters the reader's understanding of what appeared to be the main event in the novella: the journey is transformed into a conversation. After this moment in the narrative, the reader realizes that Juan died in Comala and has been dead since the beginning of the novella, since the start of his answer to Dorotea's question. By reframing the first half of the novella retrospectively as a conversation spoken from the grave, Juan's answer functions as a form of death itself. The realization that Juan is dead coincides in the novella with the moment that Juan concludes his "answer;" his "journey" explaining how he came to Comala. Ultimately, the act of transforming the journey into speech mirrors Rulfo's inversion of the living and the dead, transforming silence into a type of voice.

However, it would be an oversimplification to imply that Rulfo merely inverts the value of the novella's main thematic oppositions: silence versus voices, memory versus forgetting, and living versus dead. Through a close textual analysis of passages in the novella that present a complex relationship to these three themes (silence, memory, and death), I investigate the inversion of these thematic oppositions. In this chapter, I question the ambiguous relationship between these antagonistic dualities: how they are mutually exclusive, while simultaneously dependent on each other—providing commentary on the role of silence, memory, and death in Mexico. In his novella, Rulfo uses silence as a type of voice (and, likewise, he uses speech as a form of silence), the function of memory as a method of forgetting, the necessity of being dead in order to live; by doing so, he redefines the place of death in post-revolutionary Mexico. In *Pedro Páramo*, the text give the dead agency, while simultaneously exposing the *limits* of an agency possessed only in death. By giving characters agency in death to revise history, Rulfo

creates a paradigm shift that looks back towards history rather than prophesying a hopeful future for modern Mexico.

Because of Rulfo's problematic representation of life and death, critics continue to interpret the relationship between the novella's main oppositions as inherently nihilistic. As Lanin Gyurko states in his essay "Rulfo's Aesthetic Nihilism: Narrative Antecedents of Pedro Páramo" (1972):

The fictional world of the contemporary Mexican author Juan Rulfo is one of reduction and denial. Character is stripped of external appearance and splintered into existential shards; plot is inconsequential or nonexistent; action decelerates into stasis. Narrative continuity is fragmented into bits of dialogue and truncated memories. Structural disintegration reflects the physical and moral dissolution of the universe. Man is reduced to a voice and sometimes to a mere echo. The most profound expression of Rulfo's nihilism is his first and only novel to date, *Pedro Páramo*, which depicts a nightmare of suffering founded upon the violent existence of a Mexican *cacique*. (451)

Like the majority of criticism surrounding Rulfo's novella,<sup>3</sup> Gyurko interprets the fragmented form of the novella to reflect a "structural disintegration" that ultimately suggests the "moral dissolution of the universe." By stating that in Rulfo's novella, "plot is inconsequential or nonexistent," Gyurko rejects the fragmentary structure of Rulfo's text as an intentional novelistic device that inhibits any literal interpretation of the work. Likewise, by claiming that the "action decelerates into stasis" in the novella, Gyurko reveals the perspective from which he is reading. Rather than perceiving the novella's agency (which occur post-mortem, from the grave), Gyurko reads Rulfo's work as providing a hopeless vision of the future. Indeed, this is perhaps true. Rulfo does not focus on the *future* of Comala, but rather on its *past*. The main action in the novella exists in the form of conversations, which occur in the present moment from the grave. However, I would argue that rather than decelerating "into stasis," the conversational action in Rulfo's novella serves a significant purpose: the dead characters in Rulfo's novella do not look to the future for societal change: rather, they alter their *past* by revising history in their

conversations. This redefining of the past functions as a paradigmatic shift. While the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) ignored the past in favor of building a progressive vision of the future,<sup>4</sup> Rulfo's novella presents a vision of Mexico that advocates for a revision of historical fallacies in the modern world.<sup>5</sup> In the following section, I discuss how the novella's structure blurs the main thematic oppositions, subordinating the *individual* identities of the characters to the *collective* voices of Comala's dead.

### I. Blurring Antitheses: Silence and noise, memory and forgetting, life and death

Formally, the fragmentary structure of the novella creates numerous ambiguities in the narrative, *blurring* the dead with the living, the past with the present, and silences with voices. By "fragmentary," I am referring to the novella's formal structure. Rulfo divides the novella into sixty-eight fragments that do not follow the linear chronology of the novella's narrative. Rather, the fragments are told from both the first and third person perspective, and encapsulate memories from the dead and testimonials from the "living dead"—the ghosts that inhabit Comala. While the use of fragments allows the narrative to leap from the past to the present with fluidity, it is significant to note that time within the fragments themselves is also non-linear. The novella is seemingly divided into two halves. The first half consists of fragments from the perspective of Juan Preciado on his journey to Comala and memories of the dead. However, the reader rarely understands to whom these memories belong until the second half of the novella. Rather than focusing on Juan Preciado's "journey," the second half of the novella presents fragments that consist of testimonials from the grave and memories from the dead. By distorting time within each fragment and in the novella's fragmentary structure as a whole, Rulfo underscores the

events or memories that cannot be told, the words that avoid articulation. The holes in the narrative as represented by the fragments produce a type of silence that only *suggests* what it could be trying to articulate, but is unable to.

While walking to Comala with his first guide, a mule-driver named Abundio,<sup>6</sup> they converse about why Juan is going to Comala:

–¿Y a qué va usted a Comala, si se puede saber? –oí que me preguntaban.  
 –Voy a ver a mi padre –contesté.  
 –¡Ah! –dijo él.  
 Y volvimos al silencio. (18)

[And why are you going to Comala, if you don't mind my asking? I heard the man say. I've come to see my father, I replied.  
 Umh! he said.  
 And again silence. (4)]

By stating “and again silence,” Juan’s narration implies the existence of a previous silence. However, up until this point in the narrative, the text never articulated the presence of a silence. By stating “and again,” Rulfo implies that a silence had existed before, but was not articulated in the narrative—forcing the reader to question what is *not* being told. In this way, Rulfo utilizes the fragmentary form in his novella to emphasize what is being *left out*, what is narratively silent. The fragments pointedly accentuate the gaps between the fragments, the events within the spaces of time that are told silently. Interestingly, Juan replies not to only Abundio, but rather to *multiple* people. In the original Spanish, “–oí que me preguntaban,” Rulfo purposefully uses the *plural* imperfect form of the verb ‘preguntar’ (to ask or question), to suggest the presence of multiple people, or even a chorus of people asking Juan, “Why are you going to Comala?” By suggesting the presence of multiple people through one person, Abundio, Rulfo disrupts the distinction between a single man and a group of people, which will later prove more relevant as

numerous characters blur with one another in the use of repetitive diction to create universality among all the characters and their experiences from the grave.

On Juan Preciado's voyage to Comala he describes his confusion while journeying through the town:

Y aunque no había niños jugando, ni palomas, ni tejados azules, sentí que el pueblo vivía. Y que si yo escuchaba solamente el silencio, era porque aun no estaba acostumbrado al silencio; tal vez porque mi cabeza venía llena de ruidos y de voces. De voces, sí. Y aquí, donde el aire era escaso, se oían mejor. Se quedaban dentro de uno pesadas. Me acorde de lo que me había dicho mi madre. «*Allá me oirás mejor. Estaré mas cerca de ti. Encontraras mas cercana la voz de mis recuerdos que la de mi muerte, si es que alguna vez la muerte ha tenido alguna voz.*» Mi madre...la viva. (21-22)

[And though there were no children playing, no doves, no blue-shadowed roof tiles, I felt that the town was alive. And that if I had heard only silence, it was because I was not yet accustomed to silence—maybe because my head was still filled with sounds and voices. Yes, voices. And here, where the air was so rare, I heard them even stronger. They lay heavy inside me. I remember what my mother had said: *You will hear me better there. I will be closer to you. You will hear the voice of my memories stronger than the voice of my death—that is, if death ever had a voice.* Mother...so alive. (8)]

At this moment in the novella, the reader is unsure how Comala could seem “alive” to Juan, with “no children playing, no doves” or “blue-shadowed roof tiles.” Juan merely “felt” that the town was alive. Yet, by stating, “if I had heard only silence,” Juan implies the potential that he had heard no one. In this way, Rulfo ambiguously blurs the distinction between speech and silence, by seemingly transforming silence into speech and vice versa. Juan justifies this by stating that he was perhaps “not yet accustomed to silence,” as if silence had a voice.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Rulfo gives a voice to the voiceless, noise to the silence, speech to the dead.

At this early point in the novella, Juan suggests that he cannot become “accustomed to silence” because his head “was still filled with sounds and voices.” Although Juan does not make it clear when his head was previously filled with sounds and voices, the voices of people in his head *disturb* his ability to hear the silence. In this regard, the voice of his mother and of Abundio

can be interpreted as a part of the voices in Juan's head, and therefore as not literally occurring. Although his sentence poignantly stops on the word "voices," Juan's next sentence repeats and emphasizes, "Yes, voices," as if confirming to an other.<sup>8</sup> Because of Juan emphasizes his recognition of the voices inside his head, the reader's retrospective knowledge that Abundio and his mother are dead allows him or her to consider the possibility that Juan has only been conversing with himself throughout his entire journey; or if not speaking to himself, then to another who is not yet mentioned (Dorotea).

As Juan continues his speech, however, he differentiates between the types of voices that he hears. The voices that "lay heavy inside" of him are both the voice of his mother's memories and "*the voice of [her] death.*" This duality of voices is precisely what encapsulates all the fragments in the novella: there are memories from the dead and there are speeches from the "living dead" of Comala. His mother's italicized words tell Juan that he will "*hear the voice of my memories stronger than the voice of my death—that is, if death ever had a voice.*" In addition to giving silence a voice, Rulfo gives memories and death voices too. The dead cannot speak, silence cannot possess a voice, and memories perhaps combine the two. The voices of memories—memories of the dead—are silent in one's head, but can be externalized through speech. The fact that Juan hears the "voices of memories stronger than the voice of [her] death," suggests that he will hear her as more alive than dead. The sentence that follows, "Mother...so alive," supports this claim as well, as Juan hears her memory stronger than he hears her death.

The text grants Juan's mother (Dolores) the ability to tell her own story, as Juan recounts what his mother had literally spoken concerning the reasons why she moved from Comala to Colima. In the conversation between Juan and doña Eduvigis—Juan's first guide once he reaches the town of Comala—the diction of his mother's story mirrors Juan's own story of why

he came to Comala. While Juan grew up in the town of Colima, Juan's mother had grown up in Comala. The similarity between the names of both towns functions to create a link between the two, a shared connection or recognition that one is a mirror of the other. Indeed, like Juan's ambiguous reasons for coming to Comala, Juan's mother presents identically uncertain motivations for venturing to Colima. While speaking to Eduvigis, Juan recalls what happened to his mother after she left Comala:

–La de cosas que han pasado –le dije–. Vivíamos en Colima arrimados a la tía Gertrudis que nos echaba en cara nuestra carga. «¿Por qué no regresas con tu marido?», le decía a mi madre.  
 »–¿Acaso él ha enviado por mí? No me voy si él no me llama. Vine porque te quería ver. Porque te quería, por eso vine.  
 »–Lo comprendo. Pero ya va siendo hora de que te vayas.  
 »–Si consistiera en mí.  
 Pensé que aquella mujer me estaba oyendo; pero noté que tenía borneada la cabeza como si escuchara algún rumor lejano. Luego dijo:  
 –¿Cuándo descansarás? (31-32)

[A lot has happened since then, I told Eduvigis. We lived in Colima. We were taken in by my Aunt Gertrudis, who threw it in our faces every day that we were a burden. She used to ask my mother, Why don't you go back to your husband? Oh? Has he sent for me? I'm not going back unless he asks me to. I came because I wanted to see you. Because I loved you. That's why I came. I know that. But it's time now for you to leave. If it was up to me... I thought that Eduvigis was listening to me. I noticed, though, that her head was tilted as if she were listening to some faraway sound. Then she said:  
 When will you rest? (19-20)]

Dolores' sentences, "I came because I wanted to see you. Because I loved you. That's why I came," mirror many of Juan's reasons for coming to see his father, Pedro Páramo. Previously, Juan had stated to Abundio, "–Voy a ver a mi padre" (18) [I've come to see my father (4)], and, "Y me quedé. A eso venía" (22) [I stayed. That was why I had come (9)]. Like his mother, Juan came because he wanted to see family. However, while Juan's mother ventures to Colima to escape the wrath of her husband Pedro Páramo, Juan journeys to Comala to *see* Pedro Páramo.

The mirroring of the statements, “that’s why I came,” spoken from Juan’s mother, and Juan’s statement, “that was why I had come,” function to create a parallel narrative between his mother and himself.

The similar reaction of Eduviges to Juan’s voice and to his mother’s voice further implies their mirrored narratives. After Juan stops telling his mother’s story, he notices that he merely “thought that Eduviges was listening” to him. Juan noticed that “her head was tilted as if she were listening to some faraway sound,” and not as if she was listening to Juan who supposedly was in close proximity to Eduviges. Juan’s recognition that Eduviges seemed to be listening to something or someone faraway echoes the distanced death voice of Dolores. When explaining to Juan that she had gotten word from his mother that he was coming to Comala, Eduviges ruminates on why his mother’s voice sounded odd. She states: “–Entonces esa fue la causa de que su voz se oyera tan débil, como si hubiera tenido que atravesar una distancia muy larga para llegar hasta aquí. Ahora lo entiendo. ¿Y cuánto hace que murió?” (23) [So that was why her voice sounded so weak, like it had to travel a long distance to get here. Now I understand. And when did she die? (10)]. Eduviges implies that the weakness in Dolores’ voice stems from the fact that she had died, and thus her voice “had to travel a long distance to get here.” The fact that Eduviges hears both Dolores’ and Juan’s voice as a “faraway sound,” suggests to the reader the possibility that Juan is dead too.

The novella’s ambiguity in the characters’ existence as dead or alive mirrors their questionable ability to speak, creating a paradoxical limit to the agency of the dead—the dead are given voices and simultaneously cannot speak, except in silences. This leads the reader to believe that rather than possessing a purely nihilistic view of death, Rulfo’s text exhibits a more complex relationship to death. The ability for the dead to speak in the novella—even if they can only



speak in silences—mirrors the uncertain textual dualities. The dual perspective of all speech acts elicits a disruption in the literal understanding of the narrative itself, exacerbating all ambiguities.<sup>9</sup>

The individual characters of Juan and his mother textually blur together, as one of Juan's potential motivations for journeying to Comala is his role as the surrogate for his mother's journey. However, this motivation is complicated by the ambiguity in the function of his mother's italicized text:

Yo imaginaba ver aquello a través de los recuerdos de mi madre; de su nostalgia, entre retazos de suspiros. Siempre vivió ella suspirando por Comala, por el retorno; pero jamás volvió. Ahora yo vengo en su lugar. Traigo los ojos con que ella miro estas cosas, porque mi dio sus ojos para ver: *“Hay allí, pasando el puerto de Los Colimotes, la vista muy hermosa de una llanura verde, algo amarilla por el maíz maduro. Desde ese lugar se ve Comala, blanqueando la tierra, iluminándola durante la noche.”* Y su voz era secreta, casi apagada, como si hablara consigo misma...Mi madre. (18)

[I had expected to see the town of my mother's memories, of her nostalgia—nostalgia laced with sighs. She had lived her lifetime sighing about Comala, about going back. But she never had. Now I had come in her place. I was seeing things through her eyes, as she had seen them. She had given me her eyes to see. *Just as you pass the gate of Los Colimotes there's a beautiful view of a green plain tinged with the yellow of ripe corn. From there you can see Comala, turning the earth white, and lighting it at night.* Her voice was secret, muffled, as if she were talking to herself...Mother. (4)]

The sentence “I had come in her place” specifically implies that Juan functions as the surrogate for his mother's journey towards death. At first Juan seemingly emphasizes his mother's imparted sight—“she had given me her eyes to see”—and the italicized text functions as a visual guide: his mother's words visualize the Comala of the past for Juan and the reader. Yet, after the italicized description of the first moment that one can see the town of Comala, Juan stresses the *voice* of his mother—as if the italicized text were not being remembered, but *spoken* from his mother's “muffled” voice.

The paragraph begins with the notion that Juan is potentially seeing a dual perspective of Comala: his present version and “the town of my mother’s memories.” Yet the emphasis at the end of the paragraph on his mother’s secret voice that sounded, “as if she were talking to herself,” presents an unexpected shift in the reader’s understanding of the italicized text. Rulfo uses italics to accentuate Dolores’ visual memories, by redundantly stating, “I was seeing things through her eyes, as she had seen them. She had given me her eyes to see.” Yet, Juan originally states that he only “had expected to see the town of [his] mother’s memories, of her nostalgia—nostalgia laced with sighs.” The opening supposition that Juan’s view of Comala is not in accordance with the Comala of his mother’s memories contradicts Juan’s following claim that he “was seeing things through her eyes, as she had seen them.” The phrase, “as she had seen them,” directly implies that Juan *does* see the town of his mother’s memories. However, by beginning the paragraph with the words “I had expected to see,” the reader is led to believe that Juan does not see what he expected to see. From this, the text implies that Juan possesses a dual perception of Comala that combines the sights of his mother’s past memories with his present picture of Comala. Likewise, Juan’s dual perception of Comala mirrors the duality of senses in his mother’s memories. The memories are not merely visual, as in pictures of the past, but rather they combine the visual with the auditory. His mother’s memories are “of her nostalgia—nostalgia laced with sighs.” The memories of his mother, of her nostalgia, are not only visually expressed, but specifically “laced with sighs,” with the sound of his mother’s voice.

Thus, Juan’s quest both is, and mirrors, his mother’s journey. Rulfo intentionally creates this dual perspective in Juan’s journey to mirror the fragmented structure of the novella, which presents images of the past and present, obscuring the distinction between dead and living, silences and voices. Furthermore, the fragmented structure of the novella allows numerous

stories and characters to fuse together through repeated diction, without any spatial-temporal connection to another. In one instance, Juan's diction echoes the words of the woman with whom Juan shares a grave: Dorotea, whose similar words are spoken at a later moment in the narrative time of the story. At the end of a conversation between Juan and Eduvigés, Eduvigés' last words are repeated in the narrative, where it had left off in the chronological time of the story. As the narrative continues, however, the text suggests that Eduvigés is dead and Juan was "waiting" for death:

–Más te vale, hijo. Más te vale –me dijo Eduvigés Dyada.  
Ya estaba alta la noche. La lámpara que ardía en un rincón comenzó a languidecer; luego parpadeó y terminó apagándose.  
Sentí que la mujer se levantaba y pensé que iría por una nueva luz. Oí sus pasos cada vez más lejanos. Me quede esperando. (42)

[You're lucky, son. Very lucky, Eduvigés Dyada told me.  
It was very late by now. The lamp in the corner was beginning to grow dim; it flickered and went out.  
I sensed that the woman rose, and I supposed she was leaving to get another lamp. I listened to her receding footsteps. I sat there, waiting. (32)]

Immediately after her words are repeated, the lamp "flickered and went out," as an ominous sign of the death to come. Eduvigés no longer speaks to Juan nor does Juan mention seeing her. Rather, he ambiguously states that he "sensed that the woman rose," and he merely "supposed" her reason for leaving. In this way, the text provides clues that Eduvigés is perhaps dead and has been dead since the beginning of the story. The image of Juan "waiting" for something unknown mirrors a later point in the narrative when Dorotea articulates a similar moment of waiting: "me senté a esperar la muerte" (67) [I sat down to wait for death (61)]. Although Juan states later, "allí me senté en el suelo a esperar el sueño" (42) [I lay down on the floor to wait for sleep to come (32)], the fact that death is what follows his waiting suggests the possibility that his waiting mirrors Dorotea's waiting: both characters wait for death.

After this moment in the narrative, Juan hears the haunting moan of a dead man. The proximity of the dead man's cry that Juan hears functions in direct opposition to the distanced voice of his mother, forcing the reader to question: Is this the voice of memory or the voice of death? After Juan hears the cry of the dead man, he remarks:

Me enderecé de prisa porque casi lo oí junto a mis orejas; pudo haber sido en la calle; pero, yo lo oí aquí, untado a las paredes de mi cuarto. Al despertar, todo estaba en silencio; solo el caer de la polilla y el rumor del silencio.

No, no era posible calcular la hondura del silencio que produjo aquel grito. Como si la tierra se hubiera vaciado de su aire. Ningún sonido; ni el del resuello, ni el del latir del corazón; como si se detuviera el mismo ruido de la conciencia. Y cuando terminó la pausa y volví a tranquilizarme, retornó el grito y se siguió oyendo por un largo rato: «¡Déjenme aunque sea el derecho de pataleo que tienen los ahorcados!» (43)

[I sat bolt upright because it had sounded almost in my ear. It could have been in the street, but I had heard it here, sticking to the walls of my room. When I awoke, everything was silent: nothing but the sound of moths working and the murmur of silence.

No, there was no way to judge the depth of the silence that followed that scream. It was as if the earth existed in a vacuum. No sound: not even of my breathing or the beating of my heart. As if the very sound of consciousness had been stilled. And just when the pause ended and I was regaining my calm, the cry was repeated; I heard it for a long, long while. You owe me something, even if it's nothing more than a hanged man's right to a last word. (32)]

Juan's statement, "it had sounded almost in my ear," and his emphasis on the "silence that followed that scream" function to question whether the scream really existed. Juan states that the scream was "sticking to the walls of the room," as if it were not a noise but a physical object that was capable of attaching itself to walls. Likewise, Juan comments that he only hears "the murmur of silence," suggesting that silence is capable of having a voice. In this way, Rulfo redefines silence: silence is not a lack of voices, but something that is filled with all the "murmurs" and voices of life. After Juan hears the murmur of silence, he can no longer hear his "breathing or the beating of [his] heart." In silence, Juan is unable to hear his life-beat, ultimately implying that the noisy peace of death had conquered him.

Juan's struggle to live against the paradoxical *voices* of silence reflects the uncertainty surrounding death in Rulfo's novella. The author empowers the dead, by enabling the deceased characters to express a voice of silence (the voice of the dead). However, Rulfo simultaneously exposes the *limits* of such an agency, since the voices in death are *silent*. In one instance, Juan hears the cry of a dead man, but the dead man's voice can only speak of his suffering, his voice can only cry. Damiana, another ghost Juan encounters on his "journey" to Comala, explains to Juan: "En este cuarto ahorcaron a Toribio Aldrete hace mucho tiempo. Luego condenaron la puerta, hasta que él se secara; para que su cuerpo no encontrara reposo" (43) [A long time ago they hanged Toribio Aldrete in this room. Then they locked the door and left him to turn to leather. So he would never find rest (33)]. Toribio's corpse was left behind "to turn to leather," so that he would never "find rest," so that he can wake again. By never allowing him to "find rest," the text suggests that Toribio's death resists a nihilistic death that would be silencing and promote "rest." Thus, Rulfo's text suggests that death *grants* individuals the agency to speak.

However, the content of the speeches of the dead in Comala elucidates the limits of their ability to possess agency through speaking. Toribio Aldrete screams, "«¡Déjenme aunque sea el derecho de pataleo que tienen los ahorcados!»" (43) [You owe me something, even if it's nothing more than a hanged man's right to a last word (32)]. In this instance, the dead man chooses to verbally express his "last word," which he was not given the "right to" articulate while he was alive. By allowing his words to be heard *in death* within the novella, Rulfo provides this dead man the right to express his lack of freedom, his "hanged man's right to a last word." In this way, the agency of speech that Rulfo grants the dead is limited by only articulating the *need* for speech—Toribio's "last word" heard in his death paradoxically is limited by his ability to only state his previously denied right, and not the personal last words themselves.

## II. Confronting Ambiguities and Mediating Oppositions: Revising an unknown past

Rulfo's text aesthetically demonstrates the need to negotiate an ambiguous and dual perception of the past. The vagueness serves a dual purpose: to *unite* all the characters in their repetitive diction and to *destroy* the individuality of each character by binding him or her to a collective voice. Often, events in the narrative are described twice. In one instance, the text repeats a memory from Pedro Páramo's childhood, yet the emphasis changes from the first memory to its mirrored double.

In an early fragment, the text guides the reader through the memory of Pedro Páramo's childhood experience of hearing that his father has been murdered:

Afuera en el patio, los pasos, como de gente que ronda. Ruidos callados. Y aquí, aquella mujer, de pie en el umbral; su cuerpo impidiendo la llegada del día; dejando asomar, a través de sus brazos, retazos de cielo, y debajo de sus pies regueros de luz; una luz asperjada como si el suelo debajo de ella estuviera anegado en lágrimas. Y después el sollozo. Otra vez el llanto suave pero agudo, y la pena haciendo retorcer su cuerpo.  
 –Han matado a tu padre.  
 –¿Y a ti quién te mató, madre? (36)

[Outside in the patio, the footsteps, like people wandering in circles. Muted sounds. And inside, the woman standing in the doorway, her body impeding the arrival of day: through her arms he glimpsed pieces of sky and, beneath her feet, trickles of light. A damp light, as if the floor beneath the woman were flooded with tears. And then the sobbing. Again the soft but penetrating weeping, and the grief contorting her body with pain.  
 They've killed your father.  
 And you, Mother? Who killed you? (24)]

Pedro Páramo "glimpsed pieces of sky," suggesting that through this woman's arms, he can only see a fragmented view of the life outside. This fragment seemingly ends in a dialogue between the unidentified character (Pedro Páramo) and his mother, who tells him, "They've killed your

father.” Yet the response, “And you, Mother? Who killed you?” is ambiguously spoken aloud to this woman. Before this last sentence, the entire fragment is told by an unknown narrator who describes in the third person what this boy saw and heard. By not framing the last sentence with a logical interjection from the narrator, who might have stated, “he thought to ask” after the question, it is unclear if this question is literally asked. Because “he” is never given a voice in these memories, and “he” never describes his own experiences in the first person, it is illogical for the narrative to immediately switch to the second person perspective, questioning, “And you, Mother? Who killed you?” Since the narrative was never in the second person, and this is not a quotation, this sentence is presented *silently*. Likewise, this entire speech is literally silent, since the recounted memories are not being spoken in the present moment.

In the second half of the novella, the text repeats Pedro Páramo’s same memory. However, when the same memory is repeated, the reader is made cognizant that it is Pedro Páramo’s memory. The purpose of this memory changes in its repeated double: Pedro Páramo recalls this memory, because the death of his son (Miguel) reminds him of his father’s death. In this way, Pedro Páramo blurs the identities of his father and his son, blending their individual *deaths*. The fragment is told by an unknown narrator speaking in the third person: “vino hasta su memoria la muerte de su padre” [his father’s death came to his mind] and “nunca quiso revivir ese recuerdo” (73) [he never liked to relive that memory (67)]. The narrator describes what “he” does, until the narrator eventually *names* him: “Pedro Páramo se había quedado sin expresión ninguna, como ido” (73) [Pedro Páramo stood there, his face empty of expression, as if he were far away (68)]. The same memory when recounted in the second half of the novella serves not to describe the experience that the memory recalls itself, but rather to explain the use of memory in

the novella: how the act of forgetting a death blurs with the process of remembering it. The narrator states:

Vino hasta su memoria la muerte de su padre, también en un amanecer como este; aunque en aquel entonces la puerta estaba abierta y traslucía el color gris de un cielo hecho de ceniza, triste, como fue entonces. Y a una mujer conteniendo el llanto, recostada contra la puerta. Una madre de la que él ya se había olvidado y olvidado muchas veces, diciéndole: «¡Han matado a tu padre!» Con aquella voz quebrada, deshecha, solo unida por el hilo del sollozo.

Nunca quiso revivir ese recuerdo porque le traía otros, como si rompiera un costal repleto y luego quisiera contener el grano. La muerte de su padre que arrastró otras muertes y en cada una de ellas estaba siempre la imagen de la cara despedazada; roto un ojo, mirando vengativo el otro. Y otra y otra más, hasta que la había borrado del recuerdo cuando ya no hubo nadie que se la recordara. (72-73)

[His father's death came to his mind. It had been an early dawn like this, although that morning the door had been open and he had seen the gray of a dismal, ashen sky seeping through. And a woman had been leaning against the doorframe, trying to hold back her sobs. A mother he had forgotten, forgotten many times over, was telling him: They've killed your father! In a broken quavering voice held together only by the thread of her sobs.

He never liked to relive that memory because it brought others with it, as if a bulging sack of grain had burst and he was trying to keep the kernels from spilling out. The death of his father dragged other deaths with it, and in each of them was always the image of that shattered face: one eye mangled, the other staring vengefully. And another memory, and another, until that death was erased from memory and there was no longer anyone to remember it. (67)]

The recollection of his father's death emphasizes Pedro Páramo's process of forgetting his mother, whom "he had forgotten, forgotten many times over." The act of emphasizing his forgetfulness, how Pedro Páramo had a mother whom "he had forgotten, forgotten many times over," serves only to remember her more—articulating the *impossibility* of forgetting her.

In this second version of the memory of his father's death, Pedro Páramo describes the "gray of a dismal, ashen sky seeping through" the doorway. In the first version, he does not focus on the color of the sky, but rather on the crying he witnessed pointedly from the perspective of a child. In the first memory, Pedro Páramo notes the color of the day in relation to tears, to the "damp light, as if the floor beneath the woman were flooded with tears." In this later version of



the same memory, Pedro Páramo relates the color of the sky on the day that his father died to the “early dawn” on the day his son, Miguel, died. The earlier version of the memory emphasizes the poetic and child-like understanding of Pedro Páramo’s experience—imagining that the trickles of light he sees on the floor were in some way related to the flooding of tears from the woman’s eyes.

In this way, the explication of the memory in the second half of the novella seeks to *revise* a previous conception of the original memory. The first memory of his father’s death emphasizes the infantile perspective of Pedro Páramo’s understanding of death. As a child, Pedro Páramo hears only the “muted sounds,” which are not understood. The first version of the memory ultimately ends with uncertainty, in a question: “And you, Mother? Who killed you?” In the first memory, the reader can identify Pedro Páramo’s transition from mourning the loss of his father to metaphorically attributing the same loss to his mother, as seen in the memory’s final interrogative. In contrast, the second version of the same memory presents no transition from Pedro Páramo’s consideration of his father’s death to his consideration of all the other deaths in his life. While in the first version of the memory Pedro Páramo attributes the loss of his father to the loss of his mother *metaphorically*, in the second version, the memory of his father’s death evokes the *literal* deaths of others: others who Pedro Páramo murdered as a result of that original death. While Pedro Páramo cannot make sense of his father’s death as a child, the second version of the same memory makes sense of his father’s death in the memory’s newfound function: his father’s death “dragged other deaths with it.” By transforming the single death of Pedro Páramo’s father into a multitude of deaths that Pedro Páramo is responsible for, the second version of the memory alters the meaning of the original memory. The memory of his father’s

death “dragged other deaths with it,” so as to forget the original death with the multitude of deaths that follow it; “until *that death* was erased from memory” (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup>

The voice of Pedro Páramo’s memories, of his long forgotten mother, evokes all the other deaths surrounding the life of Pedro Páramo. It can be inferred from the original passage that the weather first instigated Pedro Páramo to recall the memory of his father’s death. And, with the image of the doorframe, the voice of his mother is given an entryway to repeat itself, as the memory relives itself in the mind of Pedro Páramo. Yet, after hearing his mother’s voice, the description of Pedro Páramo reliving the memory shifts from having a verbal emphasis to a visual emphasis. His mother’s voice is not made powerful by its description as “quavering,” but rather by its created visual image: it was only held “together by the thread of her sobs.” The voice of her weeping is transformed from a sound into an image of string that connects each of her sobs to one another.

This instance of repeated and reinvented memory illustrates how the complex structure of Rulfo’s novella—with the multitude of voices, unidentifiable narrators, and fragmented composition—creates a linguistic connection between all the deaths, through a repetition in diction. When describing the sound of his mother’s voice when she tells Pedro Páramo that his father had been murdered, the narrator uses a phrase that intentionally mimics a phrase spoken earlier by Dorotea. The narrator states that the mother of Pedro Páramo spoke “in a broken quavering voice held together only by the thread of sobs.” This phrase directly mimics the words of Dorotea when describing her death to Juan:

–Cuando me senté a morir, ello rogó que me levantara y que siguiera arrastrando la vida, como si esperara todavía algún milagro que me limpiara de culpas. Ni siquiera hice el intento: «Aquí se acaba el camino –le dije–. Ya no me quedan fuerzas para más.» Y abrí la boca para que se fuera. Y se fue. Sentí cuando cayó en mis manos el hilito de sangre con que estaba amarrada a mi corazón. (72)

[When I sat down to die, my soul prayed for me to get up and drag on with my life, as if it still expected some miracle to cleanse me of my sins. I didn't even try. This is the end of the road, I told it. I don't have the strength to go on. And I opened my mouth to let it escape. And it went. I knew when I felt the little thread of blood that bound it to my heart drip into my hands. (66)]

The “thread of blood” that connects Dorotea’s soul to her heart mirrors the description of Pedro Páramo’s mother, whose “quavering voice” was held together by the “thread of her sobs.” In this way, a connection can be made between Dorotea’s “blood,” and his mother’s “sobs”: the mother’s sobbing pain is related to Dorotea’s blood, her sadness mirrors death. Likewise, Pedro’s mother’s “quavering voice” can be connected to Dorotea’s soul or heart, since they both require a type of “thread” to hold them together. While a thread of blood binds Dorotea’s soul to her heart, a thread of sobs holds together the voice of Pedro Páramo’s mother. What desires preservation, in both cases, is the life of these women: their soul, their heart, and their ability to speak—the voice of their sobs.<sup>11</sup>

### III. Temporality in *Pedro Páramo*: The Revolution and redefining death

Because the fragmentary structure of Rulfo’s novella inhibits a clear understanding of the literal plot, critics often neglect the *present* as a significant temporal space in *Pedro Páramo*. For example, Deborah Cohn, in her book, *History and Memory in the Two Souths: Recent Southern and Spanish American Fiction* (1999), discusses the cultural, national and regional significance of Rulfo’s novella in terms of its presentation of history and memory. Cohn discusses the significance of presenting Juan’s journey as a “flashback” when she states:

This retrospectively recasts the action up to this point as a flashback, the duration of which is compressed into that of Juan and Dorotea’s dialogue. The entire first half of the novel is thus shown to be a “wrinkle” in time containing multiple internal regressions of

its own. Rather than advance the narrative action, these wrinkles retrace steps only to return, fatalistically, to the present, to the denouement whose disclosure preceded and precipitated the retrospective narration; like anaphora, they are structural restraints on the flow of time. . . . Through the endless retelling of prior events, gradually, the lived and recalled past fuses with the “present” of posthumous remembrance. In any event, with characters who are dead, all action can only be in the past, while the present and future as spaces of choice no longer exist. (172)

However, Cohn neglects the fact that there *does* exist a present in the novella. Conversations from the grave influence Juan’s understanding of history in his present state of death, and ultimately affect the reader’s understanding of all the characters and events in the novella. While in the grave, Juan is able to hear the memories (or the voices of memory) of the other characters. At one point, Juan hears Susana San Juan’s voice recounting the death of her mother, and asks Dorotea, “—¿Eres tú la que ha dicho todo eso, Dorotea?” (82) [Was that you talking, Dorotea? (78)]. In his confusion, Juan converses with Dorotea about Susana, as the reader simultaneously gathers more information on Susana’s past life in Comala. Although in the grave, Dorotea and Juan still possess an *active* interest in understanding the former lives of the people who died in Comala. They desire to hear their speeches, implying that their memories, the past, and its meaning still possess significance from the grave.

Like Cohn historian and literary critic Claudio Lomnitz denies the agency of the dead in Rulfo’s novella, by claiming the ghosts of Comala are trapped in the present: “Life both in Luvina and in Comala is suspended in the present. Not even death can awaken it. Like purgatory, the present is a prison. . . . In Rulfo’s writings, there is no future, even in death” (Lomnitz 407). However, a close reading of Rulfo’s fragmentary scenes from the grave elucidates the agency of the dead to reconcile the meaning and understanding of history in their present post-mortem state. In the same narrative fragment in which Juan hears Susana’s voice from the grave, Dorotea instructs Juan to actively listen to the moans of the dead in order to gather knowledge of the past:

“–Cuando vuelvas a oírla me avisas, me gustaría saber lo que dice” (83) [When you hear her again, let me know. I’d like to know what she’s saying (79)]. Dorotea’s present interest in the words of the dead suggests that an interest in life persists from the grave. The attention paid to “what she’s saying” post-mortem implies that what Susana says, despite her being dead, still *matters* and inherently possesses an important effect on how one views the past and understands memories from their life.

However, it is uncertain how accurately Juan hears these voices, since Juan describes the voice, ambiguously as “un murmullo” (83) [a murmuring (79)]. By correcting Juan, stating, “–No, no es ella. Eso viene de más lejos, de por este otro rumbo. Y es voz de hombre” (83) [No, that isn’t her. That’s farther away and in the other direction. And that’s a man’s voice (79)], Dorotea implies the inherent difficulty of hearing these voices correctly, as a man’s voice and a woman’s voice are not clearly distinguishable from one another in the grave. Dorotea further blurs the distinction between the living and the dead when she states: “–Lo que pasa con estos muertos viejos es que en cuanto les llega la humedad comienzan a removerse. Y despiertan” (83) [What happens with these corpses that have been dead a long time is that when the damp reaches them they begin to stir. They wake up (79)]. Unlike Lomnitz’s statement that asserts, “not even death can awaken [life],” the dead in Comala *literally* “wake up” and have their voices heard by other dead inhabitants of Comala. In this way, the dead are not dead (at least, in the normative conception of “death”), but rather they “wake up,” and are capable of making an impact on historical memory as if they were still alive.

Thus, Rulfo does not portray the present as “a prison,” like Lomnitz declares, but rather as a temporal space that is capable of mediating conflicting historical accounts in death. By specifying that the corpses that “wake up” are the ones that “have been dead *a long time*”

(emphasis added), Dorotea creates a positive correlation between the length of time that one has been dead and the ability to “wake up” and speak. In this way, the novella suggests that the longer one waits silently in the grave, the sooner one is able to speak again, providing a space of time to contemplate the actions and events of one’s previous life. The dead of Rulfo’s novella must reflect on their past to revise their fictional history and have agency in the present (by speaking). The voices of the dead and their words are thus meaningful in their expression of emotions and reflections on the past. However, Cohn states: with “the endless retelling of prior events, gradually, the lived and recalled past fuses with the ‘present’ of posthumous remembrance.” Cohn denies the “present of posthumous remembrance” any significance or value as its own temporal plane. The voices of posthumous remembrance provide an interesting counterpoint to the memories and flashbacks, since they provide an alternate perspective on Comala’s history.

From the beginning of the novella, Rulfo portrays Pedro Páramo as an evil cacique, which stands in contrast to the testimonials from the dead who present an alternative portrait of Pedro Páramo. One reason why Juan ventures to Comala is to seek vengeance for his mother. At the very beginning of the text, Juan recounts what his mother instructs him to do in Comala: “– No vayas a pedirle nada. Exígele lo nuestro. Lo que estuvo obligado a darme y nunca me dio...El olvido en que nos tuvo, mi hijo, cóbraselo caro” (17) [Don’t ask him for anything. Just what’s ours. What he should have given me but never did...Make him pay son, for all those years he put us out of his mind (3)]. The words “make him pay” suggest that Pedro Páramo had wronged Dolores Preciado by ignoring them (putting them “out of his mind”), and denying them something (“what he should have given me but never did”). Furthermore, when Fulgor Sedano

asks Pedro Páramo to continue working as the family's business manager, he recalls what don Lucas (Pedro's father) said about his son:

«¿De dónde diablos habrá sacado esas mañas el muchacho? –pensó Fulgor Sedano mientras regresaba a la Media Luna–. Yo no esperaba de él nada. “Es un inútil,” decía de él mi difunto patro don Lucas. “Un flojo de marca.” Yo le daba la razón. “Cuando me muera vayase buscando otro trabajo, Fulgor.” “Sí, don Lucas.” “Con decirle, Fulgor, que he intentado mandarlo al seminario para ver si al menos eso le da para comer y mantener a su madre cuando yo les falte; pero ni a eso se decide.” “Usted no se merece eso, don Lucas.” “No se cuenta con él para nada, ni para que me sirva de bordon servira cuando yo esté viejo. Se me malogró, qué quiere usted, Fulgor.” (47)

[I wonder where in hell the boy learned those tricks, Fulgor Sedano thought on his second trip to the Media Luna. I never expected anything from him. He's worthless, my old *patron* don Lucas used to say. A born weakling. And I couldn't argue. When I die, Fulgor, you look for another job. I will, don Lucas. I tell you, Fulgor, I tried sending him to the seminary, hoping that at last he would have enough to eat and could look after his mother when I'm no longer here. But he didn't even stick with that. You deserve better, don Lucas. Don't count on him for anything, not even to care for me when I'm old. He's turned out bad, Fulgor, and that's that. (37)]

By stating that “he's worthless,” “a born weakling,” and “he's turned out bad,” don Lucas suggests an inherent evil to Pedro Páramo's character. However, not all the members of Comala share this opinion of Pedro Páramo. By providing an image of Pedro Páramo as an immoral person from the testimony of his own father, the text negatively portrays Pedro Páramo. While don Lucas refuses to defend the actions of his son, Pedro Páramo goes to great lengths to defend the *murders* of his own son, Miguel: “–No tienes pues por qué apurate, Fulgor. Esa gente no existe” (71) [There's nothing to worry about, Fulgor. Those people don't really count (65)]. By ignoring his family, and creating a hierarchy among people who “count” or do not count, the text presents a portrait of Pedro Páramo as an inherently evil leader.

However, the text presents conflicting opinions about Pedro Páramo's character, as some characters attest to his *positive* nature. In the middle of the novella, an unidentified man's voice

describes his memory of how Pedro Páramo killed him. Yet, rather than describing how Pedro Páramo represents an evil *cacique*, this man describes the positive result of his death:

«...Tenía sangre por todas partes. Y al enderezarme chapotí con mis manos la sangre regada en las piedras. Y era mía. Montonaes de sangre. Pero no estaba muerto. Me di cuenta. Supe que don Pedro no tenía intenciones de matarme. Solo de darme un susto. Quería averiguar si yo había estado en Vilmayo dos meses antes. El día de San Cristóbal? Yo chapoteaba entre mi sangre y le preguntaba: “¿En cuál boda, don Pedro?” No, no, don Pedro, yo no estuve. Si acaso, pasé por allí. Pero fue por casualidad... Él no tuvo intenciones de matarme. Me dejó cojo, como ustedes ven, y manco si ustedes quieren. Pero no me mató. Dicen que se me torció un ojo desde entonces, de la mala impresión. Lo cierto es que me volví más hombre. El cielo es grande. Y ni quien lo dude.» (83)

[...I was covered with blood. And when I tried to get up my hands slipped in the puddles of blood in the rocks. It was *my* blood. Buckets of blood. But I wasn't dead. I knew that. I knew that don Pedro hadn't meant to kill me. Just give me a scare. He wanted to find out whether I'd been in Vilmayo that day two years before. On San Cristobal's day. At the wedding. What wedding? Which San Cristobal's day? There I was slipping around in my own blood, and I asked him just that: Which wedding, don Pedro? No! No, don Pedro. I wasn't there. I may have been near there, but only by chance... He never meant to kill me. He left me lame—you can see that—and, sorry to say, without the use of my arm. But he didn't kill me. They say that ever since then I've had one wild eye. From the scare. I tell you, though, it made me more of a man. The heavens are bountiful. And don't you ever doubt it. (79)]

Despite the “buckets of blood,” this man does not consider himself to be dead, stating, “but I wasn't dead. I knew that.” By detailing and emphasizing his blood, this man inherently implies that he had physically died, and yet by considering himself to still be alive, Rulfo inverts the normative understanding of death. To die is not to lose one's blood or physical body, but ostensibly to have been killed with *reason*. After emphasizing that he “knew” that he was not dead, this man states, “I knew that don Pedro hadn't *meant* to kill me,” as if Pedro Páramo's intention to murder him specifically dictates whether he is dead or alive. The man repeats, “he never meant to kill me. He left me lame,” suggesting that dying is not death, in the sense that it stops an individual from continuing to act or make an impact on the world. Rather, this man



implies that being dead only leaves one “lame,” or slightly impaired in his case, “without the use of [his] arm.”

Given that this man insists that don Pedro never killed him, it can be inferred that death is not necessarily the removal of one’s life and ability to speak, act, or function. Thereby, it is possible that multiple conceptions of death exist in this novella—there is one’s literal death (the death of one’s physical body) and likewise a kind of spiritual death. By revising the conventional notions of death by denying any of the characters “spiritual death” in the novella, the confounding ambiguities about the motivations and reasons behind all actions and deaths do not cancel each other out, but rather exist simultaneously and provide a more detailed and nuanced portrait of the happenings in Comala. Likewise, this man’s final statements regarding his murder by Pedro Páramo illuminate the changed perception of Comala’s *cacique*: “They say that ever since then I’ve had one wild eye. From the scare. I tell you, though, it made me more of a man. The heavens are bountiful. And don’t you ever doubt it.” This character ultimately describes his murder as having a positive effect, since it “made him more of a man.” The words “more of a man,” imply that he is more alive after death than before death. Likewise, by ending with a paradisiacal impression of the heavens, this man implies that one is more able to live in the “bountiful” heavens than in the barren wasteland of Pedro Páramo’s Comala.

In this way, the text does not solely provide an image of Pedro Páramo as evil, but rather actively demonstrates his positive nature from the perspective of the dead, in order to mediate two conflicting historical perspectives. When describing Pedro Páramo’s infinite love for Susana San Juan, Dorotea states:

«Y ya cuando le faltaba poco para morir vinieron las guerras esas de los ‘cristeros’ y la tropa echó rialada con los pocos hombres que quedaban. Fue cuando yo comencé a morir de hambre y desde entonces nunca me volví a emparejar.

»Y todo por las ideas de don Pedro, por sus pleitos de alma. Nada más porque se le murió la mujer, la tal Susanita. Ya te has de imaginar si la quería. (84-85)

[And not long before he died we had that Cristeros war, and the troops drained off the few men he had left. That was when I really began to starve, and things were never the same again.

And all of it was don Pedro's doing, because of the turmoil of his soul. Just because his wife, that Susanita, had died. So you tell me whether he loved her. (81)]

Despite her death being inadvertently caused by “don Pedro's doing,” Dorotea suggests that “the turmoil of his soul” was more powerful than anything else: his love for his wife—that “Susanita”—functions as the affectionate motivator propagating Pedro Páramo's mass murders. Likewise, by ending her speech in the second person, stating, “so you tell me whether he loved her,” the text expands the dialogue between Juan and Dorotea to the reader who questions the morality of Pedro Páramo from this new perspective. The text already provides numerous reasons prior to this moment in the text for why Dorotea died. Yet, Dorotea provides another one, by stating, “that was when I really began to starve,” as if there were levels of starvation, a hierarchy of deaths, as if how one dies were structured according to a larger chain of command. Because the text provides numerous, confounding reasons for almost every action in the past (why Juan came to Comala, how Juan died, how Dorotea died), the novella presents actions as occurring multiple times, as if one could die repeatedly.

The repetitive deaths inherent to *Pedro Páramo* further elucidate the title character's representation of a typical revolutionary leader. As Lomnitz comments: “During the revolution, political assassination became a way of maintaining the outward trappings of legality and legitimacy while consolidating real political power. Assassination also had the secondary benefit of weaving a net of complicity and silence within the revolutionary leadership” (Lomnitz 390). The mysterious ambiguities surrounding all the deaths in *Pedro Páramo* similarly possess “a net of complicity and silence,” stemming from the “revolutionary leadership” exemplified in the

character of Pedro Páramo. A feeling of uncertainty that surrounded most political deaths in Mexico during the Revolution mirrors the ambiguous and multiple representations of death in Rulfo's novella. At one point, Dorotea sits down to wait for death—as if death were in her control. In this instance, however, Dorotea died because she “really began to starve.” Likewise, Juan goes to Comala because he came to see his father, while he simultaneously went in his mother's place. In one given reason, the character is given agency over their actions or death, while in the other someone else is given agency (Pedro Páramo, Dolores Preciado).

However, the numerous and conflicting motivations of the novella's actions can also be interpreted metaphorically. Juan provides a seemingly infinite number of reasons for why he came to Comala, and yet by the middle of the novella the reasons are no longer important once it is revealed that this is all being recounted post-mortem. It no longer is significant *why* he came to Comala, because he is already there and cannot leave. Despite his ambiguous agency to get there, Juan possesses a clear agency posthumously as he listens to the moaning of the dead and builds a more comprehensive portrait of Comala's history. Likewise, the numerous reasons why Pedro Páramo murdered the inhabitants of Comala imply the inherent complexity of his decision, the complicated nature of understanding any death, any event.

Ultimately, by giving the dead agency to revise the history of a town and the history of a people, Rulfo uses the dead in his novella to discuss Comala's historical fallacies and to suggest similarities with Mexico's national history. However, literary criticism surrounding Rulfo's novella predominately has interpreted the town of Comala in *Pedro Páramo* as a town of futile hope and endless failure to communicate. In *Alternating Current* (1973), Octavio Paz writes:

Hence the hero is a dead man: it is only after death that we can return to the Eden where we were born. But Rulfo's main character returns to a garden that has burned to a cinder, to a lunar landscape. The theme of return becomes that of an implacable judgment: Pedro Páramo's journey home is a new version of the wanderings of a soul in Purgatory.

...Pedro, Peter, the founder, the rock, the origin, the father, the guardian, and the keeper of the keys of Paradise, has died; Páramo (the Spanish word for wasteland) is his garden of long ago, now a desert plain, thirst and drought, the parched whispers of shadows and an eternal failure of communication. Our Lord's garden: Pedro's wasteland. (15)

While Paz interprets Rulfo's work as "a new version" of an old literary tradition (of return, of the wandering souls in purgatory), I would like to suggest that Rulfo redefines the normative conception of "return." Juan Preciado's journey home is a quest seeking to revise history. The novella presents a dual portrait of the man Pedro Páramo, describing him as both an evil *cacique* that murdered everyone and simultaneously as a man who loved his family above all. By creating a dual perspective of Pedro Páramo, the novella seeks to mediate conflicting versions of its past history. From the first lines of the novella, the text states that Pedro Páramo has died, inherently suggesting the perspective from which one should interpret the text. Because everyone in Rulfo's novella is dead—most importantly, Pedro Páramo—Rulfo provides his characters with agency in death, by revising the history of Comala's people and its past. Paz focuses his interpretation of the novella on the *present destruction* of Comala and the fact that Pedro Páramo is dead. Paz ostensibly finds fault in the fact that "the hero is a dead man," presuming a lack of agency in death, advocating for a future-oriented revolutionary outlook and not a paradigm that is guided towards the past, towards history. However, I argue that rather than looking towards the future for hope of change, Rulfo inverts the process of revolutionary change by providing his characters with the agency to *change history* by seeking to revise their ambiguous past in death.

For example, when Juan hears the moaning of Susana San Juan from the grave, Dorotea instructs Juan to listen to her. However, Juan struggles to hear Susana's voice, and thus Juan tells his grave-mate:

—No se le entiende. Parece que no habla, sólo se queja.  
 —¿Y de qué se queja?  
 —Pues quién sabe.

–Debe ser por algo. Nadie se queja de nada. Para bien la oreja.  
 –Se queja y nada más. Tal vez Pedro Páramo la hizo sufrir.  
 –No creas. Él la quería. Estoy por decir que nunca quiso a ninguna mujer como a ésa.  
 (84)

[I can't understand a thing. I don't think she's talking; just moaning.  
 What's she moaning about?  
 Well, who knows.  
 It must be about something. No one moans just to be moaning. Try harder.  
 She's moaning. Just moaning. Maybe Pedro Páramo made her suffer.  
 Don't you believe it. He loved her. I'm here to tell you that he never loved a woman like  
 he loved that one. (80)]

The moaning of the dead, the lack of “talking” or speech, is given significance by Dorotea who states, “no one moans just to be moaning.” In this way, moaning is given emotional significance by representing the voice of death—the voice of history—through the limited speech of their moans. Susana is able to communicate in her death, yet paradoxically only through moaning. Despite the difficulty for Juan in understanding what her moaning means, Dorotea emphasizes the importance of listening to the dead, suggesting that their death does not render their feelings unimportant, their opinions unconsidered, or their words mute. In addition to the words Juan heard from the unidentifiable dead man who claims Pedro Páramo did not kill him, Dorotea provides an alternate perspective from which to interpret the history of Pedro Páramo's mass murders.

In this way, death is not presented as an easily understandable event in Rulfo's novella. The presence of death in his text, however, mirrors a social reality during the time when Rulfo was writing. Lomnitz articulates: “In sum, if the Díaz regime tamed internecine conflict and brought mortal enemies together in a grand official funeral...the era as a whole was haunted. Displaced ways of life, the wrenching movement of capitalist expansion, modern statecraft, and the mechanization of death all brought the dead back as witnesses, ghosts and omens” (Lomnitz 381). In *Pedro Páramo*, the dead are similarly “witnesses” to the old era's wrongdoings, and they

haunt the coming generation. In the novella, the dead seem to possess a strong understanding of the complexities of their own death—while the reader struggles to keep track of the contradictions, ambiguities, and impossibilities of their descriptions. In this way, Rulfo metaphorically portrays the impossibility of understanding death, war, and crime by using the novella's fragmented structure to disrupt the literal understanding of events. This act functions to provide a space to articulate any opinion's counterpoint: Pedro Páramo is good and evil; Juan both possesses and lacks agency; and the unidentifiable man is both dead and simultaneously considers himself to be alive, to be “more of a man”—a mortal post-mortem.

Chapter 3 Existing in Silence: The Linguistic Deconstruction of the Narrator's Authority  
and the Discordant Language of Agency in Platonov's *The Potudan River*

“So then you'd know, you'd seen the proof, that things would always be as they had always been; that nothing came of catastrophe; that chaos invoked stasis.”

—Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (152)

In Andrei Platonov's short story *The Potudan River* (*Reka Potudan'* 1937), the reader follows a former Red Army soldier, the young Nikita Firsov, as he returns from the civil war to his home “в малоизвестный уездный город” (1) [in a provincial town (119)].<sup>1</sup> Written from the third person perspective, the narrator of Platonov's text articulates Nikita's disheartening struggle to live. The lives of the main characters are surrounded by extreme poverty, hunger and hopelessness. Once Nikita returns to his tiny hometown, his father expresses surprise that his last living son returned from the war seemingly unharmed. To pass the time, Nikita works with his father in a furniture workshop, making wooden cradles and coffins. While walking through his empty town, Nikita by chance runs into a woman whom he had loved before the war—Lyuba. In an attempt to reconnect with her, Nikita visits Lyuba often and brings her food, since she lives alone and has no money. Eventually, Nikita and Lyuba decide to marry. Despite his love for Lyuba, Nikita seeks an escape from his monotonous life, from his work with his father, from Lyuba, and even from himself. Nikita wakes up one morning and decides to follow a beggar out of town until they reach a crowded bazaar, simply to have something to do. In order to forget himself, Nikita stops speaking, remembering, and worrying about himself and his life at the bazaar. Nikita loses all humanity at the bazaar, and he is ultimately reduced to a thing that cannot hear, speak, understand, or care about life. After living at the bazaar for a long period of time, his

father recognizes him while shopping at the bazaar (unaware that Nikita was living there), and Nikita remembers how to speak again and recalls his former life with Lyuba. Once his father informs Nikita that Lyuba tried to drown herself in the Potudan river from her sorrows, Nikita gathers the will to return once again to his small village town, and to finally consummate his marriage with Lyuba and continue the endless struggle to live. In a sense, Platonov's story has no plot. The story's uniqueness lies in Platonov's ambiguous grammar, speech, rhetoric and thematic structure. By writing a story that has no significant plot and employing an ambiguous use of language, Platonov creates an esoteric world that mirrors the uncertain times in Soviet Russia. Before the literary stylistics of the work can be analyzed, specific historical background of Platonov's story must be discussed.

Since the impoverished reality of the poor classes in Soviet Russia was presented as uncertain, the story does not present a singularly pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet perspective. In her critical study *Andrei Platonov* (1973), Marion Jordan reflects upon the uncertainty surrounding Platonov's literary career and potential exile from Moscow, the facts of which remain wholly ambiguous even today. She states: "There are rumours that Platonov was 'exiled' from Moscow on two occasions in the thirties—firstly after the publication of 'For Future Use' in 1931, and secondly after the publication of *The River Potudan* in 1937. Whatever the truth of that may be Platonov certainly found it almost impossible to get his best stories published" (Jordan 58). Platonov's themes of oppression and poverty could be taken as direct reflections of daily reality in Soviet Russia during the 1930s, ostensibly writing against the enforced Socialist Realism. As Jordan states, "Platonov's stories were clearly neither 'ideologically sound' nor imbued with the correct 'party spirit.' Platonov could, of course, have made out a good claim that they were 'national' in character, but this was not the kind of national character that Socialist Realism had



in mind” (55). While many critics focus on the struggle to live endured by the three main characters, it is primarily because of the unidentified narrator’s authorial control in *The Potudan River* that the work creates a deeper level of textual, political, and existential tension between Platonov’s fiction and Soviet reality. In the following section, I will discuss the unique use of language employed by Platonov’s narrator: a type of language that separates the content of the narrative voice from the form of its articulation.

### I. The Narrator’s Intentional Misrepresentation of Platonov’s World and Characters

In effect, the narrator uses a contradiction between form and content to possess an authorial control over the plot of the story and the identities of the characters. *The Potudan River* deliberately creates an uncertainty surrounding all events, in order to circumvent direct articulation of the story’s saddening themes. At the intersection of Platonov’s poetics (the narrator’s misrepresentations and contradictions) with the story’s main themes (the characters’ struggle to live) stands the question of authority. The narrator controls the identities of the main characters—Nikita, the father, and Lyuba—by misrepresenting the story’s events and contradicting the story’s evidence that provides the characters with an imposed and collectivized identity and denies the characters individuality.<sup>2</sup> Platonov’s story parallels Soviet politics, by employing an authoritative narrator: the authoritative narrator of Platonov’s text, like the Soviet authorities, *attempts* to impose a singular, collective identity on all of the characters. However, the narrator ultimately fails to impose the collectivized identity onto Nikita, since Nikita loses all desire to live, loses all desire to possess an identity. In this way, Platonov’s work functions as a

critique of Soviet methodology. It is important to note that Platonov's genius stems not from his political critique, but from his unique use of language and his imposition of a narrator who speaks in a manner that contradicts the content of his authorial voice. Although my reading of his text analyzes the poetics of his political purport, it would be incomprehensible to neglect the ingenuity of Platonov's literary masterpiece in terms of its artistry and literariness, excluding all socio-historical interpretations. *The Potudan River* is a story that transcends artistic norms, strictly political readings, and normative linguistics. It is because of this that Platonov's work is able to say so much, while the work was never published in his lifetime, and Platonov himself was ultimately silenced as a writer.

Platonov's narrator embodies the voice of Soviet authority by rendering the literal plot of the story ambiguous and creating false assumptions about the main characters. Specifically, the narrator *mirrors* the authoritative Party rhetoric of the Soviet censors, in the intentional misrepresentation of life. Likewise, through the use of assumptions and contradictions, the Soviet censors misrepresented the opinions of authors. For example in a report from the Politburo archives, Boris Volin, the head of Glavlit (the main censorship body in Soviet Russia), demonstrates the common employment of contradictions and assumptions as a method of maintaining the Party's authority:

Among our best and most prominent writers, there are none who have been hurt by Glavlit and are sharply displeased with our censorship. Authors usually accept individual comments from Glavlit that improve the text politically. Publishers do not exactly welcome Glavlit, for a censor, of course, causes them quite a few unpleasantnesses of a political and material nature. Authors and editors affected by Glavlit's influence frequently think that it is not they who are to blame for their political mistakes but Glavlit for discovering them. (qtd. in Clark 263)

While at first Volin states that there have been no writers "hurt by Glavlit and are sharply displeased with our censorship," his statement ends by contradictorily expressing the hidden

disapproval of the authors who were negatively “affected by Glavlit’s influence.” The last sentence, “authors and editors affected by Glavlit’s influence frequently think that it is not they who are to blame for their political mistakes but Glavlit for discovering them,” inherently contradicts Volin’s opening sentence stating that there are no “prominent writers” who were “displeased” with the censorship enforcement of Glavlit. By presuming that authors are even capable of making political “mistakes,” Volin states that there are right and wrong political attitudes, imposing a right and wrong type of literature. Yet by assuming the authors “blame” Glavlit “for discovering” their political “mistakes,” Volin’s statement makes it unclear whether political correctness is static. If there was a definitive right and wrong political attitude that the writers must employ according to the Party censor’s enforcement of Socialist Realism, then there would be no need for the discovery of political mistakes since they would be apparent. Yet, Volin suggests that authors who are censored have incorrect political attitudes that Glavlit must discover—presenting the censorship program as an investigation of anti-Party testaments. In this way, Volin blurs the distinction between authors who intentionally make “political mistakes” and the censors who discover political representations of anti-Party speech.

Through Volin’s use of contradictions and an ambiguous expression of the authors’ feelings towards the censorship program, Volin demonstrates how Socialist Realism became a tool for Party politics that extended far beyond the regulations imposed upon literature and the arts. Through the assumption that the writers blame Glavlit “for discovering them,” Volin inherently presents his organization as an investigatory operation filled with watchmen. Likewise, the assumptions that Volin makes regarding the writers directly mirrors Platonov’s narrator, who similarly makes assumptions about the identities of the characters in *The Potudan River*. In this way Platonov’s narrator can be seen as a representation of Soviet censors that

misrepresented the true feelings and lives of its citizens and artists, in order to impose a *vision* of reality that was in contrast with the reality of Soviet life during the 1930s. Platonov's prose distinctly applies a contrast between its content and its form, ultimately creating an ambiguity in the understanding of the text—ultimately signifying the inherent enigma of the Soviet reality it represents.

Platonov adopts a unique use of grammar to create ambiguity within his prose language.

As Joseph Brodsky, in his preface to the *Collected Works of Andrei Platonov* (1978), writes:

In general it should be noted that the first victim of talk about Utopia—desired or already attained—is grammar; for language, unable to keep up with thought, begins to gasp in the subjunctive mood and starts to gravitate towards timeless categories and constructions; as a consequence of which the ground starts to slip out from under even simple nouns, and an aura of arbitrariness arises around them. (ix)

Platonov's intentional use of unique grammatical stylizations allows him to create an “aura of arbitrariness,” such that what is being said holds less authority in the ambiguity of speech. By intentionally manipulating the grammar of his sentences, Platonov demonstrates his authorial control over the writing of his text, while simultaneously the lack of control over the thematic repercussions of his ambiguous grammar.

In Platonov's text, ambiguous diction—specifically in terms of grammar—allows the narrator to present the story as a return from the civil war, while intimating the possibility that the war is still not over and there is no possibility for return. In this way, the narrator possesses full control over the story via grammar by intentionally rendering the story's circumstances—the soldiers' return from war—as uncertain. From the very first sentence of Platonov's work, the narrative voice creates an ambiguity surrounding the time and place of the story. By shifting between the war ending and the war continuing to exist, the text problematizes the spatiotemporal existence of the soldiers' return home. The narrator states: “Трава опять отросла

по набитым грунтовыми дорогам гражданской войны, потому что война прекратилась” (1) [Grass was growing again on the packed dirt roads of the civil war, for the fighting had stopped (118)]. The soldiers presumably are walking home on the “packed dirt roads” and the grass was growing again, because the war was over. Yet, despite the war’s conclusion in time, the grammar of Platonov’s sentence transforms the civil war from an event in time to a geographical space. The narrator states that the grass began to grow “on the packed dirt *roads of the civil war*” (emphasis added), suggesting that the civil war has become a part of the landscape and possesses a physical existence. In this way, despite the fact that “the fighting had stopped,” the civil war still exists—not in time, but in space. By forcing the war to bear physical significance on the lives of all soldiers and people, war is not something escapable in time or space. The soldiers fight in the war and they walk home on the roads of war. Whether fighting or walking, the war does not disappear in Platonov’s story.<sup>3</sup> War functions as a bleak backdrop for all the sad events and impoverished lives that the characters must endure in *The Potudan River*. By creating a contrast between the form and the content of the narrator’s voice, the literal plot of Platonov’s story is left uncertain for the reader.

In the beginning of Platonov’s story, the narrator creates multiple portraits of the soldiers, by describing them as happy people returning from a great war, different people than the soldiers who went to war, and simultaneously saddened people who changed from the war:

Они шли теперь жить точно впервые, смутно помня себя, какими они были три-четыре года назад, потому что они превратились совсем в других людей – они выросли от возраста и поумнели, они стали терпеливее и почувствовали внутри себя великую всемирную надежду, которая сейчас стала идеей их пока ещё небольшой жизни, не имевшей ясной цели и назначения до гражданской войны. (1)

[They were walking now as if to some new life, only vaguely remembering what they had been like three or four years before, for they had been transformed into different people. They had grown out of their age, and become wiser, they had grown more patient, and they felt inside themselves the great world-wide hope which had now become the central

idea of their still-small lives which had no clear goal or purpose before the civil war. (118-119)]

The narrator's statement that the soldiers' lives are "still-small" (ещё небольшой жизни) stands in contrast to the "great world-wide hope" that the soldiers supposedly embody. The largeness of the "great world-wide hope" appears too big for the soldiers, whose lives were still small.

Likewise, the narrator appears to make assumptions about the soldiers' feelings, since they were walking now "*as if* to some new life." Their beings contain the idealization of revolutionary transformation, since "*inside themselves*" (emphasis added) lies "the great world-wide hope" of an optimistic future. The overly idealized description of what the soldiers "felt inside themselves" presents a romanticized version of what the collective group experienced emotionally. By stating that a whole group of people felt one way, the narrator generalizes all soldiers to share a single communal experience. In this way, the narrator refuses to present a legitimate portrait of the soldiers' true feelings of returning home.

Like the generalized portrait of the soldiers' return home, the narrator creates assumptions surrounding Nikita's agency in the story. The narrator often creates the illusion of fact, forcing the plot of the story to become ambiguous. In the text, Nikita looks for physical or sensory evidence of something or someone's existence, rather than relying on assumptions. However, the narrator's description is limited to Nikita's outward appearance and action, which the narrator then uses to make assumptions about the characters' internal feelings and individual identities. When passing by Lyuba's house with the green shutters, the narrator describes Nikita's act of looking: "Он думал, что, может быть, кто-нибудь заиграет на пианино внутри дома, тогда он послушает музыку. Но в доме было тихо, ничего неизвестно... Должно быть, умерли уже давно и учительница-старушка, и её дочка Люба, а мальчик ушёл добровольцем на войну..." (6-7) [He thought maybe someone would play the

piano, and he would listen to the music. But everything inside was quiet, telling him nothing... It must be that the old teacher and her daughter Lyuba had both died a long time ago, and the boy had probably gone off to the war as a volunteer... (124)]. By actively listening for “the music” that someone inside might be playing, Nikita relies on physical evidence for proof, rather than false assumptions. However, after describing Nikita’s observations, the narrator describes his conclusions based on Nikita’s observations, stating, “It must be that the old teacher and her daughter Lyuba had both died a long time ago.” In this way, the text creates the illusion of fact by shifting from Nikita’s physical observations to the *narrator’s* assumptions, in order to create an uncertainty in the narrative plot. Since we know that Lyuba did not die, we can further understand how the narrator embodies a voice of assumption, not fact.

The narrator’s active assumptions replace the father’s own explanations of his actions, thus providing an ambiguous portrait of one of the main characters in Platonov’s story. When the father and the young Nikita had previously visited the home of the old teacher (Lyuba’s mother), the narrator describes the father’s reason for refusing to eat her crackers: “Отец Никиты сидел всё время молча; он стеснялся, крякал, кашлял и курил сигарки, а потом с робостью пил чай из блюдца, не трогая сухарей, потому что, дескать, давно уже сыт” (5) [Nikita’s father sat there silently, he was embarrassed, he quacked and coughed and smoked his little cigar, and then shyly drank his tea out of the saucer, not touching the little crackers because—he explained—he was already full (122)]. It is important to note a significant translation error: the father never “explained” that he was already full. The particle “дескать,” which was translated as “he explained,” more accurately translates as “say” or “as if to say.” In Russian, the particle “дескать” connotes an exaggeration of speech, or a generalized saying. Thus, a more accurate translation of the sentence would read: “...not touching the little crackers, say, because he was

already full.” In this way, the narrator provides a hyperbolized description and uncertain assumption that the father was “already full.”<sup>4</sup> Although seemingly a minor point, the sentence structure’s separation and division of the narrator’s explanation for why the father did not touch the crackers illuminates the narrator’s full authority. In the original Russian, the text divides the words “because” (потому что) and the explanation that “he was already full for a long time” (давно уже сыт), with the particle “say” (дескать). However, the particle “дескать” is indeclinable and thus is not presented in the past tense or from the third person singular tense. Likewise, rather than using a verb such as “говорить” (imperfective aspectual form, meaning “to say”) or “сказать” (perfective aspectual form, meaning “to say”), which would give the father agency to speak, the intentional choice to use the particle “дескать” presents the motivation as an uncertainty: “as if” the father were not hungry.

Platonov’s narrator frequently draws false conclusions from textual evidence in order to misrepresent the characters by suppressing their emotions. Because the narrator creates assumptions about what the father is feeling internally, textual ambiguities require the reader to question the form and content of the writing. When describing the physical interaction between Nikita and the father, the narrator misrepresents the father’s feeling of being reunited: “Никита положил руку на голову отца и привлёк его к себе на грудь. Старый человек приислонился к сыну и начал часто, глубоко дышать, словно он пришёл к своему отдыху” (4) [Nikita put his hand on the father’s head and drew it to his chest. The old man leaned against his son and started to breathe deeply and fast, as if he had just reached his resting place (122)]. The narrator does not describe the supposed emotions of Nikita and the father upon reuniting, but rather articulates the physical motion of the father and son coming together again. Numerous critics interpret Nikita’s welcome home as a clear and positive experience. One critic states that Nikita



“is welcomed by his father and the two of them lovingly embrace each other” (Egeberg 182). More complicated than a loving embrace, the text provides a dual perception of the father’s experience. When the father leaned against Nikita, he began to “breathe deeply and fast,” which contradicts the notion that perhaps “he had just reached his resting place.” If the father were resting, he would not be breathing quickly, as if out of breath or frightened. In this way, Platonov’s text requires his readers to question the narrator’s frequent statements that follow direct description. The frequent statements presume a correct or knowledgeable interpretation of the main event.

In a comparable example, the narrator illustrates his authorial control over Nikita’s emotions, by presuming the reason why Nikita cannot speak. When Nikita and his father are reunited for the second time at the bazaar towards the end of Platonov’s story, the narrator presumes Nikita’s reason for not being able to speak. When the father sees Nikita at the bazaar after Nikita had disappeared without explanation, the father asks Nikita what he is doing there. The narrator then describes Nikita’s attempt to answer, stating: “Никита захотел ответить отцу, однако у него сохлось горло, и он забыл, как нужно говорить” (32) [Nikita wanted to answer his father, but his throat dried up and he had forgotten how to talk (149)]. The narrator assumes that Nikita “forgot” how to speak, and does not consider the likely alternative that Nikita was too emotionally overwhelmed to speak. The narrator’s assumption that Nikita forgot how to speak is based on the rationale that Nikita had stopped talking once he arrived at the bazaar and thus forgot how to verbally communicate.<sup>5</sup> However, the statement that Nikita’s “throat dried up” indicates that perhaps he was about to cry, and the preoccupation of holding back his tears prevented him from emotionally greeting his father. By assuming the cause of Nikita’s silence, the narrator effectively suppresses direct articulation of Nikita’s emotions. In the subsequent

section, I discuss how Platonov's narrator seeks to erase and control Nikita's identity—an act that mirrors Nikita's own desire to lose his identity—that ultimately serves to question the nature of existence, the difference between living and existing, and blur the narrator with Nikita's character.

## II. Censorship, Chaos, and the Redefining of Existence

When discussing Platonov as a reformer of socialism in Soviet Russia, critic John Riser states: “For Platonov, living was both problem and project, a problem because of the irreducible ambiguities and uncertainties of life, its tragic and disconcerting events, a problem not mitigated by there being some obvious truths” (Riser 76). Platonov's biographical information sheds great light on the nature of human existence represented in *The Potudan River*. While Platonov's characters overtly struggle with living in extreme states of poverty and despair, his narrator refuses to provide the characters with reasons to live. Instead, the narrator subverts the physical necessities of existence to ideological reasons for living.

In Platonov's story, the narrator redefines the nature of existence for Lyuba, by subordinating the physical requirements needed for one to exist to the ideological pursuit of knowledge. Lyuba questions the reasons for man's existence in a hopeless world, for which the narrator provides no answer. The narrator describes Lyuba's studies at the academy, stating:

Она училась теперь в уездной академии медицинских наук: в те годы по всем уездам были университеты и академии, потому что народ желал поскорее приобрести высшее знание; бессмысленность жизни, так же как голод и нужда, слишком измучили человеческое сердце, и надо было понять, что же есть существование людей, это – серьезно или нарочно? (9)

[She was studying medicine at the district academy; in those days there were universities and academies in all the districts because the people wanted to advance their knowledge as quickly as they could; like hunger and want, the senselessness of life had tormented the human heart too long, and it was high time to find out what the existence of men was all about, was it something serious, or a joke? (126)]

The narrator compares Lyuba's desire to "find out what the existence of men was all about" to the primal human needs of "hunger and want," suggesting that the act of learning is an existential question for Lyuba and not a personal decision to grow. Additionally, Lyuba's conception of what it means to live is in direct opposition with the necessary constituents for living: "Я и так не очень люблю кушать: это не я – голова сама начинает болеть, она думает про хлеб и мешает мне жить и думать другое..." (9-10) [I'm not so fond of eating: it isn't me, but my head starts to ache, it starts to think about a piece of bread and keeps me from living and thinking about anything else... (127)]. In Lyuba's mind, living is thinking and gaining knowledge—not sustaining one's physicality through consumption. The "piece of bread" that physically keeps her alive is contradictorily what is preventing her "from living." Ultimately, the narrator fails to provide a feasible reason and method for the characters to live, since intellectual pursuits cannot replace physical means to live.

The narrator often presents uncertain reasons or approaches to maintain one's existence, when the basic human necessities of survival are impossible to attain. When Nikita ventures to the bazaar, the narrator describes how one lives at the Kantemirovka bazaar: "Правда, там нищему человеку подавали всегда мало, кормиться как раз приходилось по дальним, бедняцким деревням, но зато в Кантемировке было праздно, интересно, можно пожить на базаре одним наблюдением множества людей, чтобы развлеклась на время душа" (27) [It's true, they gave little away to a poor man there, and the beggar could really feed himself only in the faraway villages where poor peasants lived, but still it was fun in Kantemirovka, interesting,

one could live at the bazaar just by watching the crowds of people, distracting the spirit for a little while (145)]. The narrator suggests that one can “live at the bazaar,” by simply “watching the crowds of people.” By stating that a beggar “could really feed himself only in the faraway villages” and “they gave little away to a poor man there,” the narrator subordinates the physical necessities of existence to the explanation of how interesting it is (“интересно”) to watch the crowds of people at the bazaar. In this way, the narrator suggests that to live is to watch others, to distract one’s own spirit. Yet, rather than watching the crowds of people who “live at the bazaar,” Nikita ultimately stops caring about the life around him.

The narrator articulates Nikita’s struggle to live when he arrives at the bazaar, specifically stating Nikita’s intentions that effectively surrender his agency,<sup>6</sup> identity, and name as “Nikita” in the story. Towards the middle of the narrative, the narrator describes what Nikita does after he follows a beggar to the bazaar: “Никита пришёл на базар, сел в тени за торговым закрытым рундуком и перестал думать о Любе, о заботах жизни и о самом себе” (28) [He came to the bazaar, sat down in the shade next to a merchant’s bin with a hinged cover, and stopped thinking about Lyuba, about the cares of life, and about himself (145)]. The narrator’s statement that Nikita decided to stop thinking about “the cares of life, and about himself,” suggests that Nikita *willingly* abandons his agency and loses any desire to exist. This act forces Nikita to lose his identity and his name “Nikita” in the story. In this way, Nikita’s surrendering of agency coincides with his textual loss of his identity. Because the narrator’s numerous attempts to tell the characters how and why to live *fail*, Nikita’s decision to give up existing functions as a commentary on the effectiveness of Soviet authority: the regime is incapable of providing its citizens with a reason to continue living. The narrator’s lack of providing Nikita with any reason to live mimics Nikita’s lack of desire to live.

The narrator and Nikita can be seen as mirrors of one another, since they both employ a type of speech in which the form of its language contrasts with its semantic content. Throughout the text, Nikita employs negative rhetoric in his conversations with Lyuba, in order to suggest that Nikita needs an “other” to help him lose his identity. By using rhetoric that intentionally frames life in terms of death, and remembering in terms of forgetting, Nikita inverts the emotional distinction between these oppositions. By emphasizing the negative-opposite of living and remembering (dying and forgetting, respectively), Platonov via Nikita subordinates life and memory to a preexisting state of death and forgetting. In this way, Nikita’s struggle to live is rhetorically articulated in his statements that tacitly require a type of death in order to express life: a loss to intimate a presence, an extinction required to enunciate an existence. When Lyuba first sees Nikita, she asks him: “-Вы меня не помните? – спросила Люба. –Нет, я вас не забыл, - ответил Никита” (8) [You don’t remember me? Lyuba asked him. No, I haven’t forgotten you, Nikita answered (125)]. Rather than asking, “do you remember me?” Lyuba’s rhetoric frames the question in the negative: “You *don’t* remember me?” (emphasis added). Rather than saying, “I do remember you,” Nikita employs a rhetoric of despair, stating, “No, I haven’t *forgotten* you” (emphasis added). Thus, the negative rhetoric functions as a reminder of their imminent death, not their present love. In this way, Nikita’s speech contrasts with the form of his voice, which similarly mirrors the narrator’s ambiguous rhetoric.

The narrator echoes Nikita’s desire to forget himself by erasing Nikita’s identity in the text, immediately after Nikita “stops thinking about himself.” The narrator no longer defines Nikita as “Nikita,” but rather identifies him as an unknown person. In this way, the narrator and Nikita both “stop thinking” about Nikita. The narrator treats Nikita in the narrative as if a new character were being presented:

За последнее время уже несколько ночей подряд сторож прогонял с базара одного и того же человека. Когда сторож толкал его, спящего, тот вставал и уходил, ничего не отвечая, а потом опять лежал или сидел где-нибудь за дальним рундуком. Однажды сторож всю ночь охотился за этим бесприютным человеком, в нём даже кровь заиграла от страсти замучить, победить чужое, утомлённое существо...Раза два сторож бросал в него палкой и попадал по голове, но бродяга на рассвете всё же скрылся от него. (28-29)

[Recently the watchman had driven the same man out of the bazaar for several nights in a row. When the watchman shoved him, as he slept, this man would get up and walk away, saying nothing, and then he would sit down or lie down somewhere else behind a bin which was farther away. Once the watchman hunted this homeless man all night long, his blood fairly sparkling with his passionate desire to torment and to subdue this strange, exhausted creature. Twice the watchman threw his stick at him and hit him in the head, but by dawn the vagabond was still hiding from him. (146)]

Because the narrator describes the daily activities of the watchman at the bazaar for a few paragraphs, the reader loses focus on Nikita in favor of the watchman. Upon first reading the passage, it is unclear for the reader that the “same man” that the watchman drove out of the bazaar is Nikita. Because the narrator now speaks from the perspective of the watchman, Nikita is referred to as “this homeless man,” “this strange, exhausted creature,” and a “vagabond.” Nikita is now presented precisely as an “other,” similar to an animal that the watchman “hunted,” and possessed a “desire to torment.” Nikita allows himself to be degraded as the “watchman shoved him,” wandering like a vagrant from place to place without any home. From the perspective of the watchman, Nikita appears to be a separate being who shares no traits in common with him. Interestingly, the text presents the watchman as *nameless*, only possessing the generalized identity of “watchman” without any specific name. In this way, Nikita’s act of losing his name and individual identity eradicates the specific names and identities of the other characters at the bazaar. While describing the story’s events at the bazaar, the narrator refers to characters solely based on their role or societal function, not on their individual family names.

Ultimately, the fact that Nikita and the narrator seek to rid Nikita of any individual identity, further elucidates how the narrator is representative of the Soviet authorities.<sup>7</sup>

To elucidate the narrator's interaction with Soviet politics, it is useful to briefly discuss the imposition of collectivism on the masses.<sup>8</sup> Literary critic John Riser articulates how Platonov's literature engages with the ideology of collectivism in Soviet Russia throughout the 1930s:

A common theme for Platonov is the difference between, as I will put it, collectivity and collectivism. The former term is descriptive, designating an implicit unity or connectedness of things; the latter term is normative, an ideologically impregnated expression of evaluation that assigns positive value to the standardization of human attitudes and thoughts for the sake of the social unification of behavior...a collectivism of human consciousness is something else, usually signifying a substantial lack of individuality, independent thinking, sustained reflection and thoughtful critique. (Riser 55)

While at the bazaar, the narrator refuses to provide any of the characters with "individuality" or "independent thinking," which mirrors the Soviet censor's desire to create "a collectivism of human consciousness." The narrator of Platonov's text seemingly attempts to promote a "social unification of behavior."

However, once the narrator and the watchman empirically deduce that Nikita has an identity—a desire to retain his humanity—the narrator provides this "homeless man" with his original name, Nikita. The narrator describes the watchman's realization that this being is human and capable of thought, stating: "Сторож окликнул спящего, тот открыл глаза, но ничего не ответил, посмотрел и опять равнодушно задремал. Сторож подумал, что это – немой человек. Он ткнул наконечником палки в живот дремлющего и показал рукой, чтоб он шёл за ним" (29) [The watchman called to the sleeping man, who opened his eyes but did not answer, looked at him and then dozed off again with complete indifference. The watchman thought—this must be a dumb<sup>9</sup> man. He prodded the sleeper's stomach with the end of his stick

and gestured with his arm that he should follow him (146-47)]. By making the assumption that “this must be a dumb man,” the narrator intentionally hides his knowledge that Nikita is this supposedly “dumb man,” in order to create the illusion that this “sleeping man” was not Nikita. The narrator states: “Немой глядел на сторожа туманными глазами: наверно, он был и глухой ещё...Но нет, едва ли, - немой забрал в сених весь нужный инструмент и материал, как сказал ему сторож, значит – он слышит” (29) [The dumb man looked at the watchman with dull eyes: probably he was deaf, too...But no, he couldn't be, because the dumb man picked up in the shed all the tools and things he needed, just as the watchman had told him. This proved that he could hear (147)]. The assumption that Nikita (“the dumb man”) “was deaf” illuminates the narrator’s agency and motivation to deconstruct Nikita’s identity by suggesting false information, thus treating Nikita as if he were a completely new person. By drawing the rational conclusion that Nikita “couldn’t be” deaf, based on the evidence that “the dumb man picked up...all the tools and things he needed, just as the watchman had told him,” the narrator empirically proves that this man is capable of thinking, reasoning, and understanding.

Once the homeless man “proved that he could hear,” Nikita’s identity returns textually: by conforming to the watchman’s orders, the narrator restores Nikita’s identity in the text. Immediately following the proof that he could hear—evidence that he was engaging in society—the narrator names the homeless man as Nikita: “Никита аккуратно сделал работу, и сторож явился потом проверить, как оно получилось; для начала вышло терпимо, поэтому сторож повёл Никиту на коновязь и доверил ему собрать навоз и вывезти его на тачке” (29) [Nikita did the job accurately, and the watchman came back later to see how it looked; for a start, it was tolerable, so the watchman took Nikita to the place where horses were hitched and told him to pick up all the manure and take it away in a wheelbarrow (147)]. Once the narrator establishes



that Nikita is consciously compliant towards the watchman, the narrator implies that Nikita now possesses *agency* during the time that he specifically lacked an identity. Since Nikita followed the watchman's orders and proved that he is not dumb, the narrator symbolically rewards Nikita's behavior of submitting to authority by identifying him as "Nikita" again within the story. The specific diction of the words "accurately" and "tolerable" suggests that the narrator is grading Nikita's work performance, since the narrator assumes that the watchman thought Nikita's work "was tolerable."

Once the narrator identifies Nikita by his name, the narrator describes his ostensibly improved nature of existence: "На слободском базаре Никита прожил долгое время. Отвыкнув сначала говорить, он и думать, вспоминать и мучиться стал меньше...Он уже привык жить на базаре, а многолюдство народа, шум голосов, ежедневные события отвлекали его от памяти по самом себе и от своих интересов – пищи, отдыха, желания увидеть отца" (30) [Nikita lived for a long time at the bazaar. Having first become unused to talking, he thought, remembered, and worried less and less...He was already used to living at the bazaar, and the crowds of people, the noise of voices, all the daily happenings, kept him from remembering about himself and from his own concerns—food, rest, and the desire to see his father (147)]. By stating that Nikita was "at first" (сначала) unaccustomed to speaking, the narrator implies that Nikita got used to not talking, he became accustomed to being silenced. The text presents the act of silencing Nikita as eliciting a positive effect, since Nikita "thought, remembered, and worried less and less." The narrator presents the act of not speaking as directly correlated to Nikita's ability to live. By stating that Nikita had become "*unaccustomed*" (отвыкнув) to speaking and "*accustomed*" (привык) to living at the bazaar, the narrator implies that for Nikita to live, he must be silenced. Since "отвыкнув" and "привык" are antonyms, the

text inherently suggests that by getting out of the habit of speaking, his silence allows him to live. The narrator requires Nikita to be silent in order to live, while simultaneously suggesting that “the noise of voices” and the multitudes of *other* people at the bazaar function to distract Nikita from remembering himself and his own individual needs. In this way, the narrator suggests that by silencing Nikita, he is able to live a better life in a collectivized society, where his individuality becomes subordinated to the masses and collective Soviet consciousness.

While working at the bazaar, supposedly living a better life in silence, an investigator accuses Nikita of stealing. The narrator and the generalized characters of the “watchman” and the “investigator” seek to censor Nikita’s individuality in Platonov’s story. However, rather than investigating Nikita’s accused crime of stealing, the investigator questions his potential uniqueness and desire to live. The narrator describes the investigation, stating:

Среди лета Никиту взяли в тюрьму по подозрению в краже москательных товаров из базарного филиала сельпо, но следствие оправдало его, потому что немой, сильно изнемогший человек был слишком равнодушен к обвинению. Следователь не обнаружил в характере Никиты и в его скромной работе на базаре как помощника сторожа никаких признаков жадности к жизни и влечения к удовольствию или наслаждению, - он даже в тюрьме не поедал всей пищи. (30)

[In the middle of the summer they took Nikita to jail on suspicion of having stolen some Chandler’s goods from the government store at the bazaar, but the investigation cleared him because this dumb, desperately tired man was too indifferent about the charge against him. The investigator could find no evidence of any desire for life or enjoyment or satisfaction of any kind in Nikita’s character or in his modest work at the bazaar as the watchman’s helper. (148)]

The specific diction of the words “suspicion” (подозрению), “investigator” (следователь), and “indication” (признаков) implies that the investigator was looking for *proof* that Nikita did not possess “any desire for life or enjoyment or satisfaction.” The sentence structure intentionally confuses the investigator’s job to search for evidence supporting the theory that Nikita had wronged the state, with the investigator’s search for evidence that Nikita wants to live or enjoy

life. The confusion in the narrative voice allows the investigator's purpose to become ambiguous—as if the investigator is actually there to inspect Nikita's existence and make sure he is not existing as an individual or enjoying life.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, this suggests that the narrative voice itself is trying to keep Nikita from living *in particular*, as a unique individual. The narrative voice prevents Nikita from existing, by investigating Nikita to ensure that he lost his identity, that his being becomes subordinated to the masses. The connotations of the names “watchman” and “investigator” similarly imply the prominent existence of censors in Soviet Russia, allowing the narrative voice and these characters to be representative of Soviet authority.<sup>11</sup> While the narrator had previously suggested that Nikita had become used to living at the bazaar, and even implied that Nikita's life improved at the bazaar (“he worried less”), the investigator contradicts the narrator by concluding that Nikita possessed no desire for life. The investigator's words, “никаких признаков жадности к жизни и влечения к удовольствию или наслаждению” (no sign of greed for life or desire for pleasure or enjoyment) suggests that Nikita is wholly apathetic towards life, and he was “accustomed” to living at the bazaar only at the primal level of survival. While the content of the narrative voice suggests a literal investigation of Nikita's possible thievery, the form and language of the narrator's speech contradicts the textual claims.

The investigator's search for Nikita's desire to live is ultimately futile, since Nikita appears too indifferent to the charges and to being thrown in jail. By not protesting the investigator's accusations against him, Nikita never admits nor denies the charges against him, making his character neither pro-Soviet nor anti-Soviet. In this way, Nikita is described as existing outside the Soviet system, his apathy surmounting his desire to live or protest false accusations. Likewise, because the narrator silences Nikita (a form of censorship) and Nikita

seemingly wants to silence himself by forgetting himself (a form of self-censorship),<sup>12</sup> the investigator's description of Nikita as a “немой, сильно изнемогший человек” (dumb, very weak man) denies him the agency to protest the charges—giving Nikita no choice but to submit his agency to higher authorities. The narrator describes the investigator's realization that Nikita does not care about possessing his own identity *nor* becoming a part of the Soviet collectivized identity when he states: “Следователь понял, что этот человек не знает ценности личных и общественных вещей, а в обстоятельствах его дела не содержалось прямых улик. 'Нечего пачкать тюрьму таким человеком!' – решил следователь” (30) [The investigator realized that this was a man who did not know the value of either personal or public property, and there was not even any circumstantial evidence against him in the case. There's no reason to dirty up a prison with a man like that! the investigator decided (148)]. By not knowing the value “of either personal or public property,” the narrator suggests that Nikita is neither pro-Soviet (by ascertaining the value of *public* property) nor anti-Soviet (by valuing personal property). Likewise, since the investigator could not even find “any circumstantial evidence against him,” the narrator implies that the investigator actively searched for *any* evidence to justify the charges against Nikita, intentionally seeking criminals. Ultimately, the investigator is unsuccessful, since he concludes that it is not worth dirtying up a prison “with a man like that,” with Nikita who possess no desire to live.

Interestingly, it is only once Nikita *surrenders* his agency that the narrator allow him to *possess* agency in the text. The narrator's speech suggests that Nikita has control over his life at the bazaar and can leave jail and stop working for the watchman whenever he wishes:

Никита просидел в тюрьме всего пять суток, а оттуда снова явился на базар. Сторож-надзиратель умирился без него работать, поэтому обрадовался, когда немой опять показался у базарных рундуков. Старик позвал его в квартиру и дал Никите покушать свежих горячих щей, нарушив этим порядок и бережливость в

своём хозяйстве. “Один раз поест – не разорит! – успокоил себя старый сторож-хозяин. – А дальше опять на вчерашнюю холодную еду перейдёт, когда что останется!” (30-31)

[Nikita stayed in jail for five days, and then went back to the bazaar. The watchman-supervisor was already tired out from having to work without him, so he was overjoyed when the dumb man showed up again. The old man summoned him to his apartment and gave him hot, fresh cabbage soup to eat, breaking all the rules of thrift in his own household. “Let him eat for once—it won’t ruin him!” the old watchman-supervisor reassured himself. “And then back to yesterday’s cold leftovers, when there are any.” (148)]

The narrator’s speech gives Nikita agency, by suggesting that he had “stayed in jail” and “then went back to the bazaar” of his own volition. The watchman was “overjoyed when the dumb man showed up again,” presuming Nikita has a *choice* to stay or leave. By intimating that letting Nikita “eat for once” might “destroy him,” the investigator conforms to the narrator’s belief that Lyuba and Nikita did not need food nor want it, since the narrative often suggests that food inhibits the characters from living. Yet, by stating that eating once “won’t ruin him,” the watchman presents a sarcastic corollary: not only does eating paradoxically inhibit one from living, but also eating potentially could “destroy” someone. The narrator intentionally has the watchman say this to “успокоил себя” (reassure himself), as if eating did have the possible consequence of destruction. In this way, the narrator redefines the nature of existence and inverts the normative value of the necessities to live.

While previously the narrator only identified this character as the “watchman” (сторож), now the narrator seemingly provides the watchman with more authority after Nikita's investigation, by attaching onto the watchman's name more titles. In the original Russian, the watchman is now referred to as the “сторож-надзиратель” (watchman-supervisor) and the “сторож-хозяин” (watchman-owner). By adding the titles of “supervisor” and “owner” (these discrepancies are not accounted for in the above translation), the narrator provides the

watchman with more authority, which contrasts with Nikita's supposed agency. Since the watchman functions as Nikita's "boss" or "host" (хозяин), Nikita's textual agency to show up and work for the watchman again of his own accord reduces the authority of the watchman. Indeed, the narrator's decision to attach numerous other titles to the "watchman" perhaps suggests that the watchman's authority is purely titular. In this way, Nikita's textual surrendering of his own agency allows him to possess *more* agency and authorial control in Platonov's text.

Ultimately, Platonov's narrator creates an ambiguous distinction between living and existing in the story, further problematizing the need to provide Nikita and the characters with any reason to live. After the narrator gives Nikita more agency in the text by suggesting that Nikita returns from jail and continues to work for the watchman out of his own free will, the narrator describes Nikita's complete apathy towards existence, stating:

Он слабо теперь чувствовал самого себя и думал немного, что лишь нечаянно появлялось в его мысли. К осени, вероятно, он вовсе забудет, что он такое, и, видя вокруг действие мира, не станет больше иметь о нём представления; пусть всем людям кажется, что этот человек живёт себе на свете, а на самом деле он будет только находиться здесь и существовать в беспамятстве, в бедности ума, в бесчувствии, как в домашнем тепле, как в укрытии от смертного горя... (31)

[By now he was only dimly aware of himself at all, and he thought very little about anything that happened to come into his mind. By autumn, probably, he would have forgotten entirely what he was. Looking around at the activity of the world he would have ceased to have any understanding of it. Other people might think this man was living but actually he would be there and exist only in forgetfulness, in the poverty of his mind, in his loss of consciousness, as if in some warmth of his own, taking shelter from mortal grief... (149)]

First, it is important to note that the translation does not accurately demonstrate the changed nature of Nikita's awareness of himself. Rather than stating, "by now he was only dimly aware of himself at all," a more accurate translation is "Nikita now weakly felt himself and thought a little, what only accidentally appeared in his thoughts." Indeed, this translational error demonstrates the difficulty of translating Platonov's text, and in fact suggests the opposite of the

cited translator's meaning. Rather than having little awareness of himself, Nikita now "weakly felt himself" and possesses the agency to think, if only "a little" (немного). By stating that by autumn, Nikita would forget entirely "*what*" he was, the narrator represents Nikita as an object and not a person, by using the Russian word "what" (что) rather than "who" (кто). By questioning "*what*" he is, Platonov proffers a philosophical investigation into the existence of man, rather than a personal search for Nikita's identity. The question of "what is man" possesses philosophical implications of Nikita's seemingly personal search for his identity. In this way, the search for Nikita's identity is also the larger pursuit for man's purpose in Platonov's literary and literal world. Likewise, Platonov creates an ambiguous distinction between living and existing, by stating that "other people might think this man was living." The statement, other people might think this man was "living," could suggest that people would think Nikita was living a good life, while it could simultaneously suggest that others presumed Nikita was "living," or existing *literally*. The narrator follows this sentence by suggesting that Nikita is not literally "living" or alive, by stating that "he would be there and exist only in forgetfulness," and Nikita would thus only exist in *absence*. In this way, the narrator suggests multiple definitions of existence and standards of living, but ultimately fails to provide Nikita with any reason or basis to live, since Nikita only possesses an apathetic desire to continue existing.

Through the narrator's control of the plot and characters in Platonov's *The Potudan River*, and through the narrator's inability to provide Nikita with reasons and methods for how to live in the world, Platonov's work functions as a critique of the Soviet regime. By stripping characters of their unique identities, by silencing the voice of the main character, Platonov elucidates how the Party's imposition of Soviet Realism and a collective Soviet consciousness fails to give the masses any reason to keep living. Ultimately, Nikita's lack of any desire to live

elucidates his apathetic reaction to the investigator, the watchman, and the narrator's silencing of Nikita's voice and identity at the bazaar. Thus, the author implies that, for Nikita, dying and living are the *same*. Nikita has neither a desire nor an aversion towards his life. In this way, Platonov presents Nikita as mirroring the narrator, while simultaneously presenting them as antagonistic opposites. Nikita can only exist in silences, in the substance of nothingness, in the freedom of not existing.



## Endnotes

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### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Many critics note writers' unique relationship to revolution and art: "After World War I and the Russian Revolution, it was taken for granted that art had a social content, and it was understood that the artist would participate in the political life of the day" (Lewis 61).

<sup>2</sup> As historical Peter Calvert states, "Violent political change is the factor common to the major established usages: that of intermittent alteration of government, that of cyclical change of regime, and that of linear historical progression through fore-ordained stages of development" (52).

<sup>3</sup> "This distinctly modern faith in revolution now shapes the official rhetoric of Moscow and Phnom Penh, Peking and Havana, and a host of Third World capitals. It was born and nourished during the turbulent period extending from the wandering of the French Revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the harsh beginnings of the Russian Revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup>" (Billington 96).

<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, what such distinct revolutions such as the American Revolution, the Mexican Revolution, the Bolivarian Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, the October Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the French Revolution, the Iranian Revolution and the Taiping Rebellion all share is a desire for change and a reconstitution of order.

<sup>5</sup> Trotsky explains, "Literary criticism took the place of politics and was a preparation for it. But that which was merely a hint for Belinsky and for the later representatives of radical publicism, has taken on in our day the flesh and blood of October and has become Soviet reality" (209).

<sup>6</sup> "By the resolutions of the Communist International of 1932, augmented by the Kharkov theses of the Soviet Writers Congress of 1934, the method of socialist realism was defined. It was to be a historically truthful and concrete depiction of reality with a thematic emphasis on the coming of the revolution" (Lewis 61).

<sup>7</sup> Resolution of the Politburo of the TsK RKP(b) "On Party policy in the sphere of literature." RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 506, ll. 4, 31-37. Authenticated copy. Typewritten. Published in its final version in *Pravda*, 1 July 1925, and *Izvestia TsK RKP(b)*, no. 25-26 (1925): 8-9. 18 June 1925.

<sup>8</sup> In a 1938 letter, author Mikhail Bulgakov urges Stalin to reinstate the creative freedom for a fellow author, N. Erdman: "confident that literary gifts are extraordinarily valuable in our society, and knowing at the same time that the writer N. Erdman is now deprived of any opportunity to apply his abilities as a result of the negative attitudes that have been created toward him and that have received such expression in the press, I am allowing myself to ask that you turn your attention to his fate... I fervently ask that N. Erdman be given the opportunity to return to Moscow and to labor unimpeded in literature, thereby leaving behind his condition of isolation and spiritual oppression" (qtd. in Clark 331).

<sup>9</sup> In a 1944 interview of Soviet author Zoshchenko, a member of Russia's KGB SSSR asked the author, "Whose fate seems tragic to you, if you happen to be talking about writers now alive?" to which Zoshchenko replied, "I am particularly concerned about the fate of Yury Olesha, who was living in Ashkhabad. He used to say that catastrophe was waiting for him—he was right" (qtd. in Clark 372).

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<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Svetlov—a Soviet poet—expresses the terrifying account of artists living in Russia during the 1930s: “What’s going on? They are nabbing everyone, literally everyone. It’s terrifying. The arrests are assuming hyperbolic dimensions. The Peoples’ Commissars and their dep[uties] have moved to Lubianka [headquarters of the secret police]. But what is both ludicrous and tragic is that we are walking around as this is going on and don’t understand a thing. Why, what is it for? All I understand is that there has been an epochal shift, that we already live in a new epoch, that we are just the pitiful remnants of the epoch that has died, that there is nothing left of the old Party, there’s a new Party with new people. They have replaced us... These are not court trials but organized killings, so what then could we expect from them? There’s no Communist Party any more, it has been transformed and has nothing in common with the proletariat” (qtd. in Clark 318).

<sup>11</sup> Olesha wrote *Envy* ten years after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and five years after the end of the Russian Civil War, which officially transformed Russia into the Soviet Union. In 1922, Stalin became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and over time slowly increased his power and control over Russia. By 1927, Leon Trotsky was expelled from the USSR and Stalin would soon be achieving a totalitarian rule over Russia in the proximate years.

<sup>12</sup> Trotsky defines the group of ‘Fellow Travelers’ as artists caught between the Revolutions. He states, “between bourgeois art, which is wasting away either in repetitions or in silences, and the new art which is as yet unborn, there is being created a transitional art which is more or less organically connected with the Revolution, but which is not at the same time the art of the Revolution” (56). This statement undoubtedly suggests a political imposition that defines what literature should and should not depict. Literature written during the Revolution, according to Trotsky, is not the literature *of* the Revolution. This is because literature of the Revolution should display clear Party values. The ‘fellow-travelers’ “are all more or less inclined to look hopefully at the peasant over the head of the worker. They are not the artists of the proletarian Revolution, but her artist ‘fellow-travelers’, in the sense in which this word was used by the old Socialists. If non-October (in essence anti-October) literature is the moribund literature of bourgeois land-owning Russia, then the literary work of the ‘fellow-travelers’ is, in its way, a new Soviet populism, without the traditions of the old populism and—up to now—without political perspective” (Trotsky 57-8).

<sup>13</sup> As Barbara Margolies states in her study on the Revolution, “The so-called problem of peasant villages... is not their static state perpetuated through non-disposable cognitive orientations, but their exclusion from the benefits of wider society” (qtd. in Carr 6).

<sup>14</sup> “French artists of the most disparate tendencies eagerly acknowledged the truth of Stalin’s flattering dictum that artists and writers ‘are the engineers of the soul.’ The pronouncement was gratifying because it meant that artists would no longer be considered marginal figures, as they so often felt themselves to be in bourgeois society. On the contrary, they could now play a vital role in bringing about the revolution” (Lewis 61).

<sup>15</sup> In another similar example, Octavio Paz, a contemporary Mexican literary critic of Rulfo’s, proffers an opinion on how to regard history and revolution: “The use of the word *revolution* in the sense of a violent and crucial change of society belongs to a period that conceived of history as an endless process. Whether rectilinear, evolutionary, or dialectical, history had a more or less predictable direction. It was of little moment that this process appeared to have the form of a curve or a spiral or zigzag when examined in detail; in the full analysis it was a straight line: history was a continuous forward march” (*Alternating Current* 178). Thus, both Lomnitz and Paz describe the Mexican Revolution as oriented towards the future, towards the “New Man” on his “continuous forward march” in history. Yet, Rulfo contrasts with

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Paz and Lomnitz by presenting a paradigmatic shift that focuses not on the future of society, but on the questioning its past.

<sup>16</sup> It should be stated that Stalin, while in effect the dictator and promoter of the Russian Revolution, did not lead a dictatorship but controlled the Party. As Clark rightfully notes: “The Party was itself divided on many cultural issues and the dividing line between intellectuals and the Party was murky because so many leading figures in the cultural sphere, especially in literature, were also Party members. It was not even the case that, technically, Stalin dictated cultural policy in the Politburo” (Clark 141).

<sup>17</sup> Credit should be given to the groundbreaking *Annals of Communism* series, of which *Soviet Culture and Power* is volume. This series brought to light previously unknown information on Soviet Russia through the publication of formerly unattainable historical documents and records from former Soviet state and party archives.

<sup>18</sup> “The demand for ‘Soviet patriotism’ which became one of the main consequences of the campaigns of 1936-1938 became a fundamental principle of the new aesthetic doctrine, Socialist Realism. It became an official requirement that a Socialist Realist work exemplify *narodnost*’ in all its meanings, having to do with ‘popular,’ folk,’ ‘of the common man,’ ‘people’s,’ ‘national,’ and ‘state,’ and here, as with Socialist Realism in general, involved all four of them” (Clark 260).

<sup>19</sup> In a letter from Gorky to Stalin regarding Gorky’s speech on Socialist Realism that he was to give to the First Congress of the Writers Union, Gorky discusses literature that harbors the mentality of the peasant—a mentality that was very clearly associated with Platonov’s writings. Gorky writes: My mistrustful and even hostile attitude toward the peasant is not diminished by the fact that the peasant sometimes speaks in the languages of the Communist. Literature by peasants and literature about peasants demands especially close reading and especially pointed criticism... And some [writers] are in such a ‘hurry to live’ that their haste creates the impression that they are not confident that the reality being created by the Party has strengthened sufficiently and is going to develop exactly the way it has been doing, they think that the peasant is only pretending to be collectivist and that we have all the prerequisites for fascism and that ‘war could set us farther back than NEP’ (qtd. in Clark 189-90).

<sup>20</sup> “*Krasnaya Nov* published a long critical article by A. Gurvich, who spoke of Platonov as a writer obsessed by themes of misery, orphanhood, and death and thus completely out of tune with what was then expected of a Soviet writer. It is surprising, indeed, that Platonov did not share the fate of so many other Pereval writers... who became victims of Stalin’s purges, and managed to survive. For a time Platonov came again into his own during the war, but one of his postwar stories was once more violently attacked, and he was reduced to silence” (Struve 231).

## Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> The very real struggle for artists like Olesha perhaps can be further illuminated from the following statement taken from a letter from a group of artists written to I.V. Stalin in 1926: “Alongside the extraordinary material need, alongside the glaring poverty of the other artistic societies, AKhRR is easily acquiring the economic base other artists lack in their struggle for fruitful labor, for the right to create, for the right to carry out a real search for a genuine revolutionary art” (qtd. in Clark 46). Artists were placed at the mercy of the government that determined what was to be written, what was to be published, such that no artist could have known what is to be done to possess creative freedom of art and expression in the new world.

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<sup>2</sup> Not only is the act of replacing an old father-figure represented in the novella, but historically Stalin replaced Lenin as Russia's paternalistic leader, and perhaps can even be said to have used Lenin's death to further his political agenda: "Stalin created a series of legends to support the derivation of his authority, and most important of these was his closeness to Lenin, drawing on Lenin as a quasi-traditional source of authority, he substituted himself for his predecessor. Khrushchev recalled how Kaganovich in the early 1930s pleased Stalin by suggesting that the slogan "Long Live Leninism" be replaced by "Long Live Stalinism" (Brooks 61).

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the concept of replacing the old with the new is part of the general spirit of revolution, as an intentional rejection of past authorities in favor of a new power. In the relationship between Valya and her father, Ivan, Valya treats Ivan as an estranged relative while preferring to view Andrei as her functioning father. Thus, Babichev takes over and replaces the parental figures of the old era (as represented in the character of Ivan) with the paternal and maternal roles during the coming of the new era (in his 'parenting' of Volodya and Valya).

<sup>4</sup> The reader fully discovers the circumstances of how KavaleroV got to be sleeping on Volodya's sofa in Andrei's house only at the very end of the novella, ultimately suggesting that their diametrically opposed natures (those of Volodya and KavaleroV) are perhaps meant to be united by the collective political family in the new era. Andrei's sentimentality towards the future—towards the new era that Volodya physically embodies—is transmitted into the unknown body of KavaleroV, who despite having nothing in common with the principles of the new era, is taken in to replace what is temporarily gone.

<sup>5</sup> In this way, Olesha places KavaleroV in the long Russian tradition of the superfluous man from 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. The superfluous man is often self-destructive, whimsical, and lacks the societal values of the time. Much like KavaleroV, "the superfluous man is a homeless man" (Patterson 2).

<sup>6</sup> Olesha does not solely depict a communist vision, but maintains a dualism in his novella by also portraying the individualism of the old era through the characters of KavaleroV and Ivan. The fight for individualism functions directly against the communist values of collectivization. The old era represented individuality and family values, while the new era stressed a collective politicized group family.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, KavaleroV sees "nothing crazy" in this exchange, as if *the guise* of wanting to reunite the family were the real battle. Because Ivan knows he cannot reunite with Valya in the new era, his useless, theatrical pleading for her functions as the true fight—the battle against artificiality and guises in Soviet political society is a more productive fight than the fight for one's children, whom the state has repossessed. The guise of truthfulness was the basis for Soviet realism to depict accurate realities of communist values in society. The literature that modeled itself on this basis, as writer P.A. Kuzko states, "distorts and embellishes reality for the good of the powers that be" and demands that literature depicting this Soviet realism "has to be destroyed because it is false and perverts man's minds" (qtd. in Clark 358). The *real* fight against literature depicting Soviet realism directly mirrors Ivan's fight against the guise of possible reconnections within the family structure in the new era.

<sup>8</sup> By narrative time, I mean the time the novella uses to express the plot of the story. Chronological time, on the other hand, refers to the chronological plot of the story itself, which is not represented in a linear fashion within the story's narrative time.

<sup>9</sup> Olesha problematizes the ability to simply define this connection, by mirroring the Party's political *tactics* in his literary techniques, but neglecting to clearly promote the Party's *beliefs*. In this regard, *Envy* possesses a complex relationship to its political surroundings: While Olesha's act of subordination

mirrors Trotsky's identical political tactic, *Envy's* specifically *theatrical* portrayal of the political world rebels against Trotsky's wish for an idealized representation of the current political reality.

<sup>10</sup> In this sense, *Envy* mirrors the Party's act of subordination and censorship, but inverts the Party's value system between 'real' events and artistic images. Since Soviet 'realism' demanded literature to depict not reality, but versions of possible realities that (inaccurately) reflected and promoted communist values in society, could not Olesha's artistic images that are fraught with internal struggle be a more accurate realism than the Soviet 'realism,' in terms of their proximity to the reality of Soviet life? The intentional structuring of the events in *Envy's* chronology further echoes the Soviet Party's act of rendering ambiguous and distancing the imposed 'truth' from the reality of Soviet life.

<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Olesha's use of language directly mirrors the sloganized use of language in Soviet Russia. The rhetoric of the Stalinist state delayed any truthful account of reality, and imposed a mechanical repetition of similar phrases and stories to create a large picture of Stalinism. A former Trotskyist noted how "strict observance of verbal formulas" (qtd. in Brooks 68) was a main component of Stalinism, similar to the verbal formulas employed in *Envy*, which also seek obfuscation of the truth, and the creation of a new meaning through repetition of language.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin's discussion of the Greek hero mirrors Stalin's statement, in which he relates Greek heroes to the Bolshevik soldiers. Stalin states: "I believe that the Bolsheviks resemble the hero of Greek mythology, Antaeus. They are strong like Antaeus when they retain their link with their mother, with the masses, who gave birth to them, fed them, and educated them. And while they keep their link with their mother, with the people, they have every chance of remaining unbeatable" (qtd. in Brooks 79).

<sup>13</sup> Because the narrator is not explicitly identified as a specific character in the text, the subjective opinions given suggest that the narrator of the second section functions as another character entirely. The narrator cannot be viewed as omniscient because he is not objective in his opinions. In fact, the narrator appears to know the characters quite well, on an almost familial level: "На что брат Андрей, со свойственной ему грубостью, ответил коротко: «Ты просто мерзавец». Так определились разногласия между братьями" (52) [To which brother Andrei, with his characteristic rudeness, curtly replied, 'you're nothing but a scoundrel.' Thus was the disagreement between the brothers defined (78)]. The narrator interjects subjective claims that guide the reader towards specific attitudes about each character. However, the narrator also seems to question who all of the characters are, at other moments in the text. When describing Ivan and his marvelous claims of being a prophet, engineer, and dream-conjurer, the narrator states: "Да был ли он когда-либо инженером? Да нет врал ли он? Как не вязалось с ним представление об инженерской душе, о близости к машинам, к металлу, чертежам! Скорее его можно было принять за актера или попа-расстригу. Он сам понимал, что слушатели не верят ему. Он и сам говорил с некоторым поигрыванием в уголке глаза" (58-59) [Had he ever really been an engineer? Wasn't he lying? The picture of an engineer's soul, an affinity for machines, metal, and blueprints—it just didn't mesh with him! You would sooner take him for an actor or a defrocked priest. He was well aware that his listeners didn't believe him. He himself spoke with a certain twinkle in the corner of his eye (87)]. The unknown narrator seemingly admits that he does not know who Ivan is, and furthermore suggests to the reader, "you," that Ivan is untrustworthy. By making the reader question the truthfulness of Ivan, the reader is able to see how the narrator is similarly untrustworthy by questioning all of the ambiguities in the text, creating a new meta-textual layer of uncertainty between the narrator and the characters described. Additionally, this unknown narrator subordinates truthful information to mythical tales, through the use of parentheses: "(Факты говорят о том, что в те времена, когда Иван Бабичев был двенадцатилетним гимназистом, воздухоплавание не достигло ещё широкого развития, и вряд ли над провинциальным городом устраивались в те времена полеты. Но если это и выдумка —то что же! Выдумка — это возлюбленная разума)" (54) [(The facts attest that when Ivan

Babichev was a twelve-year-old schoolboy, ballooning had not yet reached wide-spread development, and it's unlikely that flights would have been arranged in those days over a provincial town. But when if he had made this up? Who cares! Making things up is what reason likes best) (81)]. The narrator subordinates the truthful "facts" of the Ivan's story to a deliberate favoring of imaginative lies, which the narrator justifies by the statement, "making things up is what reason likes best." Reason is typically a statement of fact used to justify an assertion under speculation. However, here the narrator inverts the value of fact and fiction, ultimately suggesting a larger inversion within the novella and Soviet society between a truthful history and a fictional history. If the demand for an accurate portrayal of Soviet realism in literature is based on the Party's political agenda, could a fictionalized history of Soviet reality be seen as a more accurate portrayal of Soviet life?

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Soviet society incorporated "socialist building" which created and strengthened the Party's main ambitions, often employing the rhetorical metaphors of "the path," "the line," and "building" (Brooks 48) to express a single ideology, a single truth. However, "the use of 'the path' changed toward the decade's end as the metaphor acquired the connotation of moving from one planned period of activity to another... 'the path' became an agenda-setting metaphor. The thrust was to deny the present except as a means to something else, to restrict public attention to those on the path, and to limit authority to leaders who claimed to know it" (Brooks, 49). The meaning of the metaphor 'the path' in Soviet history similarly transformed into new meanings through its constant repetition in newspapers and in its continual incorporation into communist propaganda, during all the fluctuations and changes of the Party's goals.

<sup>15</sup> This act perhaps echoes the Party's use of sloganized metaphors, which similarly bore new significance at different moments in Soviet history.

<sup>16</sup> Brooks explains how during the 1920s and 1930s, Russian history was controlled to reshape the future of Soviet life: "Stalin's legitimacy depended on the faultless projection of the Soviet project forward and backward in time, which explains why he so emphasized the future as well as the past in performance. The writer Michael Ignatieff points out, 'It was the central metaphysical conceit of the totalitarian state that its functionaries would never answer to any other future than the one which history, the Party, or the leader had preordained.' The press reinforced this conceit by appropriating time itself" (81-82).

<sup>17</sup> In 1942, a mother wrote to the editor of *Red Star*—a publication popular among civilians and soldiers during the war—describing the anguish at the loss of her family: "'I beg you to tell me where my son has been buried and to mark his grave... If possible, help me find my son Igor.' In the letters, people addressed Ehrenburg [the editor of *Red Star*] with requests as if he personally had the power to help them... Mother now meant not only Mother Russia, but particular mothers. [In 1942, Ehrenburg asked]: 'And how many people on the front suddenly remembered how much they loved their mothers?'" Furthermore, a great number of Russian poets, writing during the second world war, describe the reality of the thousands of missing children: "The Yiddish partisan poet A. Sutzkever... wrote a poem in the Vilna Ghetto in 1943 titled 'A Wagon of Shoes,' with the lines: 'All children's shoes—but where/Are all the children's feet?'" (qtd. in Brooks 181-2) Journalists supporting the cult of Stalinism portrayed the state's Red Army as the new parents of children, whose parents were often already shot or killed in war: "'Fighters and commanders of the Red Army and Fleet, workers, collective farmers, and employees donate their personal savings to support orphaned children and attend to their upbringing, replacing their lost parents,' *Pravda's* editors wrote on June 14, 1943" (Brooks 192).

<sup>18</sup> Russian men of letters Ivanov-Razumnik, Shishkov, and Petrov-Vodkin, on the topic of Stalin's persecution of writers: "In all these stories one hears the motifs of an oriental despotism. All these stories have to be compared to the terrible importance and power every word Stalin utters has, which makes his power significantly mightier than the power of even the most unlimited oriental despot, for there power is

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material, physical, whereas here on top of this is power over minds, over the slightest manifestation of free thought. In connection with this all these conversations about fairytale transformations in the fates of individual people at a single word from the leader take on a special characteristic historical meaning” (qtd. in Clark 135). [Clark’s citation: OGPU special memorandum “On writers’ responses to the assistance rendered by the government to the son of writer M.E. Saltykov-Schedrin.” March 1932. AP RF, f. 3, op. 34, d. 186, ll. 213-215. Original. Typewritten. March 1932.]

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Olesha was creating a pun when he wrote this, suggesting both that understanding time can be an emotion, and that man needs to understand that these are emotional times. It could be inferred from Volodya’s statement that man’s main emotion has to be an understanding of *these times* in Soviet history. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as: man’s main emotion has to be an understanding of the processes of time. The ambiguity leads a duality in Volodya’s character: Volodya could be seen as sympathetic towards the current struggle in defining the time of being between two eras, and also as cold-hearted, as a man who believes time will erase the pain via history.

<sup>20</sup> Since Volodya and Valya represent the children of the new era, by presenting Volodya’s history hidden under layers of mythological rhetoric and ambiguous language in the story, Olesha mirrors Soviet reality by hiding the histories of the children of the new era. However, Olesha simultaneously questions the problem of fake histories by mythologizing history in the present moment, and not over a long period. The historical truth of the events in *Envy* obfuscates any clear understanding of the events, which directly mirrors the presentation of history in Soviet Russia. A connection can be made between the way language hides the truthful history in *Envy* and how Soviet newspapers wrote in “abbreviations, neologisms, and Russifications of foreign words” (Brooks 12), which similarly functioned to distort and mystify the truth. This caused a large percentage of readers to misunderstand the stories being published, similar to the reader’s experience of lacking a clear understanding of Volodya’s history. The public saw the articles written “not in Russian but in political language” (Brooks 13). Olesha’s adoption of mythologizing literary language to convey historical truths mirrors the communist Party’s use of ambiguous “political language” to express the news—and in both cases, the “readers did not understand” (Brooks 13). However, by mirroring the political farce in Soviet society, Olesha unveils the real distortion of information.

<sup>21</sup> This passage is especially intriguing when read specifically in its relationship to Soviet censorship. The story itself is being censored; it’s not allowed to be told, except by mythologizing Babichev into a “giant” and even replacing concepts or anything tangible with “stars” and the “ravine” that they were in. Additionally, the narrator’s words, “anyone who saw them would have thought,” immediately conjure up the notion of spying and people who during the 1920s in Russia kept an eye out for anarchists or anti-government acts of rebellion. Moreover, the narrator plays with the role of assumptions by stating what “anyone” “would have thought” if they were there—inherently implying the limitations of knowledge gleaned only from the perspective of a third-party witness.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the Soviet press used mythologizing rhetoric to transform Stalin’s history into a mythologized history: “His near deification, in effect, answered a question typical of creation myths: How did our universe arise? ...The press emphasized Stalin as the agent of creation, reinforcing the mythic nature of the cult and lending it almost magical power” (Brooks 66).

<sup>23</sup> During the time when Olesha wrote *Envy*, the most dangerous of citizens in Soviet life were artists. What causes chaos in Olesha’s novella and what similarly threatened Soviet power is the production of ideas or liberated thinking that could potentially stir the masses. In *Envy*, Olesha imposes concepts upon specific characters, allowing individuals to represent larger ideas. Olesha makes conceptual ideas literalized and physically embodied in various characters—and thus able to be destroyed. When read

historically, the novella's imposition of ideas onto specific characters echoes the inverse process of 'Stalinism.' During the Great Terror of the 1930s in Russia, the individual Joseph Stalin transformed into an ideology—Stalinism. Stalin "did not perform on radio or in documentaries," but "relied on the press to convey his words and image to Soviet citizens" (Brooks 10). Stalin's personhood morphed into the conceptual image of 'Stalinism,' which had a life force which of its own accord extended and influenced far beyond the man himself

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Olesha's choice to use French President Carnot perhaps relates to his support for the French Communist Party, whose organization is linked with Lenin's tomb: "The square was filled with thousands of spectators who watched as the banner of the Paris Commune, a gift from the French Communist Party, was carried into the mausoleum. The banner was placed in a special case on the wall of the tomb. Then, for many hours, people moved through the mausoleum to gaze at the embalmed body" (Tumarkin 194-195).

<sup>25</sup> However, the ambiguous phrase "king of the novel I'd just read" can also be read as a reference to one of Andrei's writings, since Kavalero works as an editor for him. Because of the novella's obfuscated distinction between chronological time and narrative time, the reference to a novel that Kavalero recently read could be seen as *Envy* itself. By the very last chapter of *Envy*, the narrator makes a connection between his perceptions and a recent novel, as he states: "Был легкий ветерок (точно листаля книгу), голубело небо" (103) [There was a light breeze (that seemed to be turning the pages of a book) and the sky was blue (150)]. The words surrounding the parenthetical are mundane, normal observations. By contrast, the use of parentheses to describe pages turning in a book creates a multi-leveled structure of speech in which the narrator distinguishes between important information, visual observations and unimportant information, actions and consequences of the visual observations. The narrator inverts the value of important information here, which seemingly echoes Trotsky's demands of Socialist Realism to describe an accurate reality in literature. However, Olesha ultimately uses parentheses to draw attention to the intentional inversion of Trotsky's hierarchies. By placing the meta-textual reference to reading a book in a parenthetical, the narrator of the second section of the novella is ostensibly dividing the narrative between what he tells the reader is literally happening ("the sky was blue") and the idea of reading this very novella. Furthermore, by placing the suggestion of reading *this* novella in parentheses, the narrator distinguishes between important information and unimportant information. The narrator implies that the act of reading this very book is unimportant, as suggested from its placement within parentheses. Or, if it is not unimportant, perhaps it is not allowed to be written, which inherently suggests a tension between the events of the characters and the events of the readers, mingling the actions and events of all, thus creating a sense of dialogism. There exists a unique dialogue in the novella among not only all the characters and their ideological differences, but also among the literal novella that is the text and the presence of the novella within the text.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin's concept of dialogism helps to explicate how words move beyond themselves to artistically portray a historical image, both in a literal sense of the word 'image,' and in a larger sense of a broad historical map: "The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interactions with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way" (Bakhtin 279). When a word is uttered, according to Bakhtin, it is already "in a dialogue" with "an alien word" that is inherent to it. In this sense, words take on a universal and simultaneously specified nature, such that they relate to a preconceived connotation of the word while also transforming its meaning to suit its own purposes—the word "forms a concept of its own object." The word "hoopla" functions to similarly exist in eternal connection with past words and future words to create a historical dialogue.



<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek's essay "Is There a Cause of the Subject?" helps us understand how past trauma can be only realized when placed in the symbolic order, at which point the trauma no longer exists, except in the form of a poetic symbol. Žižek states why a past trauma can only become a trauma through a presented symbol functioning in the present symbolic order, which mimics or recalls the original trauma itself: "The fact that the real operates and is accessible only through the symbolic does not authorize us, however, to conceive of it as a factor immanent to the symbolic and consequently, that which is only detectable within the symbolic under the guise of its disturbances" (99). Just because the real does not exist to us except through symbols of the real, which are only to be recognized in a symbolic order, does not mean that the real never existed, but rather, that the real needs a symbolic order for it to be discovered. Žižek's theory works to clarify the function of Kavalero's poetics by explaining how recognition of the past traumatic loss is not reconciliation of the original trauma. However, once the poetically represented and distanced trauma becomes known and then buried, the original trauma can never be reestablished because of the inability to get out of the symbolic order, which functions as a new "trauma." Kavalero cannot get out of the symbolic order of understanding, and likewise cannot escape his literal presence in the new era of Soviet society.

## Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Rulfo's text are provided in the original Spanish. The translations that follow are from Margaret Sayers Peden's English translation of Rulfo's text (1994).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note a discrepancy in the translation: The Spanish "¿Qué viniste a hacer aquí?" emphasizes not *why* Juan came to Comala, but rather, 'what did you come here to do?' The verb 'hacer,' meaning to do or make, implies an agency—Juan came to Comala to do something.

<sup>3</sup> For further criticism that interprets Rulfo's novella as presenting a nihilistic and hopeless vision of modern Mexico, see: García-Moreno, Laura, "Melancolía y desencanto en Pedro Páramo," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* (2006); Hernández-Rodríguez, Rafael, "El fin de la modernidad: *Pedro Páramo* y la desintegración de la comunidad," *BHS* (2001); Lyon, Thomas, "Juan Rulfo, o no hay salvación ni en la vida ni en la muerte," *Revista Chilena de Literatura* (1992).

<sup>4</sup> As Carlos Fuentes states in *The Buried Mirror*: "In Mexico, the dictator Porfirio Díaz, proclaiming himself to be scientific and inspired by positivism, waged savage campaigns against the Indian population of the northern Mexican states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua... Where was this barbarism coming from? From the city, from the countryside? One thing was certain, the ideology of progress overrode all objections. The Indians were expendable" (Fuentes 286). Although the Porfirio government claimed to be progressive, it only continued the chaos of conquest, "waged savage campaigns" that furthered unjust colonialism, and ignored the past in favor of an idealized portrait of the future—a portrait that had no basis in reality. This is one historical example that is representative of the ideology of progress existent in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico; a vision focused on the revolutionary future that stands in contrast to *Pedro Páramo*'s emphasis on revising a past history, a paradigmatic shift backwards.

<sup>5</sup> In the middle of the twentieth-century in Mexico, numerous attempts were made to determine the "historical truth" of the found remains that were supposedly belonging to the sixteenth-century Aztec ruler, Cuauhtémoc. The process of authenticating historical documents and scientifically investigating the Aztec king's remains ultimately suggests a previous manipulation of history and the present need for historical revisionism. As historian Lomnitz states: "In the colonial period, the Church had control over the authentication of relics, and a person dealing in false relic could be tried and punished. In the modern

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era, methods of authentication were legal, in the first instance. However, when birth and death certificates, historical documents, and material witnesses were not available, what was to stop people from infinite manipulation? The case of Cuauhtémoc's remains at Ichcatopan, Guerrero, provides the most complete dossier for considering this possibility" (370). Through the manipulation of history based on the popularity of Mexico's historical mythic figures and forged historical evidence, this one example represents the need in Mexico to reexamine historical truths, a need that lies at the core of Rulfo's novella. For further historical examples, see Lomnitz pages 40-45 on Death's emergence as a national totem in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution and Mexico's cultural revolution.

<sup>6</sup> During Juan's journey to Comala, it can be said that Juan has three 'main' guides to Comala. Abundio brings him to Comala, and his character functions as Juan's guide to reach the city itself. Once he arrives in Comala, Juan is guided by three different dead women: doña Eduviges, Damiana, and Donis' wife or sister (the woman is married to her brother).

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this makes sense retroactively since the reader is later made aware that Abundio "went deaf" (16) and had died already. Any conversation Juan had with Abundio would have been impossible, or perhaps only silently possible.

<sup>8</sup> In this question, Rulfo provides a hint that Juan's "journey" to Comala is being spoken as part of a conversation to Dorotea—who would function as the one who asks, "Voices?"

<sup>9</sup> Juan's journey to Comala is likewise told from the dual perspective of his memory: when *he* made the journey to Comala, and the past memories of *Dolores*, who spent her childhood in Comala.

<sup>10</sup> Although a seemingly straightforward observation, this consideration bears great significance for the entirety of the text. The reader is aware that Juan has been dead all along by the second half of the novella, allowing the first half to function as the memory of his own death, his memory living while Juan was dead while telling it. Yet, in both the case of Pedro Páramo's memories of his father's death and Juan's memory of his own death, it is only the *recognition* of the death as a past memory that allows other deaths to surface and kills the original memory completely. Once Juan is aware that he is dead, he is able to converse freely with Dorotea and hear the memories of all the other dead members of Comala. And although the memories of the dead exist in the fragmentary novella prior to Juan's realization of his own death at the middle of the novella, the memories are only explicated to the reader during the second half when the focus is on the other deaths that Juan's recognition of his own death brought with it.

<sup>11</sup> Toward the end of the novella, a similar remark is made regarding "a thread" of Abundio's, immediately after the moment he murders Pedro Páramo. The narrator states: "Abundio Martínez oía que aquella mujer gritaba. No sabía qué hacer para acabar con esos gritos. No le encontraba la punta a sus pensamientos. Sentía que los gritos de la vieja se debían estar oyendo muy lejos. Quizá hasta su mujer los estuviera oyendo, porque a él le taladraban las orejas, aunque no entendía lo que decía" (120) [Abundio Martínez could hear a woman screaming. He didn't know how to make her stop, and he couldn't find the thread of his thoughts. He was sure that the old woman's screams could be heard a long way away". Even his wife must be hearing them, because they were piercing his eardrums, even though he couldn't understand the words (121)]. The thread of Abundio's thoughts lost their connection to another. And as the thread disintegrates, so does his ability to understand the meaning behind the scream, his own voice.

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 Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are provided in the original Russian from the following edition: Platonov, Andrei Platonovich. *Reka Potudan'* Ed. Marilyn Minto. Bristol: Bristol Classical, 1995. Print. Originally written in 1937. The Russian text is followed by English translations by Joseph Barnes found in the 20<sup>th</sup> century collection of Russian fiction: Brown, Clarence. *The Portable Twentieth-Century Russian Reader*. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print.

<sup>2</sup> The narrative voice refuses to present a single portrait of the characters, but rather usually articulates two or more contradictory descriptions. For example, the main character, Nikita Firsov, had a modest face that was “постоянно опечаленным лицом” [always sorrowing], which perhaps “не от грусти” [did not come from grief], but perhaps derived from “сдержанной доброты характера” (1) [some controlled goodness of character (119)]. The narrator dually suggests that Nikita’s sorrowing face perhaps stems from “grief,” while subsequently suggesting it came from “some goodness of character.” Ultimately, the uncertain rhetoric of the story’s narrator creates an ambiguous understanding of Nikita’s character. By describing Nikita using uncertain rhetoric that intentionally contradicts itself and provides multiple characteristics of who he is, the narrator strips Nikita of a singular identity.

<sup>3</sup> Historians note how during the 1930s in Soviet Russia the Party intentionally creates a mythologized history and version of the civil war. Because the narrative voice uses grammar to secretly question when the war occurred, if it still exists, and on which side the soldiers are fighting, Platonov’s narrator mirrors the artificiality of Soviet authority to fictionalize history: “In the culture of the thirties the new (revised) history of the Party was needless to say no less important than the mythologized version of the Civil War. Stalin was personally involved in a series of decrees and publishing ventures which progressively reviewed the standard account of Party history” (Clark 295).

<sup>4</sup> In a similar example, the narrator differentiates between what Lyuba needs and what is excessive, stating: “Люба теперь жила лишь в одной комнате, - больше ей не надо” (8) [Lyuba was living now in just one room—she didn’t need any more (126)]. The narrator assumes that living in one room is enough for Lyuba, and that she “didn’t need any more,” although her state of poverty would inherently suggest otherwise.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the theme of forgetting and remembering metaphorically symbolizes Nikita’s struggle to exist in his past memories of a life lost, and his despairing outlook of a future without hope. When Nikita first sees Lyuba, the narrator describes Nikita’s reaction: “Никита подошёл к ней и бережно оглядел её – точно ли она сохранилась вся в целости, потому что даже в воспоминании она для него была драгоценность” (7-8) [Nikita walked up to her and looked her over carefully, as if to see if she had kept herself in good shape, for even in his memory she was precious to him (125)]. For Nikita, Lyuba exists not in the present, but “*in his memory*” (emphasis added), inherently in his past when life was different, hopeful. Yet, by observing her “as if to see if she had kept herself in good shape,” Nikita simultaneously compares a mental portrait of the Lyuba he had met before the war, with the Lyuba he is currently facing. However, the text suggests that Lyuba “was precious to him” specifically in Nikita’s memories, as if Nikita no longer had anything that, or anyone who, could be precious to him after the war.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Nikita was denied agency from the very beginning of the text, allowing Nikita’s surrendering of his agency to possess more significance. At the very beginning of the narrative, Nikita’s agency is subordinated to the existence of “others”: “Насекомые летали над ним, плыла паутина, какой-то бродяга-человек переступил через него и, не тронув спящего, не заинтересовавшись им, пошёл дальше по своим делам” (2) [Insects flew over him, a spider web floated above him, a wandering beggar stepped across him and, without touching the sleeper, uninterested

in him, went on about his business (119)]. The inaction of Nikita is in direct opposition with the insects that “flew,” the web that “floated,” and the beggar that “stepped across him and...went on about his business.” The little creatures of Nikita’s world, or the human beings who are considered lowly and serve no purpose, are prioritized over Nikita in their ability to actively move and change—as if they were more important than Nikita, than the main character of Platonov’s story.

<sup>7</sup> “During the period 1928-1938, the revolutionary utopianism of socialism was replaced by ‘an ideology of bureaucratic state centralism and a theology of the Stalin personality cult,’ that is, by administrative utopianism” (Riser 52).

<sup>8</sup> Soviet authorities, notably the censors, often fabricated evidence in order to provide adequate reason to justify their persecutions: “The leadership had at their disposal dossiers with incriminating material on most figures of any significance in Soviet public life, and failing that they could always fabricate such material to suit their purposes. This was an important factor in their enjoying so much power” (Clark 319).

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that “dumb” in this case does not connote that the man was ‘stupid’ or a ‘dummy,’ but rather *specifically* that he was mute and could not speak.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, during the 1930s in Soviet Russia, the implementation of investigators is used to represent the changed nature of Socialism: “The socialist agenda itself changed, along with those supervising it, and many hopes were dashed... Technology can be introduced, machines can be put into place, land can be reassigned and developed, and so on, but transformation of the mental, emotional, cultural and, in general, social-psychological characteristics of individuals is more problematic. Furthermore, stipulating that there is now public, collective *ownership* of the social means of production does not entail that there is also collective *control over* those means” (Riser 52-53).

<sup>11</sup> In a report from the Politburo archives, Boris Volin, the head of Glavlit (the main censorship body in Soviet Russia), demonstrates the common employment of contradictions and assumptions by the authority of the Party. Volin writes: “Among our best and most prominent writers, there are none who have been hurt by Glavlit and are sharply displeased with our censorship. Authors usually accept individual comments from Glavlit that improve the text politically. Publishers do not exactly welcome Glavlit, for a censor, of course, causes them quite a few unpleasantnesses of a political and material nature. Authors and editors affected by Glavlit’s influence frequently think that it is not they who are to blame for their political mistakes but Glavlit for discovering them” (qtd. in Clark 263).

<sup>12</sup> “Active here were not only Glavlit but also the organs of oversight insight editorial offices, publishing houses, film studios, theatrical literary departments, the TsK press departments of the republics and Party obkoms (oblast [regional] committees), which were subordinated in turn to the Department of Propaganda and Agitation and to the Secretariat. Censorship and self-censorship were probably the most finely tuned mechanisms in Soviet culture” (Clark 126-27).

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