[Identity] is [Capitalism] plus [Abjectification]:
[Post]-Soviet Subjectivity

Thanks to:

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Вино нам нужно для здоровья, а здоровье нам нужно, чтобы пить водку.
Wine we need for health, and the health we need to drink vodka.
—Виктор Черномырдин (Viktor Chernomyrdin)

There doesn’t seem to be much literary communication across the pond between the United States and Russia. For many, the concept ‘Russian literature’ ends with Solzhenitsyn. The repressive murders under Stalin had finished producing Zhivagos and like-minded souls. Who cared for “Socialist Realism?” The good stuff was illegal. Ask Vasiliy Aksyonov. And the United States, besides producing literatures of exhaustion and replenishment, gave us many a Portnoy and DFW.

Viktor Pelevin’s Generation «П» is a Russian novel for Homo Sovieticus, she who was abandoned by the world of Leninism and pioneer weekends on the Black Sea. It takes up the Russian literary tradition with its questions of the soul [subjectivity] and, in Pelevin’s own view, attempting to subvert whatever came before it. Gary Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story is an apocalyptic romance about the coming economic collapse of the United States. Shteyngart’s aging narrator falls “in love” with a woman fifteen years his junior in a time of crisis.

Eleven years separated the two publications—Pelevin in 1999 and Shteyngart in 2010—but they inhabit similar worlds. These writers describe places and people entangled with the question of what I term ‘abjectivity.’ Characters come to know themselves by being abject in the sense advanced by theorist Julia Kristeva: being wrenched from something that anchors their sense of meaning as well as being drawn towards the thing that wrenches them away. These ritualistic enactments of abjection occur through consumption, being a consumer, being consumed,
trying to sell things, and collecting them to “possess.”

Pelevin’s protagonist is a copywriter named Vavilen. A poet whose poetry loses its meaning with the disappearance of Soviet power, he throws himself into Russia’s new age of дерьмократия (shitocracy) in which no one has the luxury of believing in anything. Vavilen suffers the in-betweenness of consuming and being consumed. He peddles it and stokes its flames spreading across Russia until he’s promoted high enough to learn that Mad Men disseminate identity, demolishing individual subjectivity by selling it.

At story’s end, he becomes a simulacrum: the Goddess Ishtar—physically constituted through advertising—has found her new husband, returning to the only maternal or birthing figure of the entire novel in a queer union. Vavilen has lost his “identity:” his likeness can be pasted into whatever ad he chooses, manipulated like an idiom in the hands of those who work with him and will follow in his footsteps.

Shteyngart’s Lenny Abramov grew up in a world used to the mediating impacts of gadgetry on the creation of a subject and her subjectivity. His old-timeliness and his love Eunice’s youth elaborate abjection’s role in identity formation. Where Vavilen sees possibility, Lenny fears his own death. Where Pelevin backgrounds his maternal figure, Lenny rages against the dying of the light hoping to sleep with one. In recognizing his looming doom, he doggedly works at a company selling Indefinite Life-Extension to High Net Worth

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In the original Russian, the name combines Vladimir Lenin and Vassily Aksyonov [a “famous” émigré dissident writer]. The translation instead foolishly uses Yevtushenko’s poem Babi Yar despite the fact that it’s just as unknown to most readers in English.
Individuals hoping to win Eunice Park’s heart.

Lenny builds the fire that burns him. Being a ‘person’ means buying things and lacking personhood. One must keep up with and accrete one’s self, with markets, with smartphones registeringfuckability and credit scores. But Lenny also lacks a mother, or at least the sense that someone will truly take care of him. Then Eunice comes in, the actual life force behind a novel that poses as a male complaint.

Hobbes’s war of all against all has changed. The enemy is within you, without you. Every time you buy shampoo, you’re acknowledging a sense of necessity generated by an object, not a subject, and that the object of your affection wouldn’t be there without you. An invisible hand breaks the relationship between ‘thing’ and ‘person;’ suits are made by men and make the man so to speak, birth a recurring pain.

All are abject in their ability to recognize their imaginary relationship to things, a relationship predicated on their acknowledgement that what separated them from being ‘things’ is very porous. Kristeva’s presents abjection in her essay *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, a useful anchor.

Abjectivity is a confusing lens for personhood. It necessitates an understanding of misunderstanding. The Nietzschean question of identity suggests “we remain strange to ourselves out of necessity … [and] we must confusedly mistake who we are.”\(^2\) It leaves a question of “who” that I can’t

answer. If we take the question to be one of limits or ‘de-limiting,’ then we might ask “where am I?” rather than who. I can’t answer who Vavilen Tatarsky is, nor can I answer who Lenny Abramov or his beloved Eunice Park are.

I can, however, attempt to de-limit where they are in relation to themselves, to each other, and the world around them. I can try to place them (the two may appear quite similar). And in placing them, I think we might find that the matrix of affects, effects, and objects that produce a sense of personhood suggest we are between a thing and a person, always straying but never immigrating.

**Breaking Bad: Meeting Kristeva at the Border**

“Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.”


In a way, this entire thesis is an exegesis of this brief passage. Before I can make any claims about the relationship between the Post-[Soviet] consumer and the experience of abjection, a definition of what I intend by the word ‘abjection’ is necessary. I have to make ‘Kristeva’ say what I want her to say since her theory, like the abject, “does not let itself be seduced.” 3 My central concept is the decomposition of any distinction between subject and object, I and the Other, You and Me, Me and the can of Coke in my hand.

As she acknowledges, abjection arises at the border between states, corporeal, metaphoric, life-like, death-like. If this reality is recognized, the subject is

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annihilated. To be annihilated is to be extinguished, extinct. Yet to be abject saves one from such a fate. Neither side of the so-called border can annex or acquire the Other. They exist in an oppositional attraction, trapped in a bad marriage of sorts. “Legals” and “illegals” on both sides of the river face off without country or citizenship. They are each Other and I at once. The border guard doesn’t kick anyone out. He makes sure that all who come are chained to the border, struggling against it and always pulled back.

It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you—it is now here, jetted, abjected, into “my” world. Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint.⁴

The world off the border is one of “safe” imaginaries. There is always an Us and Them and a division between what you are willing yourself to do and what is being acted upon by your will. But the collapse of such imaginaries or a belief in the absolute values they represent creates a sense of displacement and duress. If one is stuck between things or places, between being an “I” or an “Other,” one can’t know one’s place/thinghood. You are unfamiliar to your world and yourself, the world unfamiliar and even indifferent to you.

Landscape is a recurring motif in Kristeva’s theory. The experience of exclusion or being repelled from that which abjects you also “draws [you] toward the place where meaning collapses.”⁵ Meaning is a location, divisible, always available to a cartographer plotting out the aisles of a Walmart. Even The Clash feared getting lost in a supermarket. By meaning, I also mean identity since both

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⁴ Ibid, 3-4  
⁵ Ibid, 2
seem to require the ability to differentiate or distinguish one thing from another to function. Here we have Jacques Derrida’s epistemological metaphysics of différenciation: meaning and identity function according to a “lexicon of that which one is delimiting.”

6 Things, categories, people always need to be defined or marked at the edge, like a living corpse in chalk at a crime scene.

What is this place? A border works. A border is crossed. One can transgress or trespass a border established by law, by habit, by a sense of right. Kristeva describes a more intense experience. If anything, it’s the event horizon of a black hole. You approach a limit beyond which you die. Abjection holds you in abeyance. Escaping suspends you. Without your flight, the force holding you wouldn’t exist.

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being.

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Once abject, the subject cannot leave what has been left behind. The Russian émigré watching Fourth of July fireworks on the Washington Mall in 1974 can never ‘leave’ behind her world of hushed anecdotes and KGB elementary school. Beyond the border, there is that black hole within a person left by what is missing and by whatever was so lacking that one tried to leave. That black hole, never filled, always draws one back to the place where ‘meaning’ collapsed, imploded, was rebuilt around this lack.

I argue abjection entails this simultaneous exterior/interior experience of attraction and repulsion. The subject is both aware and unaware of what is going on

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7 Kristeva, 5
when it happens. This isn’t a matter of false consciousness, as though I could go around with a ruler like Marx and simply smack the abjectively oppressed millions on the wrist. It is no longer ‘I’ who expel or am expelled. Abjection is a spatial concept Kristeva has attempted to sketch an/interior to a person.

Thus the border and black holes break down, themselves decomposing as examples of attempts at capturing an experience that always evades. But what is decomposed—the corpse, the failed metaphor—still contains some semblance of life. We see ourselves rubbernecking at a traffic accident because it could have been us, is us. Such is the plight of immigrants, their children, as well as those whose home left them. Their worlds exist in parallel, angry atoms that can never to fuse or fissure.

Having broken bread with Kristeva, here I ‘break bad.’ Throughout her exploration of the concept, I am never sure where her theory is. Abjection seems negative. Kristeva uses the word ‘horror’ in her title, which identifies an ethical value. Whoever is abject is living in indeterminable crisis. I don’t think that she intended some immotile freeze-frame one is stuck living out. But it still seems to be a bad experience that marks one, de-limits one’s character.

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject.8

Life is impossible, laden with angst. I’d rather break this ‘bad’ valuation and evaluate it from the perspective of how it makes being a ‘person’ possible in the two

8 Ibid, 5
works I’ve chosen. Let’s look at the upside of the unbearable lightness of being
Kristeva points to. Though I will continue to wrangle with more quotations from her
work, this seems a necessary preface to the issues of perspective and ideas of de-
limiting that recur in metaphysical strokes through both books.

**A Collapsing Bridge to Nowhere, A Thousand Points-of-View**

“Millions of Russians went to bed in one country and woke up abroad. Overnight,
they were minorities in the former Soviet republics, and the Russian people
became one of the biggest — if not the biggest — divided nations in the world.”
—Владимир Путин (Vladimir Putin)

If we were to pinpoint the *site* of collapse in *Generation «II»*, it would be the
Soviet Union. An entire economic and social structure predicated on an ideology
seventy years old fell apart within three years. After Christmas Day, 1991, the
country and its maps, its hierarchies, its flags planted in hearts and minds, ceased to
exist. The millions of people and varied detritus of propaganda, WWII memorials,
and AK-47 firesales remained, as did the borders of the fifteen “new” republics
borne away from Mother Russia.

The narration notes that the “Soviet soul simply continued rotting until it
collapsed inwards on itself.” It never says that this soul, whatever specter haunted
Russia, actually *died*. The Utopian Soviet Dream passed away but lingered on as a
ghost.

Any Russian who’d woken up in the Soviet Union the day after the “collapse”
likely didn’t feel that they had moved. They were still in Russia, or at least in the
territory de-limited as Russia. Suddenly the black market vendors, those hawking

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stolen jeans, those reselling gas from their state subsidized trucks, and the music collectors awash with Western vinyls and CDs could walk out on the street and push whatever they possessed. And they too were possessed by something.

A lid had been pulled off; all the pent up pressure behind перестройка (perestroika) busted out. Today, Radisson and other chains leave busts of Lenin or hammers and sickles on display. Ideology never fully leaves. Consumers can’t be cleaved from the past. Companies propagandize, save for the fact that they only try to make a product [like ideology itself] necessary. Even this is questioned in the novel: ads are pitched to business owners, not on the merits of what they’ll sell.

Generation «П» includes those who were the last to grow up in a Soviet system falling apart. The П of the title is the Russian letter for P and stands for two things primarily (if the author’s interviews and book are taken seriously): Pepsi, the drink that changed the country, as well as the Russian word Пиздец (Pizdyets), a curse derived from the word cunt uttered in the face of terrible circumstances. I’ve already referred to the collapse as decomposition and I mean that metaphor in two ways. First, the rotting corpus that held together the Soviet Union, its satellites, its “beliefs.” Second, a looser, more musically influenced understanding of the term. Russia’s landscape remained. The improvisations and fluidity within that landscape changed by a new generation of constant gardeners.

Continuing the analogy of the landscape, the narration states of Generation «П»:10

It wasn’t as though they’d shifted their previous point of view, not that – just that the very space into which their gaze had been directed (after all, a point

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10 Pelevin, 4
of view always implies gazing in some particular direction) began to curl back in on itself and disappear, until all that was left of it was a microscopic dot on the windscreen of the mind.

The thing that anchored a Russian’s sense of place was the thing she beheld. I love this quote because it reminds us that a point of view is devoid of content without a world to look out on. With that world alive and dead in Schrödingerian fashion, a point of view wouldn’t change. One’s POV would be positioned like a marketing strategy. Capital and ads push her to maintain or fix her position. She strays. She has become an immigrant by a matter of perspective.

In being stray, an understanding of where one is requires movement. Russians go on like dogs always losing the scent of their own trail. With the dissolution of space, the nation, Vavilen, and Vavilen’s generation suddenly became “deviser[s] of territories, languages, works . . . [always] demarcating [their] universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question their solidity.”¹¹ In order to make sense of this new fluidity, a language—an instrument with which to express meaning—must be found and continually honed because one’s point of view is locationless, lacks content. The difference between Vavilen’ world of meaning and his own psyche has broken down like Humpty, never to be put together again, though he must always try.

Language is conscripted, conscripts you into this ‘war’ for territory, for a ‘home’ to call your own. In the novel’s first chapter, we learn that Vavilen “couldn’t get into the poetry department [of his school] and had to content himself with

¹¹ Kristeva, 8
translations from the peoples of the USSR.” He set direct translations of work formerly in various Turkic languages, in Georgian, etc. into rhyme in Russian. He did so maintaining an eternity. The ideological edifice of the Soviet Union promised Vavilen a destination or teleology. Being possessed of that teleology, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ‘death’ of its eternity, Vavilen still had his “creative labors,” to keep working with.

Walking around one day, Vavilen sees a pair of shoes on sale from the older world he grew up in. Those shoes have been rewritten, wrenched from their former place, made ugly Vavilen realizes “they [weren’t] simply in bad taste . . . they were the clear embodiment of . . . ‘our gestalt’ . . . the new era obviously had no use for them.” Vavilen is struck by their being out of place because it signals something more tenuous: he too doesn’t belong wherever it is he’s now living.

Eternity spatially organized Vavilen’s world, suturing whatever gaps existed between what was ideal or imagined and what was in front of him. Even if the Soviet Union was always shambolic, it could ‘get there eventually.’ Folded into that eternity was also the promise of identity and meaning. Vavilen could ‘become’ the person he’d always wanted to be. His poetry and translations could mean something eventually. As Vavilen notes, “when the subject of eternity disappears, then all its objects also disappear, and the only subject of eternity is whoever happens to remember about it occasionally.”

12 Pelevin, 3
13 Ibid
14 Ibid, 4, I think also of the rewritten quotidian of Persepolis.
15 Pelevin, 5
Eternity has become something to reminisce about in its absence, a lack. His poetry is no longer a predicate of his labor. He gives up poetry because it had “simply lost [its] meaning.” In the place of poetry, of a realm of artistic expression that has much subversive power in a Russian context—I refer to Doctor Zhivago as an obvious literary and ‘real’ example—there can only be advertising. The world of buying and selling is all Vavilen has left. He has become abject before his old world and, in turn, abject before himself. The shoes are out of place, though he can now buy them freely. So how does he locate himself? What does the world of capital offer him?

Advertising becomes a language that devises territory. It places people. Even today, when you travel to foreign countries, for some reason you are quite likely to notice differences in advertising. In a way, what is consumed precedes the location you’re traveling to. You see the Caribbean in ads for cruises and it acquires a reality totally separate from TV or Internet spots. Ads provide their own logic, their own catchphrases, and their own universe of signifiers for different things. Returning to Derrida, “différance [is] temporization, différance [is] spacing.” Language [advertising] is the site of abjection, the collapse of spacing.

We learn of Vavilen that amidst the turmoil of living through the transition, he had little interest in explaining what was happening. Any explanation is both anterior to what is happening and within it. I mention this because Vavilen is described as being “less concerned with the analysis of events (what was actually

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16 Pelevin, 5
17 Derrida, Différance, 9
going on) than with the problem of surviving them.” Analysis, a function of looking
into or at something is described as a means to a kind of truth. The experience of
being abject entails an impossible entanglement with language, an intense affective
response, feeling, and understanding that is immensely difficult to describe.

Before Vavilen enters the world of writing copy and sales pitches, he works
in a kiosk selling beer and cigarettes. The narration notes “Tatarsky was connected
with the world by a tiny little window . . . [and that he] only had to glance at a
customer’s hands to know whether he could short-change him.” The physically
narrow viewpoint Vavilen has mimics the possibility of examining what was going
on in that cultural moment. He can’t look at a bigger picture. He just sees what he
sells and whom he sells to. When his friend Morkovin (from the Russian word
Морковь, meaning carrot) sees him at the kiosk, he invites him to join a new
business venture: advertising. Suddenly his new job pushes him into a world where
any intuitive sense of the customer can ideally be translated into language.

Language then comes to provide Vavilen a sense of agency, the promise of
autonomy in his new world. The ability to describe or qualify is the ability to de-
limit things. Language allows one to answer the question “where am I?” That
autonomy necessitates a primal scene of separation.

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our
personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of
maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the
autonomy of language.

18 Pelevin, 7
19 Ibid
20 Funny that it would take an ad agency to do so.
21 Kristeva, 13
From his narrow vantage point, the language Vavilen threw away into the dustbin of history gains new, altered life. I take ‘maternal entity’ in a broad sense: that which gives rise to a person’s sense of self, whether it be familial, social, linguistic, political, or any other artificial category used to de-limit aspects of experience. In short, I take it to be a source—fictional, narrativized, or actual—of origin or the origin of meaning. If Vavilen is drawn towards the place where his poetry ceased to function, then language is his potential escape that precedes his attempts to overcome or leap the chasm left in the wake of the end of the Soviet Union. He learns to use a thing that chained him to the past to break apart and rebuild what remains of it. He was born into Russian and can never leave it, only break its rules.

On one of his first freelance jobs, Vavilen is given an order for Sprite. In the background, newspapers and radios and TV sets sound off about how the whole world “had been living in [a] grey murk for absolutely ages, which is why it was so full of things and money.” The only reason Russians don’t understand what’s going on is their ‘Soviet mentality,’ a remnant of a past now incompatible with the present. Vavilen scribbles presciently about the future of Russian politics, the state of Russian culture, etc. He actually takes the time to analyze, to see what’s going on, rather than just survive. He senses the growing anti-western sentiment of the nation and plans according, noting that cola is associated with the west.

*Translated into Rusian ‘Uncola’ would become ‘Nye-cola’. The sound of the word (similar to the old Russians name ‘Nikola’) and the associations aroused by it offer a perfect fit with the aesthetic required by the likely future scenario. A possible version of the slogan:*

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22 Pelevin, 19
Sprite. The Nye-Cola for Nikola.\textsuperscript{23}

Vavilen deploys a “citational graft . . . [that dwells in] possibility of its functioning being cut off . . . from its "original" desire-to-say-what-one-means.”\textsuperscript{24} He twists an outside cultural reference to the ‘Soviet Mentality.’ His play is always predicated on someone having an order for an ad and a language that precedes him. He can choose to mouth his own words as long as they’re taken out on loan.

**Mad Men on the Moskva: Language, the Mother of (Self)Invention**

У меня вопросов к русскому языку нет.
I have no questions for the Russian language.
—Виктор Черномырдин (Viktor Chernomyrdin)\textsuperscript{25}

Autonomy entails a sense of agency distinct from or over forces that might prevent one from enacting her will, the false guarantee of an eternity or teleology that organizes being into categories blown apart when one is abject. Eternity’s absoluteness has decayed into a language of infinite possibility and assured death, a lexicon that Vavilen can use and play with but never “create” or control.

Here, I think Derrida usefully elaborates the limits of autonomy within a language. If you can only think that you’re ‘you’ by virtue of the fact that you are cognizant that you are not the jeans you are wearing or the expensive bottle of Glenlivet you bought your father, then self-identity not only requires a sense of difference or separation from objects in the world. It requires a broader ability to

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\textsuperscript{23} Peleven, 22 . . . the Un-Cola is actually Seven-Up so they decide to shelve the idea until Seven-Up needs an ad.


\textsuperscript{25} Viktor Chernomyrdin was known to speak in Bushisms and strange aphorisms, this being one of them.
distinguish between cultural, linguistic, or social differences in order to create a sense of ‘one’s place.’ It requires you ‘read.’

Derrida begins *The Prosthesis of Origin* with a properly Derridean premise: he speaks only one language and that language isn’t his. Language can never be possessed, only exist as a system of meanings, signifiers, codes, and texts that are thrust upon the subject. Derrida says of this contorted language:

> I would not be myself outside it. It constitutes me, it dictates even the ipseity [selfhood] of all things to me, and also prescribes a monastic solitude for me; as if, even before learning to speak, I had been bound by some vows. This inexhaustible solipsism is myself before me. Lastingly.\(^{26}\)

This question of maternity, of origin: that which cares for one, from which one acquires agency. So, in this turn of phrase, Derrida suggests that if we are to take language as a maternal figure in our lives, then Generation «II» suddenly finds itself motherless. Yet the mother remains a specter; the imprint she leaves on her children never disappearing, only fading. She is always lying behind whatever is being read or seen, perhaps ethereal and yet very real.

Vavilen’s first attempts at advertising are indicative of the way in which the maternal figure of meaning must always linger on in the new language being “mastered.” This specter haunting language is addressed in Derrida’s *Otobiographies*:

> The mother is the faceless figure of a figurant, an extra. She gives rise to all figures by losing herself in the background scene like an

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anonymous persona. Everything comes back to her, beginning with life...  

This brings us back to the ‘Soviet Mentality.’ There are several key points at which Pelevin’s text addresses this curious state, revealing the way in which two realities like two ducks in a row can march off for the winter in tandem, even if no one seems to know where they’re headed. For Vavilen and those he sells ads to, “the daze [of capital] has petrified [them] before the untouchable, impossible, absent body of... mother [Russia].” This decomposing body, a landscape of chemicals, weapons, steel, and propaganda plants closing, waiting for their New Bosses requires new blood.

In a scene roughly two-thirds of the way through the novel, the importance of a so-called “Russian Idea” comes into focus. Mentioned earlier by a coworker who deigns to fashion Russians as Eurasians, this organizing concept is introduced by a character known as Wee Vova.

‘The job’s simple,’ said Wee Vova. ‘Write me a Russian idea about five pages long. And a short version one page long. And lay it out like real life, without any fancy gibberish, so’s I can splat any of those imported aresholes with it – bankers, whores, whoever. So’s they won’t think all we’ve done in Russia is heist the money and put up a steel door. So’s they can feel the same kind of spirit like in 45’ at Stalingrad, you get me?’

Only from the pages of books on positioning, from the imported forms of ad orders and bananas from Finland can any such Idea be constructed. It fits well

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28 Kristeva, 6
29 Pelevin, 138
30 Pelevin calls the new Russia a banana republic that imports its bananas from Finland. What a lovely sentiment.
within Derrida’s schema that ‘originality’ only exists through an estranging inheritance. When JD speaks of the ‘laws’ of language, his proposition crosses borders: “The law itself as translation,”31 allows meaning to cohere, much like recombinant DNA. The strands pre-exist Vavilen but he eases them into a self-replicating being, spiraling onward and upward and outward and inward.

This translation exists at a shore or liminal place, a space suspended between the ghosts of other places. Advertising was already in the Soviet Union. It was merely waiting to be teased out and altered by its American cousin, a guest invited by a host but not by the rest of his family. A ‘Russian’ Idea would necessarily involve the Socialist past and the recurring sense that advertisers are propagandists. The need for an idea is the need for an origin, or, more specifically, for something original that might ‘brand’ the Russian people.

**Fire in Babylon: We, The Material Fire**

I often think that logic is the missing link between prostitution and law (if we assume there is a gap between them).
—Viktor Pelevin

The word brand has a curious place in the market. To be branded in a physical sense is to have something burned onto your skin. It scars. It’s permanent. Once branded, it acts as an immutable sign, always identifiable like a tattoo. Thieves are branded. So are cattle.

But to brand in other contexts means to shape, to control, to fashion, to sell. Branding implies a flexibility of a sign and the possibility of the distortion of older signs, ideas, images, et al by a marketing executive. Pelevin uses the imagery of fire

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31 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 10
to describe the "hellish" landscape of neoliberal capitalism. But this fire is not exterior or interior to the subject or person. Rather the individual is the fire that burns her as well as living in the world surrounded by fire. As with Kristeva, there is a breakdown of any inside or outside, of any object or subject distinct from each other. And all of this leaps into being from the primal scream of being 'branded.' We live in a society in which we 'brand' ourselves without second thought.

About halfway through the novel, Tatarsky meets the Sirruf, a mystical guardian figure for the Goddess Ishtar, while tripping. The Sirruf explains:

The material fire is your world. The fire in which you burn has to be maintained. And you are one of the service personnel . . . It is [man’s] identity that has no existence in reality. In this life man attends the incineration of the garbage [that is] his identity . . . and whichever way you might turn your eyes, you are still gazing into the flames in which your life is consumed.\(^{32}\)

This ‘manifesto’ comes on the heels of the Sirruf’s explanation that identity has no substance, no essence that adheres to a “center.” Identity is empty. It is filled with things, including the illusion of its own existence. The Sirruf sees this in negative terms, as though mankind is trapped by its supermarkets and television sets without seeing the funeral pyre that consumes the ‘consumer.’ In other words, the ‘consumer’ privileges herself as the center of reason or choice. She consumes an object, a thing, an Oreo without considering the effect objects have.

To my mind, the Sirruf is able to emblemize one fact of being a ‘consumer:’ we make choices on impulse, without reason, at the whim and mercy of our desires. We crowd the table for more birthday cake. We get dumped and buy too many shots of Fireball. We see an ad, laugh at a company’s attempt to pander to us, and then buy

\(^{32}\) Pelevin, 119-120
whatever we saw on screen anyway. The *Sirruf* leads us to believe that existence and ‘identity’ are in fact immaterial. But we experience the fire, the sale, the brand, the burn as our material existence. And in this experience, we find ourselves trapped between being willing and self-commanding people and sheeple pushed to buy different things by companies, even making their products physically addictive.

How do you locate yourself if you’re aflame, in the flames, and the flames themselves? The answer is rather Heisenbergian: we can’t precisely know. But if the fire is all there is, “the properties of a thing are effects on other ‘things.’”33 Friedrich Nietzsche considered this way out of the ‘problem’ of being. He replaced it with becoming, substance with a nebulous, confused web of interrelations between person and ‘thing’ that have no clear delimitations. Only the continual act of differentiating within that world of fire grants a sense of I and Other.

Tatarsky has lost eternity, his poetry, and his own beliefs as well. All he has access to are the earlier grafts of Western companies blending in with the bones of the Soviet Union. Azadovsky, his new boss once Wee Vova is wacked, grants Vavilen an interview:

Azadovsky: Ok . . . Political views – what’s this we have here? It says “upper left” in English . . . so what are your political views?
Vavilen: Let’s just say I like it when life has big tits, but I’m not in the slightest bit excited by the so-called Kantian tit-in-itself, no matter how much milk there might be splashing about in it . . . To cut it short . . . I couldn’t give a toss for any Kantian tit-in-itself with all its categorical imperatives. On the tit market the only tit that gives me a buzz is the Feuerbachian tit-for-us. That’s the way I see the situation.34

34 Pelevin, 154
Feuerbach is an exemplary reference for the text: he bridged Hegel and Marx in philosophy, two figures a Russian educated in ideology is likely to know. More importantly, he believed that there was no such thing as a ‘thing-in-itself’. Material existence is only for a subject. The world cannot exist without us cognizing it, interacting with it, living within it. It is not an object we manipulate. Its existence is manipulation at the moment it is cognized.

Tatarsky is making a claim that he only likes tits and the myriad things the word signifies when they exist for him, as instrumental extensions of being conscious. Right before this little speech, Azadovsky points out that Vavilen has written about the ‘collective unconscious’ and jokes that it’d be a disaster if someone actually knew what it was. But the unconscious cannot exist for-us except as that which is brought into consciousness, a thing called into being after the fact. Like Vavilen, advertising propagandists are more concerned with navigating the immediacy of the “fact” than taking time to understand it once it has passed.

Their world of advertising is not about meeting any demand from its consumers or unlocking a hidden desire. Instead, it hurls those consumers into the maelstrom: watches, drugs, suits, anything with a price tag will circulate if someone pays them to sell. The object-for-us is impossible because the body the object exists for is always decomposing, stretching out, existing for the object.\(^{35}\) There has to be a stable “subject” cognizing and instrumentalizing a thing-for-us. If a person only becomes a person by never quite attaining “subjectivity,” the object cannot be so readily used.

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\(^{35}\) Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* comes to mind, for the collector exists for what he collects and not the other way around.
We have become abjects buying objects. We are the fire that consumes us for we now consume ourselves. Location, location, location. We cannot ‘find’ ourselves or point to a map. The truest places never are: a compound lie! There are no “true” places because placement requires difference, separation, delimitation. We live in a space folding in on itself like the Soviet world that dies for Tatarsky. We labor under the allusions of identity: allusions form identity by linking it in slippery fashion to something not inherent to or immanent within a ‘person.’ If we’re never quite a subject, then objects are never quite “objects” to be pushed around.

Tatarsky’s himself a riddle: he is a television program that helps write them for a/effect, programmed by the same things he seeks to program. Just as the subject hollows, language becomes the site of the incineration of identity. Language becomes that which burns/brands us, a language that grants us access to what marks us as well; a language that “dwells and [we] call it [our] dwelling.”

That which gives us life gives us death. That which acts as an origin erases itself. Vavilen tells Azadovsky he believes in nothing but he can never give up grammar. Empty of his own politics, he has become a master грамматолог (grammatologist). He can engineer the emptiness of self and keep the fire going like the good service personnel Russia’s Mad Men are supposed to be.

**Ishtar Gatekeepers: [Russia]**

If we put it your way, the most compelling Western philosophers in my life were Remy Martin and Jack Daniels.

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36 Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other, 1
37 I refer the reader to George Clinton and Funkadelic’s seminal America Eats Its Young. Also, I apparently refer to James Joyce (“Ireland is the sow that eats her farrow”) as well.
—Viktor Pelevin

During a frenetic acid trip, Vavilen uses a Ouija board to commune with the long-lost spirit of Ché Guevara. Ché iterates the central point of my previous section: we should abandon “the dualism that imposes the division into subject and object of something that in actual fact has never existed and never will.” But Ché’s diatribe goes beyond the ‘good’ and ‘evil’ of subject and object. It introduces the “new” fundamental basis for existence in the Technicolor world of neon billboards and thirty-second TV spots.

Landscape often appears in metaphors with which we construct identity. Though that landscape exists insofar as we can describe it, it also comes to describe us. Some claim that their home is etched into their being in psychosomatic harmony. The same is true of Prada bags and stilettos worn in Praha on dancefloors moving to the sounds of Soweto. Generation «II» centers around the world of television, of representing physical things in a space immaterial in its nature, save the screen itself. The living room becomes a meeting point for the two worlds to coalesce.

In describing the way that television alters the person watching it, Ché suggests the eerie death of the subject as pregnant with actions that are only realized after gestation. All of this comes about from ‘technomodification,’ the alteration of camera angle, image, color palette, and so on that producers and cameramen use to direct the viewer’s gaze.

The changes in the image produced by various technomodifications can be correlated with a virtual psychological process in which the observer is forced to switch his attention from one event to another and select the most interesting content from what is taking place – that is, to manage

38 Pelevin, 77
his own attention as the makers of the programme manage it. This psychological process creates its own virtual subject, which for the duration of the television programme exists in place of the individual, fitting into his or her consciousness like a hand into a rubber glove.39

The subject is virtual. It perceives itself into existence. We perceive ourselves as being selves and, further, we perceive ourselves as somehow controlling what we’re watching when we’re watching it. Yet what we see actually defines what jumps out and differentiates itself from the larger frame formed by a television set. Vavilen has already posited a tab of acid as coming-into-being in material terms as an extension of consciousness. Here, the reverse happens. Our consciousness of a TV show comes into being as an extension of the immaterial thing it watches. Not only do subject and object, their sides of the border, tangle together. The subject ceases to exist in material terms.

The abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I.40

Abj ects enter here in more embodied terms: the world of things before me is opposed to me. They are not me. I am not them. But I am not free of them, free from them, free without them. We seem to exist for each other, rending the pedestaled privilege of my logos over the world it manipulates. The nature of being a person is in-between subject and object when we apply the experience of the Soviet transition to even the most mundane minutiae of daily life.

39 Ibid, 79
40 Kristeva, 1
Pelevin's conclusion draws out the possibility that others manage this virtual subject's attention span. Vavilen is a service person because he does such managing with his fluid understanding of the liquid language that the ballyhoo of band-aids, cortisone creams, and Nike smuggled across old borders. The virtual subject (read: abject) "manages his or her attention in exactly the same way as a programme production crew." Subjectivity is managed and constructed by unseen hands in distant darkrooms. Our personhood becomes a program uploaded like a virus from what we watched and touch, a thing we watch while enacting.

Here, we finally arrive at the Homo Zapiens of the translation's title. Homo Zapiens forms the key to the scattershot philosophy running through the book: Vavilen is "less concerned with the analysis of events (what was actually going on) than with the problem of surviving them." An attempt to make sense of things entails forsaking the benefits they might bring. If advertisers in Russia wasted their time actually testing clips to see what consumers wanted, they wouldn't be paid as they are. There is no political "program" they're pushing. If they were propagandizing in a purer sense, they would be measuring the success of their propaganda.

Successful "propaganda" is in fact terrible in Pelevin's world. A wealthy businessman benefits from being able to show that he can waste his money on bad advertising because the consumer has already been trained to follow whatever is

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41 Pelevin, 80
42 It's unclear why the translation necessitated a different title. Still, this speech is one of a couple philosophic focal points so I think, in the spirit of the misattribution of Fathers and Sons (it's actually Fathers and Children), the translation captures something in English which is present in the other title in Russian.
43 Pelevin, 7
happening on screen, regardless of its content. There are mentions of Marshal McLuhan in the novel for a reason: the medium is the only message Azadovsky and his ilk are interested in. Advertising and propaganda are similar. They advance the medium they work in, the structure of power they require to exist. “Sales are just a side effect.”

In the same way as a viewer who does not wish to watch the advertisements switches between television channels, instantaneous and unpredictable technomodifications switch the actual viewer to and fro. Assuming the condition of Homo Zapiens, the viewer becomes a remotely controlled television programme. And he or she spends a significant part of his life in this condition.

What power does advertising have as a language of origin? I’ve arrived at a scary thought: our identities are passively programmed by our engagement with screens that hawk different wares. The medium of television and the language it uses do not advance any meaning as content. They advance meaning in that their medium is a basis for meaning. Why does content disappear? Because of the novel’s belief in “monetary minimalism,” the value, worth, and by extension meaning of any thing can be reduced to its monetary cost. Coca-Cola and Pepsi do taste differently but they both sell the idea of soft drinks, of consuming something sugary, and of their cost value to each other. The fact that many can’t tell the difference in a blind taste test is evidence that there’s more than some truth to the idea that the content of a product is often irrelevant to how it is perceived when consumed.

44 Ibid, 211
45 Pelevin, 81
If language is maternal in its false promise of autonomy, it ceases to grant Vavilen and others the ability to analyze things,\textsuperscript{46} to know “what’s going on.” Vavilen cannot delimit the world around him. His language is little concerned with content. The ads he writes only further the dominance of a language that seems to define the identity of the subject without any locatable intention at the level of the individual, particularly today when ads now bear little relation to their products.

The absent mother leaves more than her own mark. She precludes the active control of those marks by any one person as advertising imagery covers the globe like a map drawn to life-size scale. The map becomes the world it represented. The virtual subject becomes the subject of which it was initially a prosthetic extension.

Pelevin closes this arc of the dilution of subject-object and language as mother with a shotgun wedding. Vavilen becomes a living God, a digital lifeform modeled on his body. He can now appear in thousands of ads in different capacities. Azadovsky is killed to make room for the Goddess Ishtar’s new husband.

At the sacred divination in Atlanta\textsuperscript{47} the oracle foretold that in our country Ishtar would have a new husband. We’d been having problems with Azadovsky for ages, but it took us a long time to figure out who the new husband could be. All that was said about him was that he was a man with the name of a town. We thought and thought about it, we searched, and then suddenly they brought in your file from the first section. Everything adds up: you’re the one.\textsuperscript{48}

Vavilen as грамматолог has been ‘divined’ in both senses: discovered and made divine. He unites with the mystical, maternal figure “behind” advertising.” Yet she is not behind anything at all. Her corporeal existence is the sum of her

\textsuperscript{46} Hence the name of a news anchor named Farseikin Farsook (I would translate the name but it’s English shoved into Cyrillic).
\textsuperscript{47} Home of Coca-Cola, home of America’s sweet nectar.
\textsuperscript{48} Pelevin, 243
children—she “consists of the totality of images used in advertising.” She comes into existence with them, alongside them. She gives birth to herself, is causa sui. Ishtar is the ‘real’ prime mover but she comes into being when others move. There really is no material force or thing behind personhood. What is behind is a collection of immaterial perceptions that create this illusion.

The theological anchor of the possibility of meaning in the world Vavilen has entered—meaning is only a potential now since content is irrelevant—only immaterially exists. Success for Vavilen means being digitized to function sacramentally. He is now Ishtar's right hand man for every occasion. Thus Vavilen comes to occupy a “place” next to the “originary” figure of this new age of agitprop. He embraces the extension of his person in the crystalline screens huddled in kitchen corners across the country. He takes his “place” between the corporeal world and the digital one.

Embracing abjectivity grants him an escape from the commerce that kills off the weak on occasion. They call him a living God. He is not a demi-god, though he seems to be a child of Ishtar in a way. He is a new “origin,” a new source, a new figure who can only manipulate language to further the grasp that language has on identity. viewers watch ads for Sprite, they will see his shining likeness singing. When they flip through a screen blasting anthems about Mastercard, he’ll be there. But he is not writing who he is. He is writing where he is into Others. All are coming to brush against his border.

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49 Ibid, 246
And so, beating our boats against the current, Vavilen has shown us that there is no essence to a “subject.” There’s not even a subject, only the virtual experience or perception of one. As we look for new pairs of shoes, we hit upon the vein of gold that Pelevin has found: we are only ourselves when we look for ourselves. When we look for ourselves, we have lost ourselves. We have lost ourselves because there is no ‘we.’ We ‘find’ ourselves between the things we see and consume and that mythical ‘we.’

Pelevin’s novel has no female characters aside from Ishtar. What does this thinly spun yarn have to say about the maternal figure in everyday life? Does it unravel? Perhaps, but fortunately Gary Shteyngart’s work exists in a similar universe, one in which Lenny Abramov pines for his mother.

**Towards a System of Abjects**

If you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, Book III, Ch. 6 of *The Brothers Karamazov*

*Super Sad True Love Story:* it’s unclear what modifies what in the title. The novel revels in mocking the state of contemporary politics and economics in America. The Bi-Partisan Party runs the country without opposition and tries to ensure that consumers can keep consuming (so that they don’t question political power). The national debt is spiraling out of control and the New York City that swaddled Lenny Abramov in its cosmopolitan grandeur is becoming a shopping mall for foreign tourists and High Net Worth Individuals. Lenny and his young love
Eunice Park describe a world filled with objects, items, things bought and sold and tagged to identity.

I’ve already looked at the dissolving separation between a person and what they consume. The “subject” as a decision-making, independent entity changes when it becomes a consumer, literally making internal what is external, accreting things from without such that the Other (in the object) becomes you and you become It. To consume is to, to not only instrumentalize an object but meld with it, cannibalize it. *Sprite: Obey Your Thirst. Nike: Just Do It. Calvin Klein: Between Love and Madness lies Obsession.*

I turn to France’s eminent ex/an/interior designer: Jean Baudrillard. Before he begins collecting definitions of objects, compulsively driven by a will to a system, Baudrillard examines the interior space of the living room at the beginning of *The System of Objects*. He strikingly refers to traditional modes of decoration prior to the mid-20th century as possessing a “structure [of] the patriarchal relationship founded on tradition and authority,”⁵⁰ on the first page.

As I’ve already suggested, spatial metaphors dominate the description of abjection as an affective experience that challenges the possibility of representation. Here, the organization of an actual room is predicated on patriarchy, where Kristeva’s border seems to be a crisis of maternity. If traditional collections of living room accouterments are patriarchal, they are an incursion or iteration *into* a maternal space, the blank slate that precedes or coexists with the process of

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attempting to order. We only recognize that we were once part of our mothers and then confronted by the crisis of independence from them.

Our sovereign selfhood is always liminal, attached umbilically to something else. Baudrillard's passing reference to patriarchy refers to an old promise order and in/dependence. Maternal spaces never give themselves so easily as the pre-Ikea world may have hoped; metaphors, analogies, and rhetoric fail to ever “fill” a space. They only open it up for further acts of language.

“Don’t tell them life’s a journey,” Lenny laments. “A journey is when you end up somewhere.” Lenny implicates space while going on about his own mortality. Meaning or a sense of life ‘being worth living’ predicates somewhere you’re headed. Lenny even suggests that living for your kids is more like “gradually dying for [your] kids.” His premature mourning for his own death removes procreation from any understanding of the future. Instead, his continued survival is not the continuation of himself through Others. He will survive to continue surviving for himself. The world ought to be a Feuerbachian tit-for-Lenny.

But life never so neatly organizes itself around this desire. The objects surrounding Lenny—beer, onionskin jeans, juicypussy couture, books now known as artifacts, and women—never succeed at staving off Lenny’s impending doom mirrored by the fate of New York City and the United States as a whole. He’s a neurotic, self-effacing, anxious Russian-Jew whose parents came to America and gave birth to him in another empire now facing the music. No iPhones anymore:

52 Ibid, 4
apparats\textsuperscript{53} instead—devices we use to text, to call (to verbal in the near future), to announce credit scores and fuckability ratings to every apparat-bearing soul in the room.

When all one consumes or does is cataloged obsessively for others to view, objects cease to have any content, any “moral [or ideological] theatricality . . . [They possess only] the freedom to function.”\textsuperscript{54} They are only the end they serve, as though they cease to be signposts of monarchy or tradition or a way of life. They are ripped from the system that defines them but never free of it. The set of associations I make with a high-backed leather chair in a study remain though the chair is now a functional symbol of comfort rather than the projection of power or whatever else pipe smoking desiderati deem necessary.

Consumption is a frustrated desire for totality. Object-signs are equivalent to each other in their ideality and can proliferate indefinitely: and they must do so in order continuously to fulfill the absence of reality. It is ultimately because consumption is founded on a lack that it is irrepressible.\textsuperscript{55}

A blender is simply another object taking up space until called to function, the site of a desire that can never be totally fulfilled. Baudrillard suggests that reality doesn’t adequately represent “really-existing” reality: reality is always its absence or an attempt to grasp something that’s either not there or always slipping away. Lenny has his own eternity. But it’s literally literal. He worships the power of books,

\textsuperscript{53} Apparat just means apparatus or machine, not to be confused as a reference to apparatchik, one who helps the “machine” or “apparatus” of state.
\textsuperscript{54} Baudrillard, 16
which sadly have died their own kind of death and his slim shot at immortality. He is equal parts museum curio and wishful thinker trapped by his FICO score.

Lenny’s frustrated desire is sexual, a frustration linked to totality, to the completion of a system always incomplete as well as the relationship to birth and death and the beginning and end of a totality. Collecting antiques, perhaps books for Lenny, allows him to attain an “imaginary mastery over birth and death.” And though he thinks he’s in a reality TV show—perhaps we all are now if we were to update Pelevin—he is anyway.

Before beginning Lenny’s journey in the collector’s heaven, Rome, I should explain the point of view of my analysis. What/Where is Lenny? I can’t examine the question from his point of view. It’s too insular to draw out his “place.” Instead, I’d like to showcase Eunice before mapping Lenny Abramov.

**No Mr. Frodo: Eunice is not some Fellow Traveler**

I’d love to have a 19th Century Russian book club where all the members had to act like the pretentious minor noblemen they were reading about.
—Gary Shteyngart

It is tempting to ascribe *Super Sad True Love Story* to Lenny, the more dominant narrator and the character clearly culled from Shteyngart’s life. In my own introduction, I acted as though the novel belongs to Lenny, the Emasculated Man-of-Letters acting out what he has read or what he hopes to read in the world. Lenny is Eugene Onegin but without an ounce of Pushkin’s characteristic charisma or tragedy: a man who has modeled his person on characters in books but without any hope of playing the rake. Lenny damns himself and loves it. But the novel makes a

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56 Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 80
point of including Eunice's voice, Eunice's communiqués with her family and friends (and Lenny's boss), and points out that the critics within Lenny's world felt Eunice's words were "a welcome relief from [his] relentless navel-gazing."57

Taken from Lenny's view, this is an obnoxious way to cut off criticism of his diary entries (which do relentlessly gaze at all the ways Lenny wishes he could fuck Eunice forever and feel young and blah blah blah). But it also points to a more interesting predicament: why assume Lenny as the baseline authority of the book and what does his own move to showcase his impotence tell us about Eunice?

I wager that Eunice is the true emotional crux of the novel, the only character to really develop or change, the figure who reveals most about what it means to form identity, and the character that most sets into motion the challenges of maternity, autonomy and language. She does so, in part, because of the relative brevity of her writing, as though she dives in where Lenny wades in wearing wings instead. Lenny's relationship to himself and her reflects *Super Sad True Love Story*'s super, sad, true love of abjectivity. Even if Eunice is initially a passive player exerting some force on Lenny, she pushes the entire story forward.

**How I Met My Mother: Lenny Longs for the Womb**

Even death, my slender, indefatigable nemesis, seemed lackluster when compared to the all-powerful Eunice Park.
—Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story*, page 23

The novel begins in Rome. Not many cities have the gestalt of former imperial wonder as well as the laidback realization that one lives in the ruins of the

57 Shteyngart, 327
endtimes of what made one’s country “great”\textsuperscript{58} and things are fine. “I wonder if one can love, enjoy oneself . . . or just die . . . in another language.”\textsuperscript{59} Lenny certainly seems to fear the language of decay, the gray hairs and paunch that signify maturing into eventual obsolescence and life in a hospice home, quieted through slow quietus.

Lenny’s ennui en rose centers around his compulsive fear of death, the lack of ‘true’ love in his life, around lack itself. Lenny sells indefinite life extension or the promise of eternity to the highest bidders. He wants to collect enough money to afford it himself, his life constructed around the absences of which he can be rid. He has a different eternity than Tatarsky: it wasn’t promised in an ideology, only in the slogans pushing product and the language of love as totalizing or complete or obtainable as an object. So he goes into the marketplace looking for someone to replace Fabrizia, the older Italian woman he has been sleeping with. Of Eunice Park:

I made great sniffing motions in the air, trying to capture her essence, thinking of how I would bait her to New York, make her my wife, make her my life, my life eternal.\textsuperscript{60}

To make her his life: he actually wants to transform Eunice, someone distinct from him with her own agency and desires into an object-for-him. Eunice is described in boyish terms, though I don’t want to dwell on it. More important is her potential to act as a maternal figure that grounds Lenny’s life in some way.

A man is not complete until he’s married. Then he’s finished. Lenny wants to be complete and, as a result, can never be finished. The only thing complete at

\textsuperscript{58} Istanbul and Orhan Pamuk’s exploration of the word hüzün (hewzewn) comes to mind as well.
\textsuperscript{59} Derrida, \textit{Monolingualism of the Other}, 2
\textsuperscript{60} Super Sad True Love Story, 25
novel’s end is silence, death, the absence of ever having been fulfilled. But Lenny also pines for a sense of meaningfulness, else eternity would be wasted. Just as Tatarsky’s eternity was an explicit function of his poetry and his poetry’s meaning, Lenny suggests that self-confidence in the unceasing process of decomposition is really what he lacks.

In the taxi, I sat apart from her, engaging in very idle chatter indeed (“So I hear the dollar’s going to be devaluated again . . .”). The city of Rome appeared around us, casually splendid, eternally assured of itself, happy to take our money and pose for a picture, but in the end needing nothing and no one. Lenny’s description of Rome inverts the trope of the rugged individual and brushes it over a city. Rome becomes a cowboy, a Randian maker-of-things, a city content to be collected in photographs always to outlast whoever would consume it as though it were a night at the opera. Throughout this opening, we see Lenny’s overweening hope that Eunice will love him, that this twenty-four year old would help keep his thirty-nine year old, schlubby self from being ruined. Unlike Lenny, the ruins of Rome have taken on the guise of their ruin without complaint.

This play on ruin traps the dichotomous battle of meaning and the death of meaning (or life and death). Before Lenny gets his shot with Eunice and enjoys an awkward bout of cunnilingus, a rich sculptor insults him and his line of work.

“Mediocrities like you deserve immortality.” If Lenny acquired eternal life, it would be a punishment if he lacks meaning. He would still be a ruin.

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61 “For a while at least, no one said anything, and I was blessed with what I needed the most. Their silence, black and complete.” Shteyngart, 331
62 Ibid, 23
63 Ibid, 20
Mediocrity mirrors invisibility in its ubiquity. To differentiate oneself from mediocrity requires labor, a recurring exertion (birth) on the part of whoever hates ‘mediocrity.’ Greatness requires the possibility of its death, of being located in space through a time. Lenny’s differentiating move is to publish a diary that goes on to be popular because of its other writer (Eunice Park).

Value generators (like advertising) have taken over Lenny’s world. Credit poles post videos based on your credit history, your quanta bubble out into the air around you as people with apparats check you out, and the consumer begins to place those abstract numerical values into objects devoid of value aside from their function. All this responds to an “immanent structure of promise or desire, an expectation without a horizon of expectation [that] informs all speech.”

If advertising is a language, buying a thing is a speech act. When buying or, in Lenny’s case, speaking of acquiring or achieving something, there is an internal logic of desire always present that, if fulfilled, would render the desire void. Since desire always parallels lack, it remains the specter of realizing a potential that is by its nature unrealizable. Eunice’s narration is loaded with desires explicit and latent. The two following excerpts from Eunice’s first chapter parallel her two major competing drives that recur throughout the novel.

Anyway, I NEED YOUR ADVICE because [Ben] called yesterday and asked if I wanted to go up to Lucca with him next week and I was playing hard to get and said no. But I’m going to call him and say yes tomorrow! WHAT SHOULD I DO? HELP!!!
P.S. I met this old, gross guy at a party yesterday and we got really drunk and I sort of let him go down on me. There was another even older guy, this

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64 Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 21
65 According to Eunice, his name is pretty gay. Being named can be a handicap in this world of letters.
sculptor, trying to get in my pants, so I figured, you know, the lesser evil . . . He was nice, kind of dorky, although he thinks he’s so Media cause he works in biotech or something. And he had the grossest feet, bunions, and this gigantic heel spur . . . anyway, he brushes his teeth all wrong, so I had to SHOW A GROWN MAN HOW TO USE A TOOTHBRUSH!!!!!!

In this online message—brought to you by GlobalTeens, the Facebook of tomorrow—Eunice talks with a language that Lenny might liken to sexual frivolity. That’s just because Lenny has an insatiable need to preserve the myth of youth. By no means is Eunice being frivolous. Instead, the language with which emotion is expressed sucks.

I don’t mean sucks negatively. Even if the emotional language of the Internet amounted to newspeak, it would be affectively supple. Internet abrevs suck out complexity in favor of brevity. Eunice’s words are backgrounded by a world where both consuming things AND Lenny’s desired relationship are instrumental extensions of the consumer performing a speech act. The first paragraph is meant to be emblematic of how people born recently will talk about relationships.

What do you mean Daddy’s not feeling good? If anything bad is happening you and Sally have to go to Eunhyun’s house. Mom! Forget freaking Jesu for a second. THIS IS IMPORTANT. You’re making me very scared. Did he do anything to you or Sally? I tried to call the house eight times yesterday but all I got is the voice mail. Verbal me on my GlobalTeens account when you get this.

The novel plays out as a May-December romance. Lenny is thirty-nine and falls in love with a younger woman a generation apart from him. If taken as a romance, Eunice becomes a woman who is made into an object of desire, an object whose effects extends far beyond being “possessed.” She ends up leaving Lenny for

66 Shteyngart, 28
67 Shteyngart, 30-31
his boss who’s getting treated to be younger. But Eunice’s P.S. presages the role she wants to take with her own family: caretaker. Eunice cannot just be a representation of woman because this would ignore “alterity within identity.” She is between sexual figure and caretaker, object of someone else’s affection and agent acting in the world of her own accord. She seeks being a source of stability, even at cost to herself. She is drawn to the lack in her life that tears her up.

In the first chapter, we meet Nettie Fine, now an old woman who presumably worked for HIAS shepherding Soviet Jewry through Rome to the US. Lenny calls her his American Mama because she helped his family settle into American life. We meet Lenny’s mother later on and he never refers to her in the same way. I draw attention to this fact because in the novel, Lenny was born in the United States. His world growing up, even if inflected by speaking Russian at home, was not divided by life before and life after the Middling Passage through the imperial city of Rome. He was never at home in Russia and his home in America is leaving him.

We have two representations of maternity, one extending from the sexual relationship that Lenny wants, the other a mother figure who gave birth to Lenny Американцем (as an American). Lenny might be excited by Eunice’s fuckability but she will go on to be much more than a “partner” that Lenny uses. He’s living on borders: middle age, Russian-American, mortal with a chance of meatballs. Flying home:

I took out a battered volume of Chekhov’s stories from my carry-on (wish I could read it in Russian like my parents can) and turned to the

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68 Youth might finally be wasted on the old as well.
69 Kerry Oliver, 56
70 My own mother took this route to America.
novella *Three Years*, the story of the unattractive but decent Laptev, the son of a wealthy Moscow merchant, who is in love with the beautiful and much younger Julia.\(^{71}\)

Lenny can’t read the language of the story that has now become his own tale of lust for a younger woman. He’s hyphenated. Though not particularly elaborated from Lenny’s point of view, the rabbit-like procreation of abrevs layers one degree of separation from English. The generation gap produces a clear otherness in their shared language. But on top of that, he can’t access his “true” maternal language: Mother Russian. He laments, “I have never been to Russia. I have not had the chance to learn to love it and hate it the way my parents have.”\(^ {72}\)

Why is Russian a Mother? Because he recognizes it in himself and himself as outside of it, mimicking the struggle to assert one’s identity into an American existence despite his lingering Russianness. His identity lies at a border that neither side can claim. Lenny is asking if he “can love, enjoy [himself], pray, die from pain, or just die . . . in another language,”\(^ {73}\) that lives within him but never speaks. Both the idioms of his native tongue and the entirety of his maternal tongue are beyond his ken and control.

At first mention, Eunice will “sustain [Lenny] through forever.”\(^ {74}\) She’s an object of ecstasy, a life force granting Lenny a new lease on life. But we learn that Lenny can only ever love his idea of her, and therefore can only really love himself. I never fully know how to read Eunice. She’s of a generation yet to speak for itself.

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\(^{71}\) Shteyngart, 36
\(^{72}\) Ibid, 136
\(^{73}\) Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 2
\(^{74}\) Ibid, 4
He desperately searches for the words to capture his “love.” He just wants to have his own words. Somehow the blank canvas of eternity is a certainty for him, an end (that has no end). Though it lurks behind everything like a howlingly infinite jest, eternity becomes the possession of and by language. His having a language means having Eunice Park. Having Eunice Park means finding an origin, a mother tongue, a mother, collecting tokens of her existence.75

**You’ve Got Mail: The Lovers Apart**

It is no use to blame the looking glass if your face is awry.
—Николай Гоголь (Nikolai Gogol), Ревизор (The Government Inspector)

The Park sisters favored extra-small shirts in strict business patterns, austere gray sweaters distinguished only by their provenance and price, pearly earrings, one-hundred-dollar children’s socks (their feet were that small), panties shaped like gift bows, bars of Swiss chocolate at random delis, footwear, footwear, footwear . . . I closed my eyes and let the image[s] slide into my mind’s burgeoning Eunice archive.76

Lenny “collects” her online. Her existence becomes a laundry list, a purchase history, a set of toys channeled through his obsession’s boyish, dimpled frame. The feminine figure as woman is described in terms of her memorabilia, but Lenny’s drive to collect her and the online paper trail flowing behind her is not “equivalent to sexual practice . . . [though it] produce[s] intense satisfaction.”77 Whenever Lenny talks of cholesterol, alkalinized water, resveratrol, and the other virtual things that make up what we eat when we read the nutritional content label, he eats a virtual totality of the food and its associations, not the food itself. He too wants to consume Eunice as a virtual totality.

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75 Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence* deeply explores this concept in a related fashion.
76 Shteyngart, 38-39
77 Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 93
EUNI-TARD ABROAD: I’m coming home, Sally. Hello? As soon as I find a cheap ticket, I’m coming home.\(^\text{78}\)

Confronted with a crisis in the family—her abusive father is acting up and her younger sister is getting political\(^\text{79}\)—Eunice heads home. Lenny is an afterthought, a means to the end of being near her family. Already, Eunice as figurine does not hold together. She’s more, closer to Onegin’s Tatiana\(^\text{80}\) than Tolstoy’s Kitty in *Anna Karenina*.

Lenny scuttles along his rat race, trying to please his boss Joshie (keen on teaching his employees the Fallacy of Merely Existing). He acknowledges, “I [feel] the perfunctory liberal chill at seeing entire races of humans so summarily reduced and stereotyped, but [am] also voyeuristically interested in seeing people’s Credit rankings.”\(^\text{81}\) He derives pleasure from collecting others’ data. The only exceptional trait Eunice has is the intensity of his need to collect, that collecting her numbers, her photos, her scribbling notes from the prom and her scent somehow allows him to push death away.

The weird thing is I’ve been thinking about Lenny, the old guy . . . I feel safe with him because he is so not my ideal and I feel like I can be myself because I’m not in love with him.\(^\text{82}\)

Their relationships to love are inverse: Lenny wants to ‘be himself’ through enacting his love for Eunice (which is really just a desire to collect something for himself) and Eunice feels she can only be herself when she’s not in love. If she

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\(^{78}\) Shteyngart, 49  
\(^{79}\) It seems any political activity is “political,” which is to say dangerous. Politics is a dirty word.  
\(^{80}\) Tatiana falls in love with the older Onegin only to be jilted by him. When he returns after she has grown up saying he loves her, she says no and stays with her new husband.  
\(^{81}\) Shteyngart, 54  
\(^{82}\) Ibid, 74
doesn’t love him, she can leave whenever he overbears without the hindrance of some obsessive lack.

P.P.S. I thought you were pretty cute on your friend Noah’s stream but you should really try to get off “101 People We Need to Feel Sorry For.” That guy with the suk dik overalls is just being cruel to you. You are not a “greasy old schlub,” whatever that means, Lenny. You should stand up for yourself.83

First brushing his teeth. Now lessons in self-esteem. Lenny might complain about the plight of being a grown man, but Eunice complains of his Peter Pan refusal to act like one. For Lenny, it seems that language is an ability to categorize what is being collected, to give name to the affect or desire that push such collecting.

Eunice’s language pushes at emotional reality: more honest, more volatile, less concerned with the world of things.

Eunice grew up in the apparat world of Glengarry Glen Ross consumption: sell, sell, sell. Lenny sees things as more than they are, as the sum of his own wishes for their existence. Eunice tries to see things as they are (though it’s impossible).

Lenny wants there to be a beyond he can leap into, flowers and wife in his hands, and run about the universe playing schlimazel and schlemiel wherever he goes. And both are torn between an inheritance of language or silence, of self-esteem or history, and the ability to act. Lenny wants to become historyless, to become timeless. Eunice hopes to transcend the limits imposed by her family, though she is always drawn back towards them.

Love is a Harsh Shibboleth: The Old School “Misreads” the New School

83 Ibid, 98
Print media no longer has a happy home. Books once entertained, cajoled, enlightened, and surprised. Now they’re doorstops. Lenny’s decidedly “old school” desire to save books seeks to keep them off the bonfire; assuming that the lone reference to Arcade Fire dates him, he would have listened to them in high school or college (and would have graduated not too far from my own date in the book’s world). His love of the corporal word is even more of a conscious throwback. It’s also a fear because it means that death awaits.

Eunice grew up after this world had “passed on” and become tomorrow, a more perverse today. Describing Lenny’s strange relationship with books:

Anyway, what kind of freaked me out was that I saw Len reading a book . . . And I don’t mean scanning a text like we did in Euro Classics with that Chatterhouse of Parma I mean seriously READING. He had this ruler out and he was moving it down the page very slowly . . . like trying to understand every little part of it.84

She points to a larger divide in other messages. Texts are there to be scanned, to be gleaned for information. Lenny sees reading as this unlocking of a text or a mind, almost like the collecting or acquisition of understanding. Though practical for those with bad eyesight or focus issues, he uses a device that quantifies space to isolate what he’s reading from the rest of the page: a ruler.

When she teened me she was coming to NYC, I rushed out to the corner bodega and asked for an eggplant. They said they had to order it on their apparat, so I waited twelve hours by the door, and when it came my hands were shaking so bad I couldn’t do anything with it . . . [I] started to weep. From joy, of course!85

84 Shteyngart, 144
85 Ibid, 99
As their meeting finally looms, Lenny takes on the guise of Levin from *Anna Karenina*. He is compulsive in his need to act out what love looks like. Who the hell waits twelve hours for an eggplant? And this happens the moment he receives word that Eunice is returning. He could have waited to line up the timing for when she actually came or better yet, bought groceries after she arrived. But nay, it was necessary then and there to throw himself at the idea of devotion.

I say he’s like Levin because Tolstoy’s character is obsessively in love with Kitty, and goes through incredible flights of emotional duress and fancy in his courtship. Further, Levin is an adherent to Russian tradition and distrustful of the industrializing time he lives in. Where Levin succeeds to find love and peace, Lenny’s self-obsession consumes him. Notably, Lenny reads Tolstoy (though it’s War and Peace) and Eunice uses sparknotes to skewer him in her own correspondence. And his inamorata is Tatiana, not even in the novel of Lenny’s choice and, at story’s end, able to deny him what he wants.

Now, Eunice, daughter of a podiatrist—the novel winks at us with his own pedal digression—is knocking on Lenny’s door.

To dry off a little and gain perspective, I sat down . . . the way my parents always sat down before a long trip to pray for a safe journey in their primitive Russian way . . . [I] retreated into a makeshift Retail space by a dumpster, where I bought some wilting roses and a three-hundred-dollar bottle of champagne . . . I nearly tackled her in a rejuvenating embrace . . . confronted with this kind of crazy love, Eunice didn’t withdraw, nor did she return my ardor.

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86 Though it’s not a book that I’ve dedicated any time to in this thesis discussion, its archetypal relationship to Lenny as a character in combination with Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin is compelling and telling.
87 Nabokov offers a wonderful analysis of this set of stanzas from *Onegin*.
88 My mother does the same to this day despite her atheism and superstition phobia.
89 Shteyngart, 101
Their first encounter combines the obsession of collecting with the reserved yet loving approach Eunice takes. It’s not a bottle of champagne. It’s a three-hundred-dollar bottle. Money is the tabula rasa through which Lenny expresses his love, replacing the qualities of things with a new medium of communication. Money is a mother tongue if all is reduced to its numeric value. Eunice, for her part, can’t return his ardor. She hasn’t developed a fantasy and hasn’t started her relationship with a purchase that eerily echoes the language of auction and collection, the sites of the collapse and structuring of meaning.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Lenny,” she interrupted me.

_Easy. Easy does it._ “I know you don’t,” I said. “You’re probably still in love with that guy in Italy.”

She sighed. “Everything I touch turns to shit . . . I’m a walking disaster.”

She speaks with a direct honesty that Lenny’s more “literary” English often fails to accomplish. His friend Grace cautions him that she doesn’t know what she wants and he’s just in it to feel young. But all of his purchases, his teeth brushing, his bouts of crying that he is unworthy of her love never truly convey the fact that he wants to possess something in their relationship, or perhaps be possessed by it. He doesn’t want to grow up or grow out of it. Despite the caricature use of abrevs like TIMATOV or JBF, they seem to acquire a greater depth of meaning in both their casualness _and_ the seriousness of their deployment.

_We fight a lot. I guess it’s mostly my fault because I don’t appreciate his great personality and just keep focusing on how he looks._

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90 Shteyngart, 105
91 Ibid, 115
She is quite cognizant of her own limitations both in her correspondence with friends and with Lenny. She doesn’t have a crisis of age, of finding grounding for meaning as someone out of time. And between the lines, there is always her own family, the planet to which she is satellite—her orbit sometimes decaying, sometimes escaping. Though easy to lose sight of, Lenny’s effusive paeans of love never acknowledge her motivation for returning to America. Eunice is always questioning her love and his love as well, always caught between her identity as part of her family and as her own person.

**Meet the Parents: Exorcises in (P)(M)aternity**

“It’s all romanticism, nonsense, rottenness, art.”
—Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*

The novel’s paternal figure is Joshie Goldman. Joshie is about a quarter-century older than Lenny, “wiser,” able to afford dechronification treatments that make him look quite young. He pushes Lenny to succeed, but never suggests that his being a mentor will mean anything for Lenny’s immortality. Joshie: Lenny’s “American Papa” never offers to be a life raft. He does offer help later on in the novel but it comes out of pity as much as any “fatherly” sense of responsibility.

“Three hundred years from now, you won’t even remember me. Just some flunky.”
“Nothing is guaranteed,” Joshie said. “Even I can never be sure of whether my personality will survive forever.”
“It will,” I said. A father should never outlive his child, I wanted to add, although I knew Joshie would disagree on principle.  

Lenny’s parents Russian born parents have counterpart American parental figures that figure prominently in his life; figuring both as objects or anchorpoints as

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92 Shteyngart, 127
well characters that more actively shape the landscape he lives in. What about his kith and kin? How do they look at their son and his Korean-American girlfriend?

Both of my parents swiftly evaluated her, affirmed that she was, like her predecessors, not Jewish, but quietly approved of the fact that she was thin and attractive with a healthy black mane of hair.

Like most parents, they just hope that whomever their children end up with will take care of them and that their children will return the favor. Though Lenny’s parents grumble about his demotion at work, his worsened credit rating, and their American Mama Nettie Fine, Eunice fits in. Then Lenny affirms turning his back to the Soviet Union, to his family’s connection to a world away: “I have my own dying empire to contend with, and I do not wish for any other.”93 His parents’ world is not his, yet that world taught his father Eunice’s Greek name.

When their visit is over, Lenny notes his mother and Eunice together:

_This child_, they seemed to be saying . . . _This child still needs to be brought up._94

A girlfriend has been conscripted; she now is caretaker, a giver, a mid-wife. Eunice stands liminally between his Russia and America, adolescence and adulthood, the many different neuroses Lenny doesn’t want to be rid of. In other words, Lenny doesn’t want to be complete. He wants to always be in a state of collapse or decomposition so that he always requires the love of someone like Eunice and can feel, even fleetingly, the possibility of living forever. He might never acknowledge it but being abject is the only way he can have a sense of self.

“Temperance, Charity, Faith, Hope.” . . . I don’t know about temperance or faith, but what about charity and hope? Don’t we all need that?95

93 Ibid, 136
94 Ibid, 142
Eunice breezes over her interaction with Lenny’s parents, save to say that she likes how assertive and caring his mother is. Immediately after this maternal transference occurs, Eunice goes to Tompkins Square. She begins to take on the guise of a Florence Nightingale: she wants to bring water, food, medicine, whatever she can to help the poor strewn out onto the street.

A large part of the background for the novel is a failed war in Venezuela as well as a growing protest of the dispossessed and working poor in the United States. Like the great camp protests of the Great Depression,\textsuperscript{96} former soldiers and those cut off from social services gather in public places to challenge the growing disregard for American citizens by the government. Investors are what matter. The phrase “harm reduction” appears throughout the book as a cryptic euphemism for kicking out poor residents of an area to die so as to redevelop it for rich foreigners.

Early in their relationship, they come across a bus driver protesting by living in a tin hut in Central Park. The scene sets Eunice’s growth in motion.

He sat there looking to the side, his mouth open, gently breathing in the beautiful air like an exhausted fish . . . the man ignored it all, his eyes blank, one hand poised in midair as if practicing some quiet martial art . . .\textsuperscript{97}

She responds to this sad scene of the meek and dislocated and abused by expressing an interest in their well-being. She worries her sister’s involvement is dangerous since things seem to be spiraling out of control. Confronted by poverty in New York City, something shifts in her and, unlike Lenny, she draws herself out of

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid, 146
\textsuperscript{96} Occupy Wall Street hadn’t happened as of the novel’s completion.
\textsuperscript{97} Shteyngart, 106
the insular, introspective mentality of nothing-doing in which the novel’s ostensible main protagonist is always mired.

This is like my worst nightmare... now my mom will know I’m dating an old hairy white guy. So I told Lenny he can’t tell my mom that we’re going out... he thinks I’m ashamed of him or something... that I’m trying to push him away because I’m substituting him for my father...

Yes, Eunice does have issues with her father. Yes, there is probably a tinge of truth to what Lenny is saying. But Eunice is always protecting her family from her father. She also acknowledges her father’s charity with his patients, even convincing him to offer free medical help to protesters camped out in Tompkins Square.

The “substitution” masks Lenny’s relationship to Eunice. She’s a pharmakon for his fear of death. Eunice is an extension of Lenny (in Lenny’s head) despite his belief that he has found an idol to worship, protect, and guide through life. Though Eunice plays mother for Lenny, she always eludes his grasp and challenges him and the reader to understand her motivations. The language of Jesu, of filial commitment, of responsibility that speaks through Eunice is too alien for Lenny to ever get a hold of.

Do not throw away the good. Take pride in the good... Throw away your shame! Throw away your modesty! Throw away your ancestors! Throw away your fathers and the self-appointed fathers that claim to be stewards of God... a rage that might have been better summed up with the simple plea “Dr. Park, please do not hit your wife and daughters.”

As though he could “free” these people! Lenny attends a church service with Eunice’s family and, rather than seeing into their world and how they think, he

98 Ibid, 173
99 Super Sad True Love Story, 191
spends the entire time imagining his own sermon: he can only see the family through the lens of both concrete and vague patriarchal oppression. He wants to reveal the Wizard of Oz but doesn’t see that whoever lifts the curtain for others isn’t so much different.

Eunice’s mother tells them “take care of each other in difficult time . . . Good roommates, okay?” Eunice is not helpless and does not need to be raised. She needs to be in a mutually caring relationship. Lenny saw his mother telling Eunice to raise him. He sees Eunice’s mother telling the two to care for each other. The former points to an absence, as though he were never raised to begin with. The latter to a presence, that is now in someone else’s life and needs to grow up.

“After thirty-nine years of being alive, I had forgiven my own parents for not knowing how to care for a child, but that was the depth of my forgiveness.” Lenny does see himself as a guardian. He can’t grapple with the fact that a man like Dr. Park might be lovable and loving despite his abusive qualities. Lenny has a massive blindspot: himself. He can’t see himself through the trees, ignoring the way his parents’ background might explain how they raised him (he seems reticent about the details of his upbringing that brought him trouble).

From this familial encounter, we move towards another filial scene. Lenny wants Eunice to meet Joshie, the man who might give him eternal life if all goes to plan. After arriving, drinking wine, and admiring Joshie’s considerable digs, he and Lenny mention:

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100 Ibid, 195
101 Ibid, 196
“These are stills from my one man show . . . The play was called *Sins of the Mother,*” I said helpfully . . .

Lenny’s father performed a play called *Sins of the Mother* and Eunice starts falling for him. Joshie tries very consciously to use the latest lingo, he looks young, he is much richer and can provide more stability than Lenny, and most of all, and he doesn’t seem to be a character that Eunice has to take care of. This meeting signals a change of course for the novel. The mother and father that most dominate the book meet. “It’s like I can communicate with [Joshie] easier than I can with Lenny.”

Their “child,” already grown, is about to be squeezed out of the picture.

Eunice feels she shares a commoner language with Joshie, that they can communicate, that he’s in the driver seat of his own life rather than lamenting the irrelevance of literature and his own impotence. Lenny’s “maternal language” does not lie with the woman he loves. She has her own language, her own emotional arc that Lenny can never quite penetrate. His language is always one of loss.

Soon enough, the government opens fire on protesters in Central Park, in Tompkins Square, on poor residents being moved out for “harm reduction”— redevelopment, condos, luxury hotels, and gated communities. Returning from a dinner with friends on Staten Island, shots are fired, chaos erupts. Lenny and Eunice watch as his friend Noah and Noah’s girlfriend Amy are killed: their ferry takes a direct hit from a helicopter.

As Lenny navigates the fallout and Eunice begins taking art classes with Joshie and gets a job through Joshie’s “good graces,” the world falls apart. Eunice

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102 Shteyngart, 219
103 Ibid, 227-228
can’t contact her family and can’t get to New Jersey. She worries that her sister was in Tompkins Square when it was shot up. She ceases to talk to Lenny, to engage him. When he finally makes up his mind to go talk to Joshie about what to do, Lenny tells her “I think we both really tried to make this work. But we’re just too different.” \(^{104}\) And then, coming home, Eunice drunk and crying in the shower, “untether yourself from this eighty-six pound albatross.” \(^{105}\) Though he comforts and cares for her, he makes the most note of the fact that she’s wearing a t-shirt of his and that he feels himself on her as he holds her.

In the end days of New York City, Lenny “feared the old people, feared their mortality, but the more [he] did, the more [he] fell in love with Eunice Park,” \(^{106}\) his love borne of fear. She was always a prosthesis he needed, a prosthesis of eternal youth that becomes a prosthesis of unending origin. Though he hopes that the “complex language [of literature can] . . . be processed into love,” \(^{107}\) it can’t.

The last time Lenny sees his parents, he has become their caretaker, the worrier who uses his money and connections to help them as best he can. He sees them, “patriots of a disappeared country,” \(^{108}\) and realizes in his torn identity that he is too. Soon, he and Eunice are evicted from their building along with all the old folks who won’t make it anywhere else. As the city ground to a halt, Lenny keeps trying to work, Eunice begins helping out whenever she could, and their love falls apart.

Standing in front of his building as they serve the eviction notice:

\(^{104}\) Shteyngart, 252
\(^{105}\) Ibid, 260
\(^{106}\) Ibid, 273
\(^{107}\) Ibid, 275
\(^{108}\) Ibid, 293
“Mister, mister,” some of her friends were chanting, withered arms reaching out to me. [The old people] knew me from the worst of the Rupture,¹⁰⁹ when Eunice used to come and wash them down, hold their hands, give them hope. “Can’t you do something, mister? Don’t you know somebody?”¹¹⁰

Lenny, with his friends at Staatling-Wapachung and remaining money, has no power to change the world. All he can do is speak, speak in a language that he uncomfortably calls home. Eunice, on the other hand, actually committed time and effort to help others in person. The irony here: the man of old-world letters only engages others, even his family, through the mediums of language, money, and his own ego whereas the overmediated child of what comes next actually puts a premium on face-to-face action.

As he storms back into his apartment, he sees Eunice packing up. “Just the books,” she [says]. “That’s all we have room for.”¹¹¹ Even in preserving the printed word, Eunice takes active measures while Lenny tries to cram all of her hair products about into a box. In the final days of their romance, Lenny grows concerned that Eunice “was in possession of something I didn’t know about, or maybe knew too well.”¹¹² He acknowledges his need to collect, to own, to know and, in his own way, his inability to see the obvious. Then, in a flash, Joshie takes her away and all he has left is his soon-to-be old age and life cut off from his true home. His books are all he has room for.

The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Passing Strange in the End-Times of Empire

¹⁰⁹ Not the Rapture, but an interruption of space’s continuity. That’s what a cataclysm does, apparently.
¹¹⁰ Shteyngart, 310
¹¹¹ Ibid, 312
¹¹² Ibid, 314-315
In a strange way, I expected Russia to become more like America since the Soviet Union collapsed, but the reverse is true. America has become more like Russia: a kleptocratic society.
—Gary Shteyngart

Eunice offers Lenny the promise of a fresh start, a fountainhead of youth. She attempts to rid him of his bad habits, to love him for his personality (almost like a mother who has to put up with whatever her kids turn out to be). She is described in terms never fully reserved for Lenny’s biological mother, terms also extended to Nettie Fine. The inability to reconcile their age differences, their interests, their cultural backgrounds, and their relationship to America itself leave their love in abjection. Eunice can never be Lenny’s girlfriend or some object he can collect. She’s in between the two. So is he, particularly with the quiet rumblings of his cultural confusion that are never explored.\textsuperscript{113}

Her being between also triggers Lenny’s crisis of betweenness. She is not just acted upon; she acts upon him. She might be an object for him but also an object that confounds him. Having fallen for her in their summer of love, Lenny never finds a language, and by extension a home, of his own. The novel ends with him recounting his doomed affair to a pair of Italians he lives with in Tuscany. He has come back to the breadbasket of a once great empire to flee his own. And in his storytelling, he accepts that all he wants is “their silence, black and complete.”\textsuperscript{114} He could never “complete” himself for he could only die in a language not his own. Silence, the

\textsuperscript{113} For those that will come after me examining this work, I hope that the tense dynamics of second-generation identity get a fuller airing than here, where my philosophical designs have limited the scope of my discussion.

\textsuperscript{114} Shteyngart, 331
absence of speech, is the one sure thing he has left, the only thing those of his generation and sensibility have recourse to.

I glossed over the machinations of Joshie and Eunice towards the book’s end for the simple reason that the book culminates in the various trends setup in the first two-thirds of the story. The slow burning denouement is interesting but it brings out the worst in Lenny’s self-obsession. The end of America is a tired trope I don’t much care for. So I claim that Shteyngart, authorial intention aside, is actually talking about the collapse of the Soviet Union, about the insanity of living past the death of one’s home.

He left an empire that gave him a name and a language when he was eight, stumbling through Hebrew school and Stuyvesant in America. But what sets apart Shteyngart’s novel from Pelevin’s view of the same event is his belief that the end is inevitable, we can see it coming, and it’s worse than now. For Shteyngart, the death of his former empire is the death of a way of life, of his former life. Coming from the USSR to the United States was an experience in extremes. He came from a country whose existence was predicated on the entire destruction of the economic and political systems that allowed America to exist in the first place.

Pelevin sees that the end of the USSR gave rise to something new. Though plenty of observers knew the Soviet Union couldn’t last economically, its collapse was sudden, unexpected, unforeseen, a horrendous trauma for those who lived through the transition. Despite this, his book harbors no conservative longing for a past of the bookish intelligentsia who largely failed to challenge Soviet power. He describes what comes after tomorrow. He never asks if love is possible. Perhaps it’s
always a given but in the world of memorabilia, anamnesis—knowledge as an inheritance of past incarnations of the self or of a culture—as well as downright fogeyism, Lenny never stood a chance. Everyone was talking at the same time and he never tried to listen.

I end with this comparison to the Soviet collapse because the end of America is not so readily foreseeable as in the cartoon world of SSTLS. It also an often ignored aspect of what is readily called “Russian-American” writing because most critics gloss over the fact that most “Russian-Americans” are Jewish, creating a small crisis of discourse. If you do something as simple as look up Russian-American writers on Wikipedia, you’ll see two trends: most of them are Jewish or have some other ethnic background other than Great Russian and whenever Russians emigrated to the United States during the Cold War, their Jewish identity tends to be left out. Only Jews could emigrate before 1990, save for some artists, dissidents, or diplomatic officials who married foreigners.

An often-quiet challenge of Jewish identity in America has been the decision to collapse the complexity of ethnic/religious identity into “Russian-Jew.” For example, my own mother—Dina Birman—was born to a Jewish father and Russian mother but her ethnic identity in Soviet Russia was Jewish. Many Jews today in Ukraine, Russia, and who emigrated from the USSR are actually staunch atheists or even practicing Orthodox Christians who see their Jewishness as ethnic and more broadly cultural rather than connected to a culture qua religious practice. The crisis of Russian ethnic identity in the wake of the collapse comes up in both novels, though Shteyngart’s certainly carries a different POV.
These two novels, in their explicit arguments or their delivery of narrative, suggest that abjection is a fundament upon which identity rests. That fundament is particularly fundamental for those who survived the end of an Empire and made lives for themselves in another one. To ignore the in/outsider experience of being a Russian-Jew without Judaism or just a Russian whose voice in popular culture often amounts to sardonic alcoholism, chain-smoking villainy, or otherwise elaborate slapstick routines of depression is easy. Pelevin writes about the immigration of a country within its own borders. So does Shteyngart. Both are razor sharp in describing what December 26th, 1991 must have felt like, the smell of freedom and tanks in the air and McDonalds opening up across the nation. I hope more like-minded books follow.

I invoke my own positionality not as a desperate claim to have insider knowledge or something like it. I certainly think it’s there, though I’ve found myself reining in personal exposition over the course of my argument. I consciously put myself in the forefront here to illustrate the stakes involved in an application of abjection theory towards something as twisted as Soviet/Russian [immigrant] identity. My title harkens back to this: Lenin once said that communism was socialism plus electrification of the whole country. If that’s the case, then contemporary Russian identities are often capitalism plus abjectification. Even if we hear nouveau nationalisms from Putin’s mouth, the crisis of self-confidence in identity these two novels’ illustrate remains: are we really what we eat? Or are we what’s eating us?
I don't have an answer, nor a sense of place in any discussion of Russian identity in literature. Something tells me that I, like other mutts, will make a home in the end. So will discourse on the topic. Maybe another collapse is needed to push this over. Maybe not. I've used examples burdened by the unbearable whiteness of [Russian] being, even if their claims about constructions of identity are broader. The place from which the two authors write has to be named, else it'll be swallowed up by being “European” or “American.” Their plight has a language in post-colonial discourses that have yet to take the republics colonized by capital under their wings.

This is not a history thesis. It’s not my place to make grand claims about Russian history. But in the (18)60s, there were arguments between all the great writers and litterateurs: Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Aksakov, Almazov, Herzen, and so on. Was/Should Russia be Western European, Eurasian, or Slavophilic? No one knew. Writers’ livelihoods, friendships, marriages, publications all boiled down to political allegiances about questions of a Russian identity always between “Russianness” and the mirrors through which it saw the world. As with many countries coping with legacies of Europeanization and “indigenousness,” to be Russian in Russia was already to be abject before others and one’s self. The intensity cranks up with the Collapse.

I once talked to a student at Bryn Mawr about why she studied Russian. I myself chose to because I was never taught my mother’s mother tongue. She cut it out at home. The student’s answer said it all: Some people love Canada because it’s like an America where things go right. For her, Russia is a country where everything goes wrong. Perhaps it is one of the last acceptable orient. I’ve said so in
conversation, though to deaf ears. For now, I will content myself with their silence.

But the conversation doesn’t end there. Bulgakov was right. Manuscripts don’t burn, even if the people who write them are on fire.