DYING TO BELONG: WOMEN'S SEARCH FOR PERFECT LOVE IN THE WORKS OF ZINAIDA GIPPIUS, KATE CHOPIN, GALINA SHCHERBAKOVA AND LYA LUFT

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Abstract
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This dissertation examines representations of women by women writers. Although separated by time and space – Zinaida Gippius and Galina Shcherbakova are Russian, Kate Chopin is North American, and Lya Luft is Brazilian – they are linked by the commonality of themes and concerns. The female protagonists of the works under discussion desire Perfect Love, this elusive, even impossible, total fusion with the Other, an absolute relationship in which individual egos are lost and two beings are merged into one. This absolute desire, which admits no compromise, is continually frustrated by experience, leading some protagonists to despair and withdrawal from life. Intrinsically linked with the theme of impossible desire are themes of identity, inner freedom—understood as the freedom from reflection in the Other—and concerns with the nature of life and death.

The novels are also about women's search for their social, personal, and spiritual fulfillment. All writers under discussion share a complex approach to human experience weaving together social, psychological, and spiritual threads. Their insight into the human condition reveals a profound need for spiritual growth and transcendence. 'Spirituality', 'redemption', 'transcendence' are not necessarily used here as religious terms. They can be understood, in the sense the existentialists understood them, as the desire to break out of inauthentic existence and find

fulfillment in the authenticity of being; a desire for relationships based on an authentic dialogue of self with the Other. Transcendence, in this sense, can be seen as a horizon at the edge of everyday life.

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Notes on Translation

All translations of the quotations from Zinaida Gippius' diary entries as well as from her poems and short stories are mine.

Translation of quotations from Lya Luft's novels, *A Asa Esquerda do Anjo*, *As Parceiras, A Reunião de Familia,* and *A Sentinela* as well as from her books of essays *Perdas & Ganhos* and *O Rio de Meio* are mine.

To quote in English from Luft's novel *Exilio* I used the existent translation by Giovanni Portiero *The Red House*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1994. English quotations from *O Quarto Fechado* are from *The Island of the Dead*, translated by Carmen Chaves McClendon and Betty Jean Craige, The University of Georgia Press, 1986.

All translations from Galina Shcherbakova's novels are mine.

Translations of quotes from secondary literature – books and articles – written originally in French, Italian, Portuguese, and Russian are mine.

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Introduction

I first became interested in the representations of women by female authors when reading prose fiction by Zinaida Gippius. What struck me particularly was the way she portrayed her female protagonists' attitudes toward life. What makes them shun any engagement with life, especially with erotic love? Why do they kill themselves or withdraw into mutism or madness? Are their aspirations to freedom and self-fullfilment thwarted by society and family? Although the latter is undoubtedly true of any patriarchal society, Gippius' texts do not support the assumption that women's treatment by society was what drew them to self-annihilation. Gippius' heroines' withdrawal from life often seems unjustified by external circumstances: many are free to choose a way of life they prefer, to pursue a vocation, to work, to marry or not. So, what is it that they lack, what is the desire they cannot satisfy?

As I attempted to puzzle out the reasons behind this attitude, other readings started to inform my understanding. A book that presents a similar puzzle is *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, Gippius' American contemporary. Her heroine, Edna Pontellier, decides to take her own life, after having faced the challenges presented by society and family, when she leaves her husband and is on her way to becoming an artist.

Then I discovered Galina Shcherbakova, a Russian writer who started writing in the 70's and whose work is dedicated to trying to understand the desire that moves the lives of her female protagonists. A search for a total connection with

others, especially for Perfect Love, and the failure of this search is the main subject of Shcherbakova's books.

Similar concerns are present in the novels of the contemporary Brazilian writer Lya Luft. Like the others, she mostly writes about women and their search for meaningful relationships. An important theme in Luft's novels is a quest for a true self, a struggle for emotional and spiritual independence without which a satisfying relationship cannot be achieved.

Thus, gradually, the topic of this dissertation emerged: an investigation of the nature of desire that moves the protagonists of the writers mentioned above. In the protagonists' lives this desire is most often expressed as a longing for Perfect Love, an absolute relationship in which the individual egos are lost and two beings are merged into one. This is a desire for an absolute that admits no compromise, and, because of its absolute nature, is not generally directed toward a particular goal, since every apparent fulfillment is perceived as lacking an elusive essential component, similar to what Julia Kristeva describes as desire to recover the Lost Thing.[1] In the context of this dissertation, the thing the characters mourn and want to recover is a total connection to something outside of the self, a complete union with the Other that transcends all barriers and knows no limitations. It can be rationalized from the psychoanalytical point of view as the desire to return to the safety and oneness of the womb, or, mystically, as an absolute merger with the transcendent God.

This desire is also contradictory and, therefore, self-defeating, since the longing to merge with another conflicts with the need to stand out as an individual, to be different, and even to manipulate others. Since neither total merger nor total

control is ever possible to achieve, the result is frustration and alienation. Realizing the unattainable nature of their desires, the protagonists feel inadequate and defeated, often opting for self-annihilation as a way of escaping all desire. Some will die, others withdraw into madness, others will experience a paralysis of will which will virtually prevent them from engaging in life. Still others will learn to accept the limitation and continue searching and struggling, engaged in a spiritual quest to find out who they are and how they can live a satisfying life, even if it does not correspond to the longed for ideal.

The novels are also about a woman's search for the self. The protagonists are awakened to begin a spiritual quest in search of their true selves, their social, personal, and spiritual fulfillment. But this quest for identity and fulfillment is intrinsically linked, in the novels under consideration, to a search for a true and fulfilling relationship, primarily love.

Because, for the characters of all the novels discussed here, the desire cannot be located in a particular realm – material, emotional, or even psychological – their motivations will have to be examined from a point of view that transcend those realms extending the investigation to embrace their existential and spiritual beliefs. In other words, I consider the works of the four women writers to belong to the "kind of fiction" which, as described by Flannery O'Connor,

> will always [push] its own limits outward, towards the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of the story does not begin, except at a depth where adequate

> motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. [2]

Female spiritual quest is not the exclusive domain or the exclusive theme of women writers. However, without making it an unbending rule, I would like to emphasize a difference in the portrayal of men's and women's quest and, possibly, in the approaches of male and female writers. A spiritual quest of a male character is more often portrayed as a lonely journey involving a departure from the familiar place, overcoming obstacles (internal and external), triumphing over enemies. This quest may lead a character to adopt an ascetic way of life, turning away from worldly activities, everyday life, and love.

For the female protagonists under consideration, on the other hand, the spiritual quest means a striving for an authentic relationship, an I-Thou dialogue. It is not about *overcomin*g but about *coming together*.[3] According to Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira, for women, transcendence is a search for wholeness in union with the other.[4] It is important to emphasize that the sacred that these female protagonists seek to make manifest in their lives, according to Kristina Groover, does not necessarily or exclusively refer "to a transcendent God or a spiritual realm existing outside and apart from human experience."[5] Rather it is located "in the action of forming a relationship: whether with God, fellow human, nature, or an element of the self." [6]

Although every true relationship brings spirituality into everyday life, for the works under discussion here, the relationship of erotic love is privileged and understood as an almost mystical union of the two lovers, a merger of body and soul,

what I call, in the context of this dissertation, Perfect Love. The elusive, perhaps impossible, nature of such love is described by David Buss in his book *The Evolution of Desire*.

> While love is common, true love is rare, and I believe that few people are fortunate enough to experience it. The roads of regular love are well traveled and their markers are well understood by many – the mesmerizing attraction, the ideational obsession, the sexual afterglow, profound self-sacrifice, and the desire to combine DNA. But true love takes its own course through uncharted territory. It knows no fences, has no barriers or boundaries. It's difficult to define, eludes modern measurement and seems scientifically woolly. But I know true love exists. I just can't prove it.[7]

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The search for Perfect Love aims at the achievement of this elusive, even unattainable ideal relationship. Inability to accept compromises leads many protagonists to despair and withdrawal from life. Often, they settle for flawed relationships in which people interact with each other on the level of inauthentic, false selves. Thus a search for identity and a search for authentic relationship are intrinsically linked for most.

Since the search for Perfect Love and for the true self is the desire that drives the protagonists of the works I consider, theoretical works that informed and inspired my reading of the novels mainly come from three sources, all of which are concerned

with the questions of love and human relationships in general and engage spiritual, psychological, and social concerns. The first is the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviëv (1853-1900), whose ideas were enormously influential with Russian Symbolist writers. His views of love are part of his concept of "all-unity" embodied in all aspects of existence and, most important, in the synthesis of the human and divine elements in a human being. The synthesis is achieved in the process of self-perfection through shedding of selfishness inherent to human nature, and thereby opening the path toward the union with the Other. The major force in self-perfection is Eros, erotic love linking two people. According to Soloviëv, love is the only force capable of eliminating one's selfishness without losing one's individuality. Soloviëv develops these ideas most fully in his essay "The Meaning of Love," which (in my opinion) continued to inspire contemporary Russian women writers, such as Galina Shcherbakova. For Soloviëv, erotic love affirms the absolute value of another individual while creating higher ethical values, such as "justification and preservation of individuality through sacrifice of selfishness."[8] But to attain the goal of such love, the ultimate union with the divine, the love between two people is not enough. "An individual person," says Soloviëv, can "attain salvation, i.e., regenerate and immortalize an individual life through individual love, only together with others" ("Smysl liubvi," 65).

> Thus any attempt to separate an individual regeneration in true love faces a three-fold invincible obstacle, because our individual life, with its individual love separated from the life of the of others, will inevitably turn out to be not only

> physically unsustainable, helpless against time and death, and intellectually void, but also ethically flawed. […] The attitude of a truly individual human being towards his closest social milieu, his people, and all of humanity should not be that of subordination or domination but one of loving interaction; it should be its active and fertile agent of movement; it should find the fullness of conditions and possibilities of life. (75)

It is important to emphasize the social aspect of Soloviëv's ideas. Although coached in somewhat vague rhetoric, the idea of the social dimension within the individual process of improvement is important for the writers discussed in this dissertation as well, often appearing, however, as a strand that is woven into the general picture, rather than as the main theme.

Soloviëv's ideas about relationships that recognize the full value of every individual are close to Martin Buber's concepts of I-Thou dialogues. For Buber, true individuality, or self, exists and is revealed only in the relationship that sees, accepts, and affirms the other fully: "If *Thou* is said, the *I* of the combination *I-Thou* is said along with it. […] The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being."[9]

"So long as love is "blind," that is, so long as it does not see a *whole* being, it is not truly under the sway of the primary word of relation," says Buber.[10] In contrast with Soloviëv, however, for Buber, the I-Thou relationship is not a goal that once achieved will be preserved forever but an elusive instant that exists one moment and

disappears in the next. Bordering on the miraculous, it is not a permanent condition, because "every *Thou* in the world is by its nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things" (49). This impermanence, however, is the guarantee of perpetual movement as humans strive to enter again and again into the I-Thou, the dialogical life, and finally leads to the encounter with God. "Man's sense of *Thou,* which experiences in the relations with every particular *Thou* the disappointment of the change to *It*, strives out but not away from them all to its eternal *Thou."* To paraphrase Buber, seeking the ultimate Thou (or God) in transcendence does not nullify the necessity of striving to establish I-Thou relationships with other people, in this life. Therefore, engagement with life is necessary, and turning away from life, from the world is "foolish and hopeless" because the hope of encountering the I-Thou lies only in the movement and striving, in the entering into relationships with others and being validated by them.

Buber also emphasizes the importance of finding the inner self, which also requires living in the world and facing what it brings of disappointments because "[a person's] sense of Thou, which cannot be satiated till he finds the endless Thou, had the Thou present to it from the beginning; the presence has only to become wholly real to him in the reality of the hallowed life of the world" (Buber, 49).

Both philosophers acknowledge the necessity to engage with life but there is a substantial difference. Whereas for Soloviëv, seeking the synthesis of spirit and matter, of humanity and God, may necessitate a life of sexual abstinence, denying physical love and procreation (for Soloviëv, erotic love can and should exist without sex), for Buber the ordinary life in the world is the condition of finding a true self and

genuine relationships. In addition, Buber's view of the I-Thou relationships as sporadic and impermanent, almost bordering on miraculous and always turning into I-it, speaks for a need to make reasonable compromises, accepting the less than ideal relationships and working toward improving them. Expecting less from the other translates into more reliance on the self, looking for one's own resources, taking new paths, discovering and strengthening the self.

The writings of the Israeli thinker Shlomo Giora Shoham have been particularly helpful to my approach to the clash of the competing desires of belonging and individuality observed in the protagonists of the novels under discussion. Shoham's understanding of human relationships contrasts with the ideas of Soloviëv and Buber. Whereas Soloviëv teaches that humans' attitude toward each other should be based on loving interaction and not on their desire to dominate or subordinate, and Buber affirms the possibility of such I-Thou dialogues, Shoham's main point is that such attitudes are existentially impossible. The basis of his personality theory, which uses concepts from Gnosticism, Kabala, and existentialism, is the existence, in the human psyche, of two opposite core vectors: "participation" and "separation."

> Participation signifies the identification of ego with a person(s), an object, or a symbolic construct outside of itself, and its efforts to lose its separate identity by fusion with this other object or symbol. Separation is the opposite vector. These two vectors of unification-fusion and separation-isolation form the main axis of this personality theory. [11]

Shoham uses Freudian concepts of developmental phases – the experience of birth, the formation of an individual ego, and, lastly, the demands of socialization that cause the individual's expulsion from the safety of home and family into the social sphere -- as mythoempiric equivalents of the Gnostic idea of the abandonment of man by the absent God and the resulting feelings of being thrown into the hostile world. The participant and separant vectors are in a dialectical relationship, and the predominance of one or another determines the psychological type – participant or separant. The participant aims to achieve the full fusion with the Other (Soloviëv's attitude of subordination to others) by effacing and annihilating himself, melting into the Other and "achieving the togetherness and non-differentiation of early orality" (*The Bridge*, 9). The separant aims at affirming the individuality and uniqueness, often through manipulating and dominating others. The self-effacing, self-annihilating participant type is called by Shoham Tantalic, and the separant, manipulative one, Sisyphean. The names underscore the futility of both enterprises; both the separant and the participant end up frustrated in their attempts to fulfill their aims. For the separant, the frustration comes from the realization that his desire for manipulating and controlling others face similar attitudes on the part of those others. For the participant, the desire to achieve the total fusion with the other is equally frustrating because, according to Shoham, it is an ontological impossibility. Thus "Tantalic and Sisyphean metamyths describe the predicament of man as being unable to fulfill the aims of his core personality vectors" (*The Bridge*, 42).

The predominance of one or another vector will determine the personality and behavior of a person. The separant type will value individual achievement, creativity,

being embodied, and personal growth. The participant "seeks the reversal to the noncorporeality and spirituality of nonbeing" (*The Bridge*, 12). Thus while the separant vector generates life, the participant one strives for non-being; the separant will desire growth and reproduction, the participant abhors both. The separant will seek diversity of forms and rejection of sameness or similarity; the participant will strive for non-differentiation, for oneness. While the separant type, in every interaction between people, aims at manipulation and overcoming the Other, at being different and unique, the participant type longs for a total merger, an endless I-Thou relationship. It is important to note, however, that the two vectors always exist in a dialectical relation, with one or the other predominating. This situation is a source of a conflict between the opposing desires of melting into the Other and swallowing the Other.

Shoham's position is relevant to the discussion of different attitudes to life and love manifested by the protagonists of the novels under discussion. Since the longed for goal of participation is deemed unrealizable, characters will seek different solutions. Some will give up on life while others will accept limitations and settle for a reasonable compromise. Very important is Shoham's assertion that, besides the "deviant" ways of dealing with the problem (suicide, apathy, paralysis of the will) there are life-affirming, creative ways of overcoming the existential despair. Shoham calls them "institutionalized" ways of participation, and they include mysticism, artistic creation, and love. Shoham echoes Soloviëv and Buber when he says that love is the most effective way of melting down partitions between individuals. But for Shoham, even more than for Buber, in entering into relationships, such as love and

friendship, people should not expect to achieve the ideal and, therefore, must be capable of settling for a workable compromise.

What allows people to find creative ways of sublimating their desire to merge with the Other is, for Shoham, like for Buber and Soloviëv, self-knowledge, the discovery of the true self and its full potential. However, if for Buber and Soloviëv, living in the world and participating in the historical process is the condition of discovering the inner self, for Shoham's participant type, lacking a strong separant component, this choice may not be available. According to Shoham, the participant's experience of self is always "totally subjective, intuitive, noncommunicable, and fleetingly illusive, in a veritable Tantalic manner" (*The Bridge*, 66). Unable to achieve the wholeness conferred by the inner self in the imperfect world of here and now, the participant type sees withdrawal from the world as a necessity and the only option. Soloviëv's participation in the historical process and Buber's living in the world find their echo in Shoham's affirmation that both the participant and the separant need to sustain their quests in order to be creative and achieve revelation. "Both creativity and revelation are dynamic processes fueled by Sisyphean airs and Tantalic longings that would never be fulfilled. The dialectics between our unfulfillable Sisyphean quest and Tantalic longings are our prime movers – without them we are dead" (*The Bridge*, 44).

Shoham brings elements of Gnostic and Kabalistic beliefs to create a personality theory, a typology of psychological attitudes and patterns of behavior. His approach is phenomenological. He is not interested in the world "out there", "outside or beyond the individual's perception of himself and his environment." He

emphasizes the experience of pain and alienation that accompanies peoples' interaction with each other and with the environment, which has its source in the battle between the opposing desires, a longing for participatory non-being conflicting with the desire for growth and individuality. The way to alleviate the suffering, according to Shoham, is to learn empathy toward the other person's pain in the context of a genuine I-Thou dialogue.

The process of striving towards an unachievable goal is, according to Shoham, essential for overcoming the frustration and absurdity of existence. Certain ideas of Soloviëv and Buber, inspired by mystical and religious beliefs, can be expressed in Shoham's psychological terms. Soloviëv's longing for the *unio mystico* with God, the oneness that should replace multiplicity, and Buber's striving for the I-Thou that is achieved through the immersion in the eternal Thou, is translated into Shoham's participant vector of personality.

Shoham's theory of personality, expressing mystical longings in psychological terms, is helpful when discussing the choices made by characters in the works of Gippius, Chopin, Luft, and Shcherbakova; the authors display different attitudes in relation to the ontological and existential positions of the three thinkers, and their characters occupy different places on the continuum proposed by Shoham, between the opposite poles of separation and participation.

While love, especially erotic love, is a primary concern in their novels, their authors also differ in the range of approaches to the issue of love. These attitudes will be examined in detail in the three chapters of this dissertation. The first chapter discusses the work of Zinaida Gippius (1869-1945) and compares it to the writings of

Kate Chopin, especially to her novel *The Awakening*. Certain similarities – both female protagonists opt for self-annihilation – underscore the differences in the writers' approach to character development. While Kate Chopin's protagonist in *The Awakening* is portrayed dynamically, her conflicts and struggles revealed through many narrative strategies, the characters of Gippius' prose fiction suffer from a lack of such dynamic characterization. The dramatically and psychologically static manner of characterization and the absence of readers' access to the characters' inner worlds, make the extreme choices by Gippius's protagonists' appear unmotivated and less believable. In contrast to her prose fiction, Gippius's poetry and diaries are endowed with dramatic energy and psychological depth. In interpreting Gippius's work, I will try to show the difference between the genres in which she wrote as a manifestation of fragmentation she exhibits both in her art and in her life.

The second chapter discusses the work of contemporary Russian writer Galina Shcherbakova. I analyze her three novels and a novella as a cycle, each text portraying a female protagonist on a different level of self-awareness. The heroines of all the stories are searching for Perfect Love, even if often they are unaware of it. They are lonely women longing for relationships and entering them for the wrong reasons. These flawed relationships, based on reciprocal resentment, mistrust, and betrayal are not just unsatisfying, but dangerous, often leading to tragic results, such as illness and death.

The third chapter is dedicated to the study of prose fiction of the contemporary Brazilian prose writer, poet, and translator Lya Luft. Luft started writing at the time when women in Brazil were becoming aware of the limitations

imposed on them by family and society. She writes about a woman searching for identity, a person whose survival depends on her finding her own authentic self, the only way to escape a tragic dependence on others. Although she acknowledges the social pressures on women to conform to a certain stereotype, her main interest lies in the exploration of the issues of psychological dependency of women on others leading them to identify their true selves with an Other, with objects and people outside of their own selves. The author also reflects on the ways of overcoming this dependency and acquiring inner freedom. In the case of Luft and Gippius, reading Luft's personal essays and Gippius' private diaries helps to elucidate the authors' positions on the issues of identity and relationship.

Besides thematic similarities, the works of the writers under consideration share philosophical and metaphysical preoccupations, as well as psychological and social ones. They all explore paradoxes and ambiguities of life, self, and desire, ambiguities which are often made apparent through the interplay of mirroring and reflection. Separated by time and space, all four authors are interested, however, in examining the issues of self in relation to Other, of freedom and dependency, of life and death, and the search for Perfect Love.

Notes to Introduction

[1]Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 13-14.

[2] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969).

[3] My italics.

[4] Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira, "A cicatriz do androgino," *Feminino e literatura* 101 (1990) 145-162.

[5] Kristina K. Groover, introduction, *Things of the Spirit*, ed. Groover (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2004) 3.

[6] *Ibid*., 4.

[7] David Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies for Human Mating* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 13.

[8] Vladimir Soloviëv, "Smysl liubvi," *Russkii eros* (Moskva: Progress, 1991) 32.

[9] Martin Buber, *Writings,* ed. Will Herberg (New York: Meridian, 1956) 43.

[10] Buber, "I and Thou," *Writings* 49.

[11] Shlomo Giora Shoham, *The Bridge to Nothingness* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994) 11.

Chapter 1

Tantalic Longing and Tantalic Rebellion: Zinaida Gippius and Kate Chopin

Zinaida Gippius (1869-1945), a Russian Symbolist poet, prose writer, and essayist, was the object of scrutiny by her contemporaries whose reviews of her poems and short stories appeared usually in newspaper articles or literary journals. Some monographs were dedicated to her as well, among them a book by her personal secretary, Vladimir Zlobin, with the telling title *The Difficult Soul.*[1] For the most part, critical attention focused on the writer's personality rather than on the analysis of her creative work. In post-Communist Russia, after Gippius emerged from the virtual non-existence she suffered under the Soviets, her poetry, prose, essays, and diaries began to be published, yet not a single serious study of her literary work, especially her prose fiction, has yet appeared. In the West, the best known and practically the only book analyzing Gippius' poetry is Olga Matich's *Religious Paradox in the Poetry of Zinaida Gippius*.[2] In 1971 Temira Pachmuss introduced Gippius' prose to American readers with *Z. Gippius: an Intellectual Profile*[3]. But even today, the author's literary work remains largely unexamined. Instead, her private life, her sexual orientation, even her physiology, as well as her complex personality and provocative behavior, have been the focus of literary critics.

Such interest in the life of an artist is not unexpected in the cultural atmosphere of the *Fin de Siecle* when blending life and art was part of the artistic Zeitgeist. Among Russian Symbolists in particular, "life-creation," or the mythologizing of personal existence, begged for the limelight which their

contemporaries as well as future generations willingly shone on their lives. But in the case of Zinaida Gippius there has been a clear disregard for the profound links between her art, her social persona and her inner self. The phrase of Antonin Artaud, "I will forget nothing of this life here, whose keynote has been the search for an elsewhere,"[4] could have been uttered by Gippius herself, as an expression of her longing for an absolute union with the transcendent.

Mystifying those around her, playing games, deliberately misleading others in regard to her gender and sexual identity were seen as posturing designed to call attention to herself, to shock, to mislead. Gippius, they said, presented conflicting gender and body images unreadable to others on purpose. But the question remains: what was that purpose? Was it only a game, a type of calculated behavior, or did it manifest an inner necessity, an unconscious motivation? Finally, how does this fragmentation manifest itself throughout the writer's art? Through the different voices heard in the different genres in which she wrote, Gippius establishes an inner dialogue with herself that most often takes the form of a genre/gender split: essays and articles signed by her masculine pen-name representing a struggle for ascendancy between two voices, the masculine one of the poet/spirit and the feminine one of his soul; and, finally, Gippius's artistic prose devoid of dynamism and desire, featuring female protagonists who long for the tranquility of non-being.

In turn-of-the-century Russia, as in Europe, women were becoming more socially and culturally active and enjoying an increased visibility, a fact that greatly contributed to the view of sexuality and sexual difference as another "accursed question." Moreover, the ideas expressed by Russian religious philosophers – mainly

Vladimir Soloviëv – introduced into the cultural consciousness the concept of the Eternal Feminine which became a staple of much Symbolist writing and living. Behind the Symbolist rhetoric of worship of the Beautiful Lady as the embodiment of salvation through Love there were undisguised anti-women tendencies. Woman was seen as a muse, a divine inspiration, and a sacred union with her would allow man to attain his full creative potential as well as to achieve the ultimate union with God.

In Symbolist circles women were encouraged to substitute "living a poem" to writing one. For a woman, attempting to create art was inappropriate, even "obscene," in the words of Alexandr Blok. Living a poem did not include marriage and child bearing because the goal of immortality was to be achieved through banishment of childbirth and of a certain kind of sexuality associated with females. Thus women in the Symbolist circles were seen as vehicles of artistic and spiritual inspiration but denied the agency of authorship.

Zinaida Gippius, one of the very few female artists among the Symbolists, was naturally drawn to assume the identity of spiritual androgyny. However, instead of finding a unique voice, in which the feminine and masculine aspects would harmoniously merge, her voice is fragmented, and her authorial persona in one genre conflicts with the persona in another genre. Gippius's many articles and essays are written in an authoritative, clear, self-assured voice dealing in a rational way with complex ideas, this voice she identifies with her male persona (and signed with a male pen name). In these works, written in a male disguise, the author voices her firm belief in the future transformation of humanity that will obliterate the painful oppositions between the material and the spiritual, changing the physical nature itself

(basically, echoing here the ideas about spiritualization of the matter expressed by Vladimir Soloviëv). The dynamism of her poetry, with its struggle of the differently gendered voices, also implies the possibility of transformation and the achievement of wholeness through the merger of two people in Perfect Love. Yet in Gippius's prose fiction this view gives way to the expression of an internalized impossibility of change, precluding all hope of transformation. In Gippius's prose fiction a female universe unfolds, defined by its pessimistic view of existence and the absence of will and desire to live.[5] The protagonists of Gippius' short stories and novels refuse "ordinary" life and love and opt for a withdrawal from life in order to achieve a transcendent "participation" (as understood by Giora Shoham).

It is well known that Gippius was torn between faith and disbelief, erotic sensuality and rejection of sexuality, triumphant optimism and stark despair. To use Shoham's terminology, Gippius' separant and participant personality vectors manifest themselves in different proportions in different genres. The dark pessimistic mood of her short stories belies the hopeful optimism of her essays as well as the dynamic, dialogical, and passionate nature of her poetry. This contrast in her work finds a parallel in the contrasting aspects of the writer's psychological make-up. Thus, the "separant" aspect of her personality, the one that delights in her individuality and celebrates her alterity, dominates her essays, critical articles, and many diaries intended for publication in which she narrates cultural and political events as well as her encounters with other artists and intellectuals. In her life, this "separant" self manifests itself in taking an active part in artistic and intellectual life, in her concerns with Russia's social and political problems, as well as her interests in meeting and

helping young writers, and, finally, in her work as a writer and editor in important journals. This part of the writer celebrates her unique individuality and relies on it in order to sustain and cultivate her image as a public persona. In contrast, in her prose fiction, Gippius seems to share her characters' "participant" desire to obliterate her ego and merge with the totality of all existence.

If one accepts my premise that Gippius invariably projects her own self into her art, her conscious and unconscious need of creating different personal myths, as well as her tendency toward self-fragmentation and excessive self- scrutiny, can be understood more fully. For Gippius, a woman would ideally be both less and more than a woman: without motherhood and expressed sexuality, but endowed with a man's creative genius, and, most of all, a woman who is a man's spiritual guide. She herself put it quite clearly: "I am a woman in my body and soul, and a man in my spirit." [6] Svetlana Boym's comments on Marina Tsvetaeva are applicable to Gippius as well: "In this vicious circularity of cultural myths, it is impossible to discern what is primary and what is secondary, what is literary or extraliterary, poetry and biology."[7]

For Gippius, the ambiguity of gender resulted in the production of a body of literature whose different components often stand in stark opposition to each other, in the fragmentation of literary and extraliterary subjectivity. The tendency toward fragmentation and excessive self-scrutiny is evident in the extraordinary variety of her writing. She simultaneously kept several diaries, which she called "narrow" and "specialized," recording in them different aspects of her life and thought. In her most intimate journal, "Les contes d'amour" (written in French), she justifies the new

journal by the need to understand her confusion about her own self, a self she sees as tragically divided and contradictory. “I need a special diary; otherwise [its contents] will be insulting to everything else.” [8] In addition, she kept a different kind of diary, in which she recorded cultural and political events, reaction to the war of 1914 and the revolution of 1917: *Petersburg Diary* (1914-1919), *Black Notebooks* (1917-1919) among others. In emigration Gippius continued writing diaries in which she documented the life of Russian émigrés in Poland and France: *Warsaw Diary* (1920-1921) and *Brown Notebook* (1921-1925) among others. She also created a new kind of diary: her *Literary Diary* (1908) is a collection of articles and essays published between 1899 and 1907 in different journals and newspapers.

A careful reading of her many diaries and journals would be, in itself, a fascinating study; however, in this dissertation, I am particularly interested in Gippius’s personal diaries, *Les contes d’amour* and *About Things Past (O byvshem).* It is important to note that in her most personal diary, *Les contes d’amour* (not intended for publication according to the author), Gippius’s excessive self-scrutiny is paralleled by the reticence and lack of spontaneous expression of thoughts and emotions. How otherwise can we account for her unwillingness to give an interpretation to experience? “No need for conclusions. Facts only, and the way these facts portray me,” writes Gippius in *Les contes d’amour”* (35). Yet judgment sneaks in as the internalized gaze of the other, a self observing the other self with disgust.

> Я не говорю, что в этой тетради [...] я буду писать правду абсолютную,-- я её не знаю. Но всякую подлую и нечистую мыслb про которую только буду знать, что она

> была,-- я скажу в словах неутайно. [...] Только мне нужен специальный дневник. [...]Отделить эту непонятную мерзость от хорошей части души. (35) (author's emphasis)
>
> I am not saying that in this black notebook I will write the absolute truth - I do not know it. But I will put in words every low and unclean thought that I ever had. For that, I need a special diary. […] To separate this incomprehensible filth from the good part of my soul. 9

By "incomprehensible filth" Gippius refers to her own sexuality simultaneously titillated and downplayed in the "factual" love stories she describes, the stories that gave rise to much speculation and gossip. "I have been burdened with the cross of sensuality. Can animal passion be so strong in me? … The body has to be conquered" (39). Another entry says:

> If only I could leave behind completely this appeal of filthy voluptuousness that I feel is hiding inside me, and which I do not understand because, in spite of all the voluptuousness, all the sensuality, *I do not want* (the author's emphasis) a certain form of love, that funny one of which I know. (79)

Gippius longs for the state of ecstatic love (*vliublionnost'*) that rejects sexual consummation and hopes that a solution to eroticism without sex will be found in the future. As mentioned above, androgyny was an answer she could certainly embrace.

In "Androgyny and the Russian Silver Age"[10] Olga Matich explains the infatuation of Russians Symbolists with the idea of androgyny as an "escape from the world polarized on the basis of sex and class." It reflected, she adds, the confusion regarding one's own sexuality and sexual preferences in the context of sexual revolution of the *Fin de Siecle*. In Russia, this idealistic view of androgyny as harmony concealed a very strong fear of female sexuality (on the part of male participants in the androgyny debate) and the desire to harness the woman by denying her the agency of authorship. [11] However, the cultural environment – both conscious and unconscious collective cultural attitude towards sexuality – is not enough to explain the tormenting feelings of Zinaida Gippius in this regard. It is true that she had internalized the fear of female sexuality predominant in her Symbolist milieu. But her own refusal of physical love has deeper, more complex roots; in her perception, physical love is inadequate because of its pernicious nature: such a relationship destroys the equality between the partners and, therefore, is unable to lead towards the ideal form of love – Soloviëv's spiritualized eroticism – whose ultimate objective is the transcendent union with God. For Gippius, however, tortured by contradictory beliefs, the longing for Perfect Love is matched by her pessimism regarding its attainability. "Yes, I believe in love, a great power, a miracle of the world. I believe but I also know that there is no miracle, and there never will be" (41).

Gippius's pessimism, perhaps part of her innate psychological make-up and her tendency to think rationally, is certainly reinforced by her own experience in the realm of relationships. Although her relationship with her husband, Dmitri Merezhkovski, was often held forth as an example of a lifelong mutual dedication

(they were never apart even for a day, according to Gippius' recollections), certain entries in her private diaries show a woman suffering from loneliness and lack of emotional connection in her relationship with the two most important men in her life: Merezhkovski, and the great love of her life, Dmitri Filosofov.

> Why do I try to find love, incessantly so? I do not know; may be because none of them really loved me? That is, they did love, but not with a love as great and powerful as they themselves are. Even Dmitri Sergeevich [Merezhkovski] loves me but not in a way I long for. But I do want to believe that if someone loved me completely, and I could feel it, if it were a "wondrous" love. (39)

Similar entries are found in her other diary not intended for publication, "About Things Past."[12] In this diary Gippius tells the story of an attempt by Merezhkovski, Filosofov, and herself to create a new private church that would reflect their new religious consciousness. Many entries, however, describe personal relationships between the three, revealing Gippius's feelings of isolation and lack of connection. A woman of absolutes, painfully aware of her own fragmentation, she strives to achieve wholeness, and is hurt by what she perceives as a lack of commitment and certain "relativism" on the part of Merezhkovski. Her entries testify to that disappointment:

> I tried to say things, and could not form the words. Then I fell silent, as I was silent on the question of sex, letting them

> [Merezhkovski and Filosofov] believe in their own thoughts. I was alone, and they were together against me. […] Should I leave Filosofov and Dmitri Sergeevich [Merezhkovski], should I go away? I cannot do that physically, *everything* would then turn into a Sin and crush me. I would sooner deceive myself than leave. (101, author's italics)

It is not easy to know exactly what the meaning of the above entry is, but some interpretation can be attempted. The mention of their disagreement on the issue of sex is a reference to Merezhkovski's relativism, or double standards, concerning this issue. We find out from the same diary that, while his and Gippius's marriage was chaste, Merezhkovski did engage in sexual affairs with other women, not belonging to their circle, and even broached a possibility of one of them joining their threesome. The entry also may be an indication of Gippius's dependence on male presence and authority, a dependence that would echo in her poetry – a soul, the female voice, bowing to the demands of the male voice, the poet/spirit.

In addition to her personal diaries, Gippius's essays and articles in the *Literary Diary*[13] express her views on the equal importance of both life of the body and life of the spirit. The tone is different: there are no emotional outbursts or tortured self-analysis, her voice is calm and assured. The articles are signed by her male pen name, Anton Kraini. The switching to a male authorial persona is not incidental but reflects an internalized association of certainty and authority with male authorship. Two important interrelated ideas appear in several essays. The first concerns a need

for a new religion and reflects the dissatisfaction of the new religious intelligentsia with the attitudes of the official Russian Orthodox Church on the one hand, and of the radical non-religious intelligentsia on the other. According to Gippius, the new religion, based on the concept of unity between the physical and spiritual aspects of human nature, would connect religion and life. There are two attitudes equally unacceptable to the new religious consciousness. The first is the one that rejects the need for spiritual aspirations and cares only about "feeding their brothers with the earthly bread" (168), the other advocates a withdrawal from life with its practical material concerns and tends towards asceticism and monastic life.

The question of body and physicality, especially sex, is intrinsically connected to this duality. The adepts of asceticism profess the death of the body and denial of physicality, of every aspect of material life. Human beings can never accept that because what they need is "God the Father, not void, even divine void, not empty prayers […] No empty temples will ever be built on our earth because there are no earthly stones that would support them" (179). This position, espoused by Liberation Theology in the 20th century, is not new today but was at the time a bold challenge to the official position of the Russian Orthodox Church. Gippius' attitude toward body and sex is, however, both complex and vague. In the essay "Being in Love" she, following Vladimir Soloviëv, proclaims the absolute supremacy of erotic love as a way of escaping the prison of selfishness, fully embracing and celebrating The Other, to the transcendence of all differences and a total union with all others, ultimately leading to the union with the divine. But what kind of erotic love do Soloviëv and Gippius have in mind? Acknowledging marriage as the highest of all *known* forms of

erotic love, Gippius does not believe that marriage "could be a metaphysical solution of the dilemma. Marriage (and its consequence, childbearing) is only one possible form of the manifestation of sex" (255). Commenting on the pronouncements of Vasiliy Rosanov, whom Gippius calls a contemporary "prophet" of sex, she writes:

> [Rosanov] affirms all sex, all forms in which it can be expressed. […] He gave a momentum to our awareness, … he awakened it. And this awareness sharpened the feeling that lay latent in our hearts: Not like that! It's ugly! It's demeaning! Or a sin, or torture, or maybe funny! But, at the same time, we say *no* to castration. And we say *no* to "everything is permitted." And – *no* to the marriage. We do not know where the truth lies, what is the truth for our *whole* being, for our *whole* nature. (author's italics).[14]

To the old concept of love which, for Gippius, really means "lust" or "desire," she opposes a new feeling, a state of "being in love" (*vliublionnost* in Russian), "a feeling new to us, not resembling anything we know […] that rejects all forms of bodily union but also rejects the rejection of the flesh." This kind of love is never purely physical or purely spiritual and, like human nature itself, involves both body and spirit. Gippius anticipates the objections: "What new forms of sexual satisfaction can be found? It is not possible to create new phenomena. To solve the mystery of the new form of marriage there must be a physical transformation of the body. Where does the answer lie? What should we look for?"[15] Yet to Gippius these questions are

completely irrelevant, because the answer cannot and must not be revealed to us during our time in this world, the mystery of the transformation "cannot and must not be found, […] should not become a non-mystery. The enigma of sex must not become clear and find a final resolution" (264).

> Just like God, life, and the truth can never be fully known but only knowable (cognizable?) to an ever greater degree. We will never know the answer to this mystery. Knowledge is the end of the road, death, a passage to another life. The process of cognition is life itself, movement in time. […] Searching for truth, happiness, justice, and God propels people forward, and they go on tirelessly. […] It is not possible to reach the end of the road (of life) and still remain on the road, in life. When we have satisfied our thirst, have achieved the goal, the search becomes meaningless, and we stop…But here we only know striving. (264)

There is a paradox in the combination of opposing ideas: on the one hand, the writer affirms the denial of sex and procreation, and therefore continuation of life; whereas on the other hand, she calls for an active engagement in life. It reveals two things: first, that in the true Gnostic tradition, Gippius uses subversive thinking and creatively adapts Gnostic beliefs to her own needs and to the cultural and social demands of her time; secondly, it shows that for Gippius the real goal is not the possession of sacred knowledge (gnosis) but the process of acquiring it in the course

of living life in historical time. Like Dostoyevski, she believes that suffering plays an important part in acquiring knowledge, and that suffering which results from love teaches us that in this imperfect world Perfect Love, as she understands it, cannot be achieved.

The idea of life as movement, conflict and striving that characterizes Gippius' essays, also informs her poetry. Here it takes the form of a struggle between two competing voices – those of the male poet and his female soul. The soul is embodied in various female images: a young girl, mother-earth, a mistress or a wife, a psyche brimming with passions and desires. The poet at times rejoices in and at times suffers from their inseparability, his poetic voice struggling to achieve independence from words and images suggested by the soul. The voice is Logos the Word while the soul is Emotion, Desire, Darkness.

The conflict between the longing to merge with The Other and the desire to manipulate the other that corresponds, in terms of Shohan's psychological typology, to the conflicting attitudes of the participant and separant personality cores, often emerges in the relationship between the poet and the soul. The poet usually appears as superior to the soul, a spiritual messenger whose aim is not to give the soul a new language but to silence her all together.[16]

С моей душой, безумной и мятежной,
С душою говорю.
И если боль ее земная мучит –
Она должна молчать.

I speak with my soul, mad and rebellious,

I speak with my soul

If she is tormented by earthly pain –

She must silence herself.

The soul tormented by desire must abandon her language of emotions and find peace in the "pale heights bathed in cold impassive light" (1,467).

In the poem "Dust" (1897) the soul, "gripped by fear and bitter earthly pain," tells of her inability to follow the appeal of the poet to see the light and free herself from the prison of existence whose image is a narrow cell while, in its corners, four "tireless spiders, skillful, fat, and dirty", weave the web of existence "frightening in its monotonous and never-ending labor" (1, 90).

Мне в очи смотрит ночь нагая,

Унылая, как темный день.

Лишь тучи, низко набегая,

Дают ей мертвенную тень.

И ветер, встав на миг единый,

Дождем дохнул – и в миг исчез.

Волокна серой паутины

Плывут и тянутся с небес. (1,467)

Naked night stares into my eyes,

Sorrowful like a dark day.

And low hanging clouds
Throw a deathly shadow over it.
The wind blows briefly, bringing
The smell of rain, and disappears.
Threads of grey spider web
Hang down from the skies.

The contrasting images skillfully employ grammatical gender to underscore the masculine/feminine, spirit/soul opposition. The spirit, a breath of fresh air, pneuma personified as the wind (*veter,* masculine in Russian) tries momentarily to blow away the gray spider web *(pautina*, a feminine noun) – but cannot succeed. As a result,

И в прахе душном, в дыме пыльном,
К последней гибели спеша,
Напрасно в ужасе бессильном
Оковы жизни рвет душа. (1,468)

Enveloped in dust and suffocating smoke,
Hurrying towards its last defeat,
My soul attempts in helpless horror
To tear the chains of existence.

The call of the poet/spirit causes the soul to feel alienated from herself; the soul's doubts, uncertainties and fears accompany the birth of another self, an alien self.

Tearing “the chains of being” the soul attempts a leap away from the deceitful realm of demiurgic creation toward the realm of light of the Alien God. This leap necessitates a painful rearing away from the known self toward a new emerging self experienced as both compelling and frightening.[17] In a very gnostic poem titled “A Shout” the soul becomes aware of the fallacy of divine love of the Alien God:

Изнемогаю от усталости,

Душа изранена, в крови...

Ужели нет над нами жалости,

Ужель над нами нет любви?

Без ропота, без удивления

Мы делаем, что хочет Бог.

Он создал нас без вдохновения

И полюбить, создав, не мог. (1,461)

I feel so utterly exhausted,

My wounded soul is bleeding…

Is it true that there is no compassion above,

No love for us, and no pity?

Without grumbling, without questions

We do the will of God.

He created us without inspiration

And then could not give us his love.

In fear, the soul contemplates her mirror image, her nascent alien self, wondering where the call comes from, feeling frightened and confused. It is, in the words of Hans Jonas, as though "the terrified Gnostic glance views the inner life as an abyss from which dark powers rise to govern our being."[18] The poem "Prayer" is an accusation addressed to the poet/spirit by Sophia trapped in the material world and an appeal for the recognition of her divine nature:

Кто-то из мрака молчания
Вызвал на землю холодную,
Вызвал от сна и молчания
Душу мою несвободную.
Жизни мне дал унижение,
Боль мне послал непонятную...
К Давшему мне унижение
Шлю я молитву невнятную.
Я – это Ты, о Неведомый,
Ты – в моем сердце, Обиженный,
Так подними же, Неведомый,
Дух Твой, Тобою униженный. (1,469)

Somebody, from the silent depth,
Brought to the cold earth,
Awakened from sleep and silence
My unfree soul.

Gave me the humiliation of life,

And inflicted an unbearable pain…

To You who gave me humiliation,

I am addressing my humble prayer.

I am You, Unknowable One,

You are in my heart, One who was hurt,

So raise Your Spirit, Unknowable One,

Your Spirit, humiliated by You.

The theme of the abandonment of the soul by the spirit is beautifully expressed in the gnostic tale of the marriage of Eden (earth, soul, woman) to Elohim (heaven, spirit, man). United to Eden in love, Elohim suffers from his attachment to the earth and longs to depart from her for the heavenly realm of Light. Finally separated, neither one can find complete happiness, longing for each other but unable to reconcile their different needs. Gippius must have felt the tragic nature of this predicament, so existentially human.

The struggle of the poet-logos with the soul aims at restoring the lost wholeness and, thus, effecting the transfiguration of human nature into a bodily-spiritual one. The relationship between the soul and the poet/spirit echoes the Gnostic myth of Christ who descends into the physical world to rescue the fallen Sophia. The soul, who lives in the midst of destructive passions, must give up her fears and desires in order to elevate herself into a higher realm of existence, achieving in the process a transfiguration of the human condition through spiritualization of matter. In this new

state of being, the soul and the poet-logos will be merged into one ideal androgynous being and will speak with the same voice. But before this synthesis can happen, the poet and his soul are in a perpetual struggle that concerns silence and voice.

The soul desires both to be rid of her voice that generates images of hopelessness and confusion, and to preserve it to express this desire. In the last stanza of the poem "Prayer," (Molitva) however, she asks to be granted muteness because she realizes that there are no words in the human language that can express the soul's longing for the love of her beloved spirit; this longing can only be expressed in primordial pre-verbal way.

Прежнее дай мне безмолвие,

О, возврати меня вечности...

Дай погрузиться в безмолвие,

Дай отдохнуть в бесконечности!.. (1,469)

Give me my primordial speechlessness,

Return me to eternity…

Let me submerge myself with speechlessness,

Let me find peace in infinity.

.

The soul's longing is for the divine eros is expressed in the poem "The Sacred" by merging erotic images with religious ones.

Печали есть повсюду...

Мне надоели жалобы.

Стихов слагать не буду...

О, мне иное жало бы!

Чтобы душа дрожала

От счастия бессловного...

Хочу – святого жала,

Божественно любовного. (1,531)

There is sadness in all things…

But I am tired of complaining;

I will not write verses…

I crave a different sting!

So that the tremulous soul

Would feel the *speechless* happiness…

I want the sacred sting,

Of divine love.

At times, in this ongoing struggle, the poet/spirit appears triumphant over the soul, and it is his voice that speaks in the poem "Love" below, while the soul surrenders her own voice and desires, to merge with the poet in the unity of love.

В моей душе нет места для страданья:

Моя душа – любовь.

Она разрушила свои желанья,

Чтоб воскресить их вновь.

В начале было Слово. Ждите Слова.

Откроется оно.

Что совершалось – да свершится снова,

И вы, и Он – одно. (1,477)

There is no place for suffering in my soul:

My soul is love.

She destroyed her desires to resuscitate them anew.

At the beginning there was Word. Await the Word,

It will reveal itself.

What was before, will be again.

You and He are one.

The poet loves his soul "more than himself or other people" but his love necessitates subduing the soul, "breaking the soul with the strength of my will." The love/hate relationship between the poet/spirit and his beloved/soul is reminiscent of the gnostic image of Light creating its own Darkness with which he yearns to merge and from which he strives to separate. Similarly, in the poem "She", as the soul continues to defy the poet, demanding to speak in her own voice, the poet's longing to merge with her is coupled with his need to separate, to be free of the prison of soul's irrational desires and fears:

В своей бессовестной и жалкой низости,

Она, как пыль, сера, как прах земной.

И умираю я от этой близости,

От неразрывности ее со мной. (1,532)

In her shameless miserable pettiness,

She is gray like dust, like earthly death,

And I am dying from her proximity,

Her inseparability from me.

The ongoing struggle between the two voices imbues Gippius's poetry with conflict and dynamism of the kind we witness in her journalistic writings. In both, she expresses the idea that the meaning and purpose of life is a *movement* toward an ultimate goal: the acquisition of a liberating knowledge of what we are, where we came from, and where we are going. The juxtaposition of the two voices competing for ascendance is one of many dichotomies found in Gippius' texts. Other dichotomies include a simultaneous presence in her artistic prose of the real and the ideal, the profane and the sacred, the phenomenal and the noumenal, things as they are and as they should be. The author's metaphysical dualism reverberates in textual dynamics of narrative development, in which mirroring becomes a narrative figure, and aesthetic principle, as well as a psychological necessity.

Mirroring as a narrative device allows one to compare and to contrast. The image reflected in the mirror is the same but also the opposite, so that the viewer is allowed a simultaneous view of opposing perspectives. The mirror as a symbol has neither an inherent positive or negative valuation. According to Yury Lotman, a

symbol can change its value to the opposite pole depending on the context. Mirrors in Gippius are sometimes a symbol of transcendence, a sign of access between the earthly and the heavenly realms. However, more often in her stories the mirror may suggest entrapment and imprisonment, a psyche torn between two competing selves mirroring each other: the ideal image of self and its negation in the mirror image. For mirroring to become a liberating and not an imprisoning experience, the surface of the mirror must be transformed to acquire a degree of transparency. Besides merely reflecting the image, as in a glass, it should allow a view (such as through a window) of something behind the mirror, something "other" in relation to the self. "The mirror has to be broken," says Vera, a character in the story "Mirrors."[19] The glance beyond the mirror becomes a passage allowing the self to escape the prison of self-mirroring. This space is the soul, as understood by James Hillman, the site of otherness by definition where opposites – the beautiful and the ugly, the sublime and the petty, joy and sorrow, health and illness, body and spirit, life and death – meet and confront each other. This is the space where the 'I' and the'Thou' can have a dialogue and merge in Perfect Love. The soul-making[20] that takes place results in overcoming constraints of duality, creating resonating chambers of meanings that affect not only the characters but also the reader. It provides the reader with a space where an active imaginative relationship with the text can be established. It therefore comes as a shock to realize that precisely this mediating ground, which confers dynamism to her poetry, is missing in Gippius's prose fiction. This may explain why Gippius is generally considered a better poet than a fiction writer. In spite of the fact that her

stories exercise a certain intellectual fascination, they often come across as too cerebral to elicit a strong emotional response.

In contrast to poetry, Gippius's prose fiction conveys an atmosphere of stillness, and absence of will and desire. Here Gippius portrays characters, predominantly women, whose only goal is opting out of life. Suicide and less radical forms of withdrawal are the most frequent outcomes of her short stories. The stories are permeated by the mood of hopelessness and the absence of meaning; the characters seem to go through the motions of living, with total lack of interest or desire. Their unwillingness to live is puzzling, given the fact that, for the most part, they are not motivated by either external circumstances or by an inner process of reflection and turmoil. Indeed, their absence of desire is *always already there*, sometimes disguised by what appears to be an artificially created set of circumstances. The narrative strategies reflect the sense of puzzlement: the reader lacks direct access to the characters' inner world (i.e., techniques such as internal monologue and stream of consciousness are absent), the characters' thoughts and emotions are mediated through the speech of the author or the narrator. Indeed, behind the veneer of external circumstances, it is the lack of spiritual life that is deplored by the author in most of Gippius's prose fiction.

The short story titled "Moonlight Ants" provides a good example of how Gippius embodies the idea of spiritual hunger and its devastating effects on people.[21] An unexplained epidemic of suicides spreads across Russia, among St. Petersburg's prostitutes at first and later widening to involve diverse groups of the population. The story's narrator, a young student, wants to understand the reasons behind the suicides.

While he understands the motivation of the prostitutes whose life is hopelessly bleak and short, he becomes puzzled when he discovers the suicides of several people who have no apparent reasons to take their lives. His puzzlement increases when his old friends, a seemingly happy couple, suddenly commit suicide without any discernible reason. Then, at a public lecture, the narrator notices the atmosphere of "lifeless calm in the audience – a cautious and, at the same time, indifferent quietness. It's not that they are bored, not at all. They just sit there" (13). The narrator looks for an explanation in the asphyxiating social and political atmosphere in Russia during the "years of change,"[22] but dismisses the idea because, in fact, these years did not change anything, at least not for him. It is the apparent lack of "causes" that mystifies the narrator. He reflects on the fact that the circumstances offered as causes "are merely the circumstances of life. They have always existed. They might be more or less obvious, but they have always been present" (12). His own interest puzzles him: "I am so calm, I quietly do my work. Why for heavens' sake this sudden interest in suicides?" (15) The conclusion at which he finally arrives, suggested by his reading a novel by H.G. Wells, is devastating: "They are not human beings." In Well's book, two humans are attacked by inhabitants of another planet and find out, after initial panic, that they can easily destroy the attackers:

> Людей было только двое, и на них стали, в каких-то подземельях, надвигаться целые полки враждебных, громадных муравьёв. Казалось бы, гибель. Но люди вдруг заметили, что эти муравьи – необыкновенно слабы и хрупки. Чуть тронешь – веточкой, пальцем – он уже подвернулся и готов. (14)

> There were only two men against whole battalions of hostile, enormous ants. […] It was certain death, but suddenly the men noticed that the ants were extremely weak and fragile. At a simple touch of a finger or a thin stick they would fall back and die.

"Who," asks the narrator, "has transformed humans into ants, defenseless in the face of death?" (14) His ultimate revelation is that he himself is nothing but such an ant, and only the memory of having once been a human being remains. And there is no redemption:

> Он равнодушия я не верю в возможность спасения, изменения. Ведь какая сила дыханья нужна, чтобы сдуть тяжкие пары, чреватые ядом. Ведь приникли они к земле нашей близко, тесно, цепко. Божье разве дыханье сдуло бы их, смело, очистило смертно-затихшую землю. (18)

> Indifferent, I do not believe in the possibility of salvation, of change.
> A very strong breath is needed to blow away heavy vapors
> saturated with poison; they cling to our earth very tightly. Only
> the breath of God would boldly blow them away and cleanse the earth,
> lying in the grip of deathly paralysis.[23]

The key motifs running through Gippius' prose fiction are evident in this story. The poison that afflicts humans is a total paralysis of will to live, a lack of

desire to move forward and to strive, all have their roots in the absence of spiritual life. Without higher aims and beliefs, people fear changes because changes mean decay and death; they cling to the immobility and absence of desire, becoming living "dead souls." The fear of death reveals itself as a fear of life, leaving them with the only possible outcome: they choose to opt out of life rather than submit to the agonizing wait for the inevitable. The narrative with its lack of dynamism and conflict results in stories that are static and emotionally remote, as if they were themselves "in the grip of deathly paralysis."

Similarly, the suffocating atmosphere of spiritual sterility is the reason why the protagonist of the story "The Madwoman" (Sumashedshaia) [24] withdraws from life. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist Vera is an impetuous young woman with a desire to live fully, both spiritually and erotically. Her enthusiasm soon gives way to despair and apathy. She tries to explain her inner turmoil to her husband and, failing to get his sympathy, withdraws into silence The attempts to read Vera's story as victimization of the woman in patriarchal society are not, in my opinion, supported by the text. The predicament of Vera resembles, on the surface, the predicament of Dostoyevski's heroine in the story titled "A Meek One," but the resemblance is rather superficial. In Dostoyevski's story, the woman faces a mentally and emotionally abusive husband; she tries to change him by creating a loving and trusting relationship. Having failed in her struggle to make him see her as an equal, as a human being, she throws herself in despair out the window of their apartment. In the "Madwoman," the similarity is undermined by the fact that the husband, in his relationship with Vera, is a gentle and loving person, albeit somewhat rigidly set in

his views as a liberal democrat, an atheistic materialist. However, he does not force his views on Vera, letting her be free to find and fulfill her own aspirations. He gives her books to read, does not object to her working or going to church. But, after initial happiness, Vera soon becomes bored and disheartened. Her problem, like that of many Gippius' protagonists, is her lack of will and desire to follow her path. She explores different options (work, local church), and fails to find satisfaction in any of them. Her complaint to her husband is that she "feels stifled" and "everything is boredom" (*Izbrannoe*, 756). "Boredom" should not be taken here literally; what Anna means is that nothing *in this world* can ever fulfill her dreams of a purely spiritual life. *Being in the world* is unbearable, and Vera prefers to withdraw into a state of mutism, as we see her, at the end, sitting motionless in her room in a mental institution.

The arrival of her husband's sister is certainly an added factor in Vera's growing frustration. Now she clashes with her husband and with Klavdia, both liberal positivists, accusing them of not understanding that human beings cannot live by bread alone and that they need to "know or believe that something higher than them exists," and that "those who do not feel that need, are the living dead" (765). Vera's suffering is compounded by the fact that she sees no place where she could go because, according to her, "unfortunately, people like [her husband and his sister] are everywhere" (765).

When Vera's hopes of bringing up their adopted son in her own fashion – believing that spirituality is as important to people as bread – are thwarted by her husband and sister-in-law, Vera feels that she has no reason to live.

Vera's defeat and consequent withdrawal from life are commonly explained by two interconnected factors: a woman's subordinate role in a patriarchal family structure and her resulting mental imbalance. Although Gippius calls the story "The Madwoman," she simultaneously deconstructs her own interpretation by removing her authorial voice in the narrative and, thus, not offering her opinion on the subject of Vera's madness: it is Vera's husband who tells the story to a chance encounter, and this narrator retells it to the author. At the end, the husband asks the narrator – is my wife really mad? – but does not get an unequivocal answer.

In *The Heresy of Self-Love,* Paul Zweig says that the diagnosis of madness, sometimes attributed to mystics, does not explore in depth the complex relationship between such madness and society.[25] Spiritual exaltation, taken to extremes, produces behavior that looks irrational and senseless to those who do not share similar beliefs, that is, society at large. He also adds that inside a community of like-minded people, where mystical spirituality can be freely expressed, such exalted behavior and aspirations cease being senseless and acquire a profound meaning. Whereas brotherhoods of mystics and heretics were not uncommon throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in the 19th century Russia the predominant views were, on the one hand, those of the radical intelligentsia of the positivist bend, to which Vera's husband belonged, and, on the other hand, the position of the Russian Orthodox Church, which demanded strict adherence to dogma and condemned any manifestation of individual spirituality.

Vera, who suffers because she cannot accept life devoid of spirituality, clearly has the author's understanding and compassion. Suffering, Gippius states in

the "Arithmetic of Love,"[26] is an inherent part of love, because only through suffering we learn the limitations of this imperfect world and the impossibility, in it, of Perfect Love. True human nature that partakes of the divine is revealed in suffering. Sex, particularly not sanctified by love for one, unique individual, is or should be, according to Gippus, degrading and a source of suffering.

The connection between the inability to experience shame and guilt while engaging in sexual activities and the loss of humanity is unequivocally made by Gippius in her short story titled "Creature"(Tvar').[27] The young female protagonist of the story gives her body freely to men, but refuses to be called a prostitute because, she says, she does it out of love; she simply falls in love with the men who come to seek her services. For a male protagonist, himself a former client but apparently repenting his old ways, and who might be speaking for Gippius, the woman is not human but a creature, an animal. It is not because she sins, says the man, but because her sinning does not cause her suffering. (Indeed, she is not Dostoyevksy's Sonya Marmeladova, forced into prostitution to feed her family) "The creature," like animals, "does not need to silence the human in her. But a person must. One needs to erase the memory of being a human, after that, go ahead, debouch yourself… after that, it's permissible" (530). Comparing her to other prostitutes who suffer their lot, he finds her despicable:

> И все эти Людмилки и Глафирки пьют да тискают, а человек в них все-таки полуудавленный стонет, они и мучаются сквозь угар, и знают, что убили человека и что твари... А посмотри на нее: она ничего не знает, как зверь про себя не знает, что он зверь. А человеку не

> свойственно, вот он и мучится, тошнит его от зверства. […] Ей ничего не больно. Ей нормально. Она – тварь. Я ее не осуждаю... Только зачем она в образе человеческом. (532)

> All these Liudmilas and Glafiras get drunk and embrace [men], and all the time the human in them, half choked to death, cries inside them. So they suffer, they understand, through a drunken haze, that they killed the human inside them,and that they are nothing but creatures… But look at her, she does not know, as an animal does not know that it is an animal. But a person cannot! A person will debauch himself and suffer from it, his animality is the cause of his nausea. […] She does not feel pain. For her, it's normal. She is a creature. I do not judge her… But why does she assume a human form?

Relations between the sexes in Gipiius's prose fiction are usually characterized by distrust and fear. As we have said above, the female and the male voices of Gippius's poetry represent the two aspects of the self in search for a complete unity. In her short stories, on the other hand, the protagonists, instead of striving for a loving merger with the other, recoil in horror when forcibly propelled towards each other. Both sexes in this rather rigid universe are assigned specific roles, and there is virtually no possibility of a connection or even of a dialogue. Men and women inhabit separate universes, with no linking bridges. Men are for the most part victimizers and women-- their victims. They fear and mistrust each other, or are at odds concerning their desires and expectations. This is especially true in regard to sexuality.

The fear and rejection of sexuality and erotic love cause many female protagonists of Gippius's stories to opt for self-annihilation. This view on sexuality, reflected in several entries in her diaries, informs many of Gippius' short stories in which an impending marriage drives a woman to suicide. Sex and resulting childbearing are seen by the protagonists as an embodiment of a deadly passage of time leading to sickness, decay, and death. These themes receive their full expression in the short story titled "The Living and the Dead"[28] Its plot centers on a marriage arranged for Charlotte by her father, her passive resistance to it, and her final self-annihilation. Here, too, the plot ostensibly imitates a woman-as-a-victim predicament: the story is grounded in the specific reality of time, place and characters; the figure of the oppressor is a father, a caretaker of a Lutheran graveyard in the German quarter in the 19th century Petersburg (a wink toward Dostoevsky's and Gogol's "German" motif). The cast of characters, the world of the living, besides the protagonist, includes Charlotte's father, her married older sister, the sister's sickly husband and child, as well as Charlotte's intended husband, a butcher. The "dead" in the story are the gravestones and the "little beautiful mounds of earth" at the graveyard where her father is a caretaker. But for Charlotte they are alive, her only friends; not the real people buried beneath the ground but their idealized images created by her imagination.

Charlotte hates and fears the bodies in the graves because they represent decay and impermanence – bones and yellow flesh – while the fictions behind them "were always alive, fleshless and unseen to the eye, like the sound of their names" (644), timeless and decay-free. It is the living people surrounding Charlotte who show clear

signs of decay and corruption. Charlotte's older sister, Caroline, has been transformed after three years of marriage from a healthy creature into a pale woman full of fears and anxiety. Her husband is a sickly green-faced man subject to epileptic attacks, and the couple's baby is "even greener and more sickly" and expected to die at any moment. Color symbolism plays an important part in the story. Yellow and green are traditionally associated in Russian literature with sickness and decay, a death in progress, which, in Gippius's mind, is the outcome of marriage and procreation. Red, for Charlotte, is associated with blood of the animals being butchered, as well as blood of a woman, forcibly deprived of her virginity, thus becoming a symbol of carnage and violence. The symbolic sign of equality between slaughter of animals and sexual violence is embodied in the figure of the prospective husband, a young butcher who breathes animal sexuality. When he declares his love to Charlotte, she relives in her mind the memory of once visiting the butcher shop with her father. The description of the shop, ostensibly naturalistic, has at the same time a nightmarish and garish quality due to the incongruent juxtaposition of words: "a fresh and clean shop…very fresh corpses of cows, their muscles exposed, their legs cut and outstreched…" (653). The vision of the dead animals strengthened by the sound of the butcher's axe dismembering them, becomes, for Charlotte, the symbol of death through the carnage inherent in sex. Red also functions as the sign of a sudden violent onset of illness: Charlotte notices the bulging red vessels on her father's neck signaling an impending stroke.

The world of the living is peremptorily described, with few details of characterization; they are shadow figures crossing the space between existence and

oncoming death. The dead, the imaginary ones, are referred to as if they were living people. Charlotte talks affectionately about them, visits their graves as if she were visiting people's homes. Simple inscriptions on gravestones give her ample food for imagining their lives and personalities. Thus, a total reversal of perspective is achieved: the dead and the living mirror each other and, in Charlotte's eyes, exchange places. The living world is for Charlotte a frightening tale of death, while the world of her dead friends feeds her imagination and becomes her own substitute for real life. Charlotte's lack of affection for anyone living signals her fear of an attachment to the impermanent; she is happy not to be bound by love to all those "fragile vessels." Instead, she falls in love with a dead occupant of one of the graves; for Charlotte, always already frightened of life, her one-sided love for the dead artist becomes the embodiment of Perfect Love, eternal and unchanging, unfettered by the passage of time and exclusive of sexual relationship.

Although "The Living and the Dead" is ostensibly a third person narrative told by an objective, omniscient author/narrator, the dreamlike atmosphere and the subjective mood give access to Charlotte's psyche in which life and death, reality and fantasy struggle for ascendance. For a while, Charlotte is capable of holding apart the realms of the real and the imaginary and going on with the routine of her life. The border between reality and fiction is blurred when Charlotte's dreamlike existence in the world of the dead is disrupted by the pressure to marry, as well as by the jealousy she feels toward a young woman who comes to visit the grave of her former fiancé, Charlotte's beloved. On his gravestone, there is an inscription and the engraved likeness of the man buried beneath. An artist, with a delicate sensitive face, dead at

the age of 24, had become Charlotte's prized possession, her true spouse, the one who would never change, never disappoint her or be disappointed in her. From deathlike marriage with the butcher Charlotte escapes into the eternal love attainable only in death. Fleeing the world, her impending marriage, the transitory nature of life and love, the violence of sex, Charlotte freezes to death on top of the gravestone, in an eternal embrace with her perfect lover.

In this story, as in many others, Gippius subverts the traditional plot in a way that suggests that, rather than by external pressure, the choice of self-annihilation is brought about by the vision of the world as corruptible by time and change, a place where true embrace between the self and the other, the Perfect Love, is ontologically impossible.

"The Madwoman" and "The Living and the Dead" differ in a very significant way: the former is one of the few Gippius' stories endowed with dynamism and struggle that characterize her poetry. Although the story is narrated by Vera's husband, the reader has access to Vera's inner world – in conversations she has with her husband, we hear her express her thoughts and feelings – and can follow her transition from hopes and joy to despair and resignation, making her alive and believable. In many other stories, however, such as "The Living and the Dead", for example, the reader does not have direct access to the characters' minds, since their every thought and emotion is mediated through authorial speech.

Moreover, often Gippius eschews a dynamics of conflict and struggle in the characters' behavior, presenting them, instead, as *always already* resigned to the impossibility of achieving their ideals in life, and eager for the stasis of non-being. A

novella titled "Goldenflower" *("Zlatotsvet")*[29] is a good example of a story which contains no narrative tension and features characters with no discernible inner life. It is also a story of a woman, Valentina, who abandons life for no discernible reason. The murder of Valentina by an enraged and frustrated admirer is a thinly disguised suicide: she intentionally provokes him to commit the murder. Just as her face is calm in death, her soul is not stirred at the moment before he pulls the trigger. In fact, the author tells us that

> Никогда мысль о смерти не страшила ее. Она с детства не вспоминала о смерти без какой-то глубокой душевной нежности и твердости, точно эта мысль жила вместе с нею. (274)

> The thought of death never frightened her [Valentina]. Ever since she was a child, she never thought of death other than with tenderness and resolve in her heart, as though that thought had always lived alongside her.

Neither fear nor the mystery of death provoke awe in Valentina, or trouble her heart and mind. Valentina lives her life with the same indifference as she faces her death. Gippius frequently describes Valentina's state of mind as "silence and emptiness. Calm thoughts, their wings folded. Her heart beating in a lazy, tired rhythm" (288). She professes ignorance of life and men; the books she read, she says, did not "give her keys to the dark heart of man diseased with the sickness of love; or perhaps, her

indifference is what prevented her from seeing more clearly" (251). She *always already* has an instinctive knowledge that erotic love is inherently linked with aversion for the self and the other: "the love always arrived at the moment when the object of it inspired in her an extreme aversion, when the best part of her turned away in disgust" (274). The disembodied love Valentina "cherished and dreamed about was outside of the realm of life, could not bear the touch of life" (318). She "would never defile it by the touch of life" (333).

Not only love, but its physicality and the messiness of life in general frighten and disgust Valentina. When visiting her fiancé in Moscow, she is sickened by the sight of him eating a greasy meat pie while holding it with his square fingers.[30] Everything connected to ordinary life offends her senses: the "dark old house with its "specific smell, […] coffee in the copper pot, and even the hostess with her hospitality, her kind wrinkles, and the white cap on her head" (300). After this visit, Valentina breaks up the relationship and returns to Petersburg.

Moscow, too earthly, too physical, with its "dirty snow and the smell of the meat pie," is opposed to the abstract Petersburg, "cold, frozen, and seemingly eternal" (279).[31] Nothing here ties Valentina to earthly life. Even the sounds of music in Petersburg do not stay below, on earth, but "ascend, unfettered, to the radiant skies. The air, the sun, and the sky transform this *earthly, almost coarse* music into the heavenly chords" (320, italics mine). Valentina's only enduring human connection is to her sibling who functions as her double.

The longing for an androgynous union by the poet and his soul in Gippius' poetry is transformed in some of her stories into the existence of siblings who

function as doubles for each other, often showing incestuous leanings disguised as spiritual affinity. Valentina's brother is a virtually disembodied man on the verge of dying, who professes that every touch of life is "polluting the soul." The cool and distant relationship to her sick brother, who never puts any demands on her and is himself completely withdrawn from life, is the only one that does not cause fear and revulsion in Valentina. Overall, the relationship does not provide a situation from which dramatic tension could arise.

The absence of dramatic tension also results from the fact that, as in "The Living and the Dead," the reader does not have direct access to the character's inner world, since internal monologue is virtually absent in the story. The author makes statements about what Valentina thinks or feels but, although these are rendered as first person statements, the lack of emotional component or hesitation in these statements (common signs of subjectivity) betrays the imposition of the authorial voice. Even though Valentina describes herself as "always changing, always moving, always struggling," these statements present a stark contrast to the actual absence of movement and change.

Valentina takes stock of her emotions coolly and rationally, cataloguing them and asserting her total control over them. Her other self, "the beast" which she abhors, is apprehended, judged, and eliminated, as it tries to emerge. For example, she is briefly overcome with disgust as she acknowledges her infatuation with a sleazy society columnist, but it only takes Valentina a moment to rationalize and dismiss the emotion as something completely exterior to her, "alien to my mind and my soul" (267). The author, then, comments in a similarly detached manner:

Валентина и раньше испытывала эти капризы своего зверя, зверя, которого она давно подчинила себе, да и никогда раньше она не давала ему воли. Она привыкла каждое движение своей души сознавать, улавлять и запоминать. (267)

It was not the first time that Valentina felt the beast inside her. But the beast had been conquered a long time ago, and never had its way. She was used to catching every movement of her soul, rationalizing it and committing it to memory.

Every trace of desire in Valentina has long ago become a pale ghost, and we have only the author's word that it ever existed. Valentina, a beautiful young woman with an independent fortune left her by her late husband, does not know what to do with her life. Twice she thinks she in love, only to discover that, to paraphrase Gippius's entry in *Les contes d'amour*, "there is no man alive whom she would want to love." *Les contes*, 54) Valentina has one wish – to be an actress – and she finally acts on it. She is successful, and, after a period of apprenticeship, is offered a lead part. It is following her triumphant debut, which holds a promise of a successful career, that Valentina intentionally provokes a man rendered insane by her indifference, causing him to kill her. Time and again the story underscores Valentina's boredom and alienation from life. Nothing really attracts her, except for death. But even death does not move her soul: "a last cold wave of terror ran through her body. But her soul remained calm" (340). At this moment she feels that death is

"more intimate, more dear" to her than life (340). Valentina's face in death is described through the eyes of her murderer, but from the authorial point of view: "Her face became thinner, paler, and more solemn. Death, pure and strong, gave her features the expression of ultimate truth, knowledge, and calm" (340). What truth and knowledge Valentina acquires in her death remains unknown to the reader (and probably to the writer), an enigma which the reader is not compelled to ponder. The character, whose struggles, conflicts, and desires remain hidden from the reader, does not trigger our interest either in her life or in her death.

Valentina, like Charlotte in "The Living and the Dead," and numerous other characters in Gippius's fiction, seems to shy away from desire. In one of her essays about love, Gippius says that "awareness of sin, cursing of the flesh, was born from desire" (*Dnevniki*, p.331). Given the topic of the essay, the author probably means sexual desire, however, as I attempt to show in this chapter, all desire and, most importantly the desire to live, seems entirely absent in the characters of Gippius's artistic prose.

"Mirrors" is a more complex story than either "Goldenflower" or "The Living and the Dead." There is movement and conflict, and more characters entangled with each other in different ways. The protagonists seem to experience desire; however, their desire either disappears or destroys them. The central character, to whom everybody else is attracted, is similar to Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, a "positively beautiful individual." The "Dostoyevskian" atmosphere is suggested by the Petersburg setting with its low "dark-gray skies" pressing onto the earth, the "murky waters of the canals," and the faces of people devoid of joy. The description of an

insane asylum for the poor provides a glance into the hopeless suffering of its inhabitants, confined to a house that looks "like a corpse. A huge frozen corpse, its eyes open but unseeing." The house smells of "eternal cabbage soup, waterlogged decayed bricks, […] unwashed rags, dirt, blood, and human sweat, all merged into one whole, like screeching sounds merge into one terrifying chord." [32]

The young man at the center of the story, Yan, is unselfish and forgiving and, when insulted, never blames the offender but tries to justify and explain. Like Prince Myshkin, Yan appears to have an impact on the lives of several people and, at the beginning, this impact promises to bring liberation, both physical and spiritual, to the two important women in his life: his sister Vera, forcibly confined to the mental azylum, and Raisa, sensitive and intelligent but imprisoned in her own self-hatred and ready to sacrifice herself by marriage to a man she could never love. Why does Yan fail them?

Myshkin ultimately could not save or bring happiness to the women characters around him; nevertheless, his message of love and forgiveness affected their lives. He desires to change the lives of people he encounters for the better and, on a larger scale, to improve the conditions of the Russian people. He forms plans and designs that bespeak his longing to serve his country and its people, to engage in practical work. Myshkin's desire to be actively engaged in life is completely absent in Yan.

Desire and the lack thereof, love and hate are crucial concepts for understanding the dynamics of relationships in "Mirrors." The main characters, with the exception of Yan, are driven by desire. Samokhin is filled with self-hate and a

death wish, which manifest themselves unconsciously as his contradictory feelings towards Yan: contempt, dependence, love and hate. It is also evident in his angry, aggressive pursuit of Raisa, the woman he wants to possess. Raisa herself is tormented by contradictory feelings of life's lack of meaning and an obsessive desire to live fully, even excessively. Yan's sister, Vera, who constantly talks about boredom and entrapment and whose fits of hysteria land her in a mental institution, regards Yan as her only salvation from unbearable existence in the asylum. All of them look up to Yan, seeking recognition and validation of their desire, their suffering, and their sense of being. As the title "Mirrors" suggests, the concept of reflection is paramount in the story and connects all aspects of it. All the characters yearn to be accepted and validated as subjects, and, paradoxically, it is in Yan's gaze that they seek a reflection of their true selves, thus breaking the prison of self-hatred and self-doubt and escaping the imprisoning mirror of self-image.

To escape self-reflection is, thus, a way to transcendence. But Yan is incapable of helping anyone because, devoid of desire and inner conflict, he has no interiority. Like a smooth surface of a mirror he can only reflect. He himself is a prisoner of his self-reflecting psyche that is a void. The void is filled with fear: the fear of looking both inwards and outwards, at the outer world and into the depth of his soul. In a conversation with a young woman who imagines herself in love with him, Yan acknowledges his fear of the natural world. When she wonders about him being afraid of the linden tree, he responds that that may only be an illusion:

> Видите, Оля, я может, действительно странный. Я и
> пощупаю, а мне все мало. Все я не убежден. […] И вот я

ее, липу, не знаю, какая она в самом деле, и не то что боюсь, а так, неприятна она мне иногда. […] Вот если б мы липу не пошупали, а каким нибудь другим способом постарались узнать […] и вдруг бы она тоже разлетелась,а? Вдруг она тоже отражение? И вы тоже? (597)

May be I am strange, Olya, I touch it and it's not enough, I am not convinced. […] And so I don't know it at all, this linden tree, what is it really like? And because of that, not that I fear it but I feel some kind of repulsion. What if we tried to know the linden tree not by touch but in some other way? What if it would just disappear? What if it is also just a reflection? And so are you?

It is precisely Yan's vacuity and his complete lack of desire that, paradoxically, attract the others toward him, in their striving, perhaps, to fill this void with their own desire. Like Valentina in *Goldenflower*, Yan has always already understood the destructive nature of desire and renounced it. The lack of desire and the fear of engaging with people and the world make it impossible for Yan to love and understand others. On the surface, he is very understanding, he never reacts when Samokhin taunts and provokes him or shows signs of annoyance. He does not see that what Samokhin really wants is to be confronted and, thus, acknowledged and validated in his being and his desire. Raisa, who once thought Yan's love could save her from herself, understands that he cannot do anything for her, since his own

existence is predicated on fearful passivity and total absence of desire. He fails to free his sister from the madhouse because of his fear of confronting the doctors, and she dies there. Raisa leaves and never comes back; in her letter to Yan she tells him that they will never see each other again because she understands that he is incapable of loving her the way she needs to be loved. Samokhin, consumed by self-hatred, takes his own life. In the end, we see Yan sitting immobile, half awake half asleep, outside of movement, change, and desire, with death *from* desire vanquished in favor of death *of* desire.

From the beginning, the story is haunted by the image of Yan's grandmother, who seems frozen in a state between life and death: deaf, mute, unseeing, cut off from all, she emits from time to time strange sounds that do not bear resemblance to human speech. In the end, this image and the almost death-like existence of Yan are brought together by a letter from home:

> [Оля] сообщала с детской тщательностью все подробности – не о себе,а о бабушке, о том, как она ест, спит...как «она лучше ест кашу, если датьтепленькую.» Бабушка совсем не слабеет […] все бродит и шепчет что-то,может она и чувствует. Далекой, правдивой, но какой-то ненужнойнежностью пахнуло на Яна от этих строк. Приехать? Зачем? Не все лиравно? Здесь, там... Нет расстояний, нет времени... Ян опустил голову и задумался. И даже не задумался, а впал , как ребенком бывало, в тихое,сладкое оцепенение, не сон и не бодрствование, без

мыслей, едва ощущая жизнь и совсем не ощущая себя.
(638)

With childish thoroughness [Olya] listed all the little details, not about herself but about grandmother, how she eats, sleeps […] how "she likes her porridge better when it's served warm. She does not get any weaker but walks around and makes quiet sounds, who knows, may be she can even feel something. There was distant and true tenderness in those words but somehow not needed. To go back, what for? Is it not all the same – here or there? There are no distances, no time. His head hung low, Yan fell into revery. Not even revery, rather a sweet paralysis, the kind he experienced as a child. He was neither asleep nor awake. He had no thoughts and no feelings, he was barely aware of life and totally unaware of himself.

Desire as entrapment is the leitmotif of "Fantastic Story,"[33] one of the few stories by Gippius based on a fantastic premise. A young woman abandoned by her father and living in poverty desires to know what her future will be. Her desire is satisfied during a séance with a magician. Ivonne's desire is linked to a death wish: in the beginning she longs to see the future moment of her father's death and satisfy her desire for revenge. But when her wish to know the future is fulfilled, it turns into a death of time. The magician touches her head with his hands for a fraction of a second:

> Между движением его рук вниз и движением вверх – не прошло никакоговремени. Сколько бы мы не уменьшали время – до тысячной, до миллио-нной секунды, – все же это будет некоторое время, а тут не было никакого.Но лживее всего сказать, что не было ничего. [...] Нет, все, – не было только времени. (467)

> No time elapsed between the downward and the upward movement of his hands. If we decrease time even to a thousandth or a millionth fraction, it still remains time. But here there was no time elapsed. But it would be a lie to say that it was nothing, nothing! There was everything except time.

The passage of time – past, present, future – does not exist any longer, it has been obliterated by living every moment as a repetition of the already lived. Instead of linear, time becomes circular, an accursed eternal return to the *deja vu*. Living a life becomes for Ivonne similar to rereading the same story whose end she knows beforehand, or an endless copying of her own life. Like the desire to read, her desire to live disappears because of this knowledge. The original and the copy mirror each other in Ivonne's mind.

> Я *помню* свое будущее. [...] Каждая мысль, каждое движениедуши и тела – приходят ко мне во *второй* раз, и я знаю время их прихода. Я прожила две *вторых* жизни, потому что ведь и моепервое переживание, тогда в провале

> безвременности, было лишь ярким, верным отражением, образом именно этой будущей,*второй жизни* […] *жизнь со знанием*! (468, italics in the original)

> I *remember* my future. […] Every thought, every movement of my soul and my body happen to me for the *second* time […] I lived two *second* lives because my first experiencing it, in the depth of timelessness was but a vivid, faithful reflection, an image of that future s*econd* life.*Life with knowledge*!

Nothing ever happens for the first time, every desire has already been fulfilled, every feeling experienced, nothing will ever be new and authentic. Ivonne's life has become a copy, a reflection of a life lived by someone else, or, perhaps, gleaned from a story. Furthermore, the knowledge she sought turns into its opposite: as Ivonne says to the narrator, she will never know what her life was supposed to be like because the fulfillment of her desire irrevocably changed its course. Ultimately, the only desire left is for an absolute ending, death that will put a stop to the repetition.

Stasis, stopping time, promises the fulfillment of a desire for immortality by precluding decay, change, and mutability leading to death. However, the paradoxical nature of this desire is revealed in the case of Ivonne: her life has become *always already* death, because all subsequent desires are rendered impossible by the knowledge of the outcome. It is a curious paradox that Gippius plays out in this tale: our desires are doomed by the passing of time, change and eventually death; however

the absence of desire means stagnation, absence of movement, death in life. Gippius hesitated about the story's title. It was called alternately "Fantasy: An Evening Story" or "Fate." Ivonne's fate of repeating her life, is, according to Gippius, worse than death, indeed, death is seen as liberation by Ivonne. Life is meaningless, the author seems to say, if we possess, in advance, complete knowledge of our life, because the purpose and meaning of life is precisely a striving to learn and acquire greater and greater knowledge. It is a paradox comparable to reading a book: the desire to know the outcome moves the readers closer to the end and, therefore, to the end of desire.

The theme of circularity informs the story's narrative shape. At the conclusion of the story the action moves back to the frame that surrounds the main narrative. The young man to whom the story was told by Ivonne, in turn narrates it to a group of friends. The mood of quiet resignation and surrendering of desire is prevalent in the frame narrative as well. There is the sense that the narrator and his friends are spatially trapped in immobility, in a dark room separated from the outside by heavy curtains amidst old heavy furniture; and trapped in the timeless present moment. It is as if their whole life can be lived within the confines of this room, reminiscing, telling stories, not living and not desiring. But here too a paradox is revealed: in both the main and frame narratives it is the very absence of the desire *to be* that generates the desire *to tell,* thus making the narrative possible.

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In her essays Gippius often expresses the ardent wish to experience life to the fullest. In "Zhizn' i byt"[34] she defines the meaning of life as ceaseless movement, a

striving towards the absolute, even with the knowledge that the absolute and the ideal can never be fully achieved in this world.[35] 'Byt' or the everyday grind, is characterized, on the contrary, by stagnation, an absence of movement and desire. It is this absence of striving and living that characterizes the protagonists of her short stories. They fear and shun engagement with others and are, thus, incapable of fully engaging the reader. They lack interiority because they do not evidence any inner conflict or desire, except the desire not to be. Self-annihilation is the frequent outcome in the stories. More often than not, Gippius's characters opt out of life (literally or figuratively) without any good reason. Many of them, like Valentina in *Goldenflower*, have everything to live for -- youth, money, a promise of a satisfying career -- but cannot find joy and satisfaction in anything. They seem to have internalized desire as loss and renounced it *a priori*.

In her diary, Gippius says that personal truth finds expression through the unconscious, in artistic creation. This statement may help us in trying to understand the fragmentation of the author's voice. The optimism of her essays, with their celebration of life, contrasts starkly with the sense of life as an entrapment in the prosaic, devoid of higher spiritual aims and purposes, expressed in her artistic fiction. The writer's conscious self, her active persona is driven by the separant's desire, to use Shoham's terminology, to stand out, to leave a mark, to succeed, while her unconscious longs for the unattainable, for a merger with the Other that can never be achieved. Gippius's statement in her early poem "Song," "I want that which does not exist," is clearly not accidental.

Sometimes in her stories Gippius hints at the psychological conditions that may be responsible for her characters' inability to feel secure in themselves and in life. Often, it is the loss of a parent, usually mother, or the loss of trust. In "The Living and the Dead" it is implied that Charlotte's mother left the family or was thrown out because of infidelity. Yan, in "Mirrors," never knew his parents, and does not remember his childhood well. The only scene that left a lasting memory in him is rather traumatic:

> Он очень мал. Его поставили на пол, держат под мышки и заставляютидти. Ноги совсем слабые. Ян боится, он знает, что непременноупадет, если его не будут держать. Кто-то, может быть сестра, может быть няня, присела на пол в двух шагах и совсем близкопротягивает руки. «Иди, иди, Ян – говорит она, -- не бойся, вотмои руки, видишь, здесь, иди ко мне!» Руки ее почти касаются Яна,и он идет, хочет схватиться за них – и вдруг руки отодвигаются вседальше, и Ян падает лицом на пол, тяжело и трудно. [...] Ян пошел,только веря этим протянутым рукам [...] и надолго потом в душе егоосталось недоуменье, чувство обиды и боли, тем сильнейшей, что онее сам не сознавал. (580-81)
>
> He is very small. He is standing on the floor, someone is supporting himunder his arms. They want him to walk. His legs are weak. Yan is afraid, he knows that he will fall without the support. Somebody, maybe his sister or his nursemaid is

> squatting in front of him, very close, holding her arms toward him. "Come here Yan," she says, "don't be afraid, you see my arms, they are right here, walk to me." Her hands are almost touching Ian, and he makes a step and wants to grab those hands, but suddenly they move farther away […] and he falls with his face to the floor. […] Yan walked trusting those extended arms […]. For a long time, afterwards, he felt puzzled and hurt, and his pain was even stronger because he was not really aware of it.

It could be argued, along with Julia Kristeva, that a concrete loss the characters experience has been internalized as a general lack, an absence of something essential, in Kristeva's words "The Thing," for which they are perpetually in mourning. To follow the thought of Giora Shoham, the first feeling of abandonment, when a baby realizes the painful separateness from his mother, is repeated and reflected in the metaphysical malaise of being thrown into the world abandoned by the absent God. Similarly, it could be argued that, besides the traumatic loss of her father at the age of ten, Gippius continued experiencing, when living with Merezhkovski and Filosofov, the lack of emotional intimacy and the inability to share her innermost thoughts. The frustration at her inability to engage into a genuine I-Thou dialogue with the two of them reinforces Gippius' awareness of the impossibility of a total merger with the Other, an internalized knowledge she then confers on the protagonists of her artistic prose.

The theme of desire is an important leitmotif of Gippius's life and work. Her poetry reflects the struggle between the soul who clings to her desire and the spirit who demands that it be given up. Realizing the impossibility of fulfillment the soul rebels, rejects resignation and strives to become omnipotent, to know God and to be one with God, a desire that mingles the mystical and the sexual: "I want another sting: the sting of Divine Love." The cause of Sophia's fall, in one Gnostic account, is her rebellion against the limitations that prompts her to wander in search of the Godhead, to know him and to be equal to him. It is this struggle and rebellion that are embodied in Gippius's poetry and in her private diaries.

In the short stories this inner conflict and struggle are absent. For.Gippius's heroines the perfect relationship between men and women, the total embracing of the spiritual and the physical, is impossible in this life, and the only path open to them is shutting the doors to existence through physical self-annihilation or withdrawal into madness and silence. The protagonists are devoid of the oceanic feeling of unity and choose self-annihilation not in order to merge with all of creation but out of desire to stop existing. Narratively this is reflected in numerous images of congealed immobility, death-like calm, aloofness, and detachment.

A revealing comparison can be made between the artistic prose of Zinaida Gippius and that of her contemporary Kate Chopin in whose novel *The Awakening* desire is also the main motif.[36] Significant parallels and significant differences between the two help elucidate why Chopin's stories (the main emphasis is on *The Awakening* although examples from other stories are included) are effective in a way Gippius's are not.

Both writers were active at the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century; both were at the center of artistic and cultural life, albeit in more restricted provincial surroundings for Kate Chopin; both held literary salons; both were considered liberated women and somewhat eccentric; and, more important, both wrote about women whose search for identity was profoundly spiritual, clearly reflecting the deep spiritual longings of their creators. The theme of freedom and liberation is common to both. For both writers freedom means more than the idea of women's liberation from the norms of patriarchal marriage and patriarchal society; neither is the search for freedom restricted to women. In Chopin's "The Story of An Hour," Mrs. Mallard speaks of the lack of freedom, in a marriage, for both men and women:

> There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination. (*The Awakening*, p.214)

Freedom, for both writers, means liberation from every kind of entrapment: social, psychological, and spiritual, as well as from the mortifying effect of relationships which are not based on the subject-to-subject dialogue of equals.

In "Emancipation: A Life Fable" the point of view is of "an animal born into this world," into its "confining walls," an "animal … born in a cage" (177). A clear reference to Plato's cave in this tale shows the predicament of all the living creatures

behind the "confining walls." The metaphysical meaning is reinforced by the use of the capital L: "light" in the physical sense is spelled with a small "l" whereas in another passage, the animal leaving the cage "[sees] each time more Light." In his exhilaration, eagerness to take on life's challenges, and disregard for danger in search for elusive happiness, "on he rushes, in his mad flight, heedless that he is wounding and tearing his sleek sides -- seeing, smelling, touching of all things; *even stopping to put his lips to the noxious pool, thinking it may be sweet*" (Italics mine) (177).

The quest for freedom and happiness drives Edna Pontellier, the heroine of *The Awakening.* This quest includes her search for ideal love, in which all the aspects – the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual – are united. For both Chopin and Gippius, erotic love is a quest for an ideal, impossible, and unattainable goal, a complete merger with the beloved Other. In the absence of this ideal, all love is doomed. The image in *The Awakening* of two young lovers, of whom nothing is known, followed like a shadow by a stark lady in Black, haunts the novel as a powerful symbol of doom to which love, limited to its erotic aspect, is destined. Even Chopin's earliest stories, once seen as lively sketches of local color, are haunted by death and madness accompanying erotic love. The "erotic morbidity" that Daniel Rankin links to the influence of European decadent art has, in Chopin's works, a different function and different origin.[37] The fatal nature of eros lies, for Chopin, in the inability to spiritualize the erotic relationship, to make it complete, unfettered by ego selfishness and desire to dominate; to achieve the I- Thou relationship that sets the lovers free. The metaphysical torment Edna feels is the realization that such a

relationship is impossible to achieve and that everything else leads to feelings of loss and alienation.

Sandra Gilbert in her introduction to *The Awakening and Selected Stories* makes very clear that Chopin's work is more than "empirical observation and political theorizing," when she mentions Edna Pontellier's "social and *metaphysical* torment" (13, my italics). While I agree with Sandra Gilbert's assertion that, in *The Awakening,* Chopin invents her own version of the Edenic myth, "a third Eden, a sacramental rather than a sacrilegious garden of earthly delights," I would argue that seeing Edna's quest in terms of sexual desire alone – "[the novel's] energy would arise from the liberation and celebration of female desire" (15) is reductive. Indeed, Edna's erotic encounters with Arobin, which she definitely enjoys – "it was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (139) – do not bring her happiness or even satisfaction. On the contrary, they fill her with sadness and a feeling of incompleteness, making more urgent her vague longing for the "true love" that she imagines Robert is destined to bring her.

> She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to lookupon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her,there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips. (139)

It is not the liberation of female desire that Chopin describes but a longing for a perfect and complete union between the lovers. Vital and sensual Edna longs for such love and does everything to experience it, but her actual experience of ordinary sexual love never brings her satisfaction, leading her to the realization of the unattainable nature of her desire.

Edna remembers experiencing spiritual longings disguised as amorous infatuation from her childhood and youth. She remembers herself as a little girl running across an endless field of grass "as big as the ocean" in her native Kentucky, rushing on like an animal that found its freedom, with no direction or end, when the only thing that matters is movement. She is always running, always wanting to be elsewhere, always reaching out to the longed for but unattainable bliss. Her falling in love with different men follows the same pattern, she is drawn to the man she knows to be unattainable, an image she creates of the Perfect Love.

> For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman.The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelationby any suggestion or promise of instability… The present alone was significant;was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned,newly awakened being demanded. (62)

Her love for Robert follows the same path. When they first meet, in her habitual surroundings, Edna finds him pleasant but not in any way remarkable. This is Robert as she sees him in her daily reality, in which she is a mother and wife, leading an exemplary life, as society and her husband expect her to do. But there is a different Edna, of which, at first, she is only dimly aware. Edna's discovery of her hidden self is underscored by the existence of two competing plots in the novel: the "reality plot" and the "fantasy plot." To discover her true self, Edna must escape from confinement of the "reality plot" into freedom of the "fantasy plot." The "fantasy plot" begins to take shape in Edna's imagination when she and Robert go for a nocturnal swim in the Gulf, and Robert, sensing Edna's response to the magic of the moment, tells her, half-jokingly, the story of the spirit of the Gulf that holds Mrs. Pontellier in its sway to never release her back to "reality." Another day, on a boat trip to a nearby island (water is always a corollary for Edna's awakening), Robert tells her a story of lovers who rowed away together, never to return. The new Edna of the "fantasy plot" begins to regard Robert with different eyes, and, when he leaves for Mexico and she loses him, he becomes a beautiful unattainable dream, her ideal lover and soul mate. Edna is now struggling to reconcile her two worlds, one within and one without, with the "fantasy plot" growing stronger as the time goes on, until it, finally, absorbs her whole being.

Thus, the trip on the boat to Grand Isle, in the company of Robert, initiates Edna's awakening to her inner spiritual self and sets in motion the parallel plot, the plot of myth and fantasy. The small boat on which they travel becomes a symbol of navigation as spiritual quest. While "living is *for* or *in* oneself," (italics mine)

navigating is a quest for transcendence."[38] The return of Homer's Odysseus to his home and wife "is a mystic idea analogous to the mystery of the 'fall' of the soul into the material plane of existence." [39] The myth of the lovers who row away is reflected in Edna's final swimming out; like them, she never returns to the island, returning instead to the smells and the sounds of her childhood, symbolizing her rebirth in the mystical point of origin.

The discovery of her new self brings Edna both exaltation and anxiety. Every aspect of Chopin's novel reveals the tension between Edna's outward self and the new inner self rising to the surface of her consciousness. Edna acknowledges the birth of this other self as an event that brings suffering and turmoil into her life, making her question all her previous assumptions. In fact, the first part of the novel, which takes place on the island, is almost exclusively concerned not with her external actions but with the struggle and turmoil in her heart and mind.

> An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliarpart of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish.It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day.It was strange and unfamiliar. It was a mood. (49)

Skillfully, Chopin attributes this mood to unjust reproaches her husband directed at her the previous night, while at the same time, undermining this assumption by saying that this was only one component, and not the most important, in her complex feelings:

> A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,-- the lightwhich, showing the way, forbids it. At that early period it served but to bewilder her. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to theshadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when shehad abandoned herself to tears. (57)

The "fantasy plot" along which her life has unfolded since her childhood, gains new impetus that particular summer on Grand Isle when Edna's awakening to her inner self makes her feel with unusual poignancy the glorious beauty and sensuality of the world around her. It is in the totality of this sensual-erotic world that her self yearns to lose itself. When, in the second part of the novel, the new self is acknowledged and incorporated into her psyche, Edna is ready to act. As surely and systematically as her husband takes pleasure in acquiring things, Edna is divesting herself of everything deemed not essential. The final "de-vestment" before Edna swims out never to return, is symbolized by her taking off her clothes.

> The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. […] How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. (175)

The central scene of the second part of the novel is the scene of Edna's last supper, a beautiful dinner reception she offers her close friends before leaving the family house forever to move to her new dwelling which she affectionately calls the "pigeon house." The scene is analyzed with great inspiration by Sandra Gilbert. To her reading I would like to add another layer of interpretation. Gilbert sees Edna preside over the dinner table as the powerful goddess Aphrodite, thus placing her in an alternative pagan feminist myth, which Chopin substitutes for the patriarchal myth of Jesus Christ. I agree with the idea of Chopin deconstructing the traditional Christian myth replacing it with a revisionist one. In my reading, however, the myth she creates is a gnostically inspired myth of the two Aphrodites, the Earthly one and the Heavenly one. It is Edna in her embodiment as the Earthly Aphrodite, "the powerful goddess of love and art […] blazing with beauty and diamonds" (144) who ignites Victor Lebrun's erotic imagination. Because he himself is an embodiment of the openly erotic Dionysian element, he cannot help but to see this one aspect of Edna-Aphrodite. But the authorial description shows the goddess "clothed in a paradoxical veil of power and vulnerability" (145). Indeed, the narrator perceives the duality of her heroine's state of mind:

> But as she sat there, amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness that so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition. It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed. There came over her the

> acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision
> the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with
> the sense of the unattainable. (145)

Sandra Gilbert wonders, "who or what, indeed, is the oddly vague 'beloved one?'" "Unattainable" is the key word here describing Edna's intimate knowledge of the impossibility of ever achieving a total union with the "beloved one." When Edna tells Robert of her love upon his return from Mexico, she already possesses the sad knowledge of the unattainable nature of her desire. None of her attempts at sublimating her yearnings through art, the bold emancipation from her marriage, or even the love she feels for Robert will be capable of assuaging her desire for the absolute, a mystical merger of her soul with the totality of being.

In her Introduction to *The Awakening*, Sandra Gilbert notices "Edna's restlessness and her irony, her desire for freedom and her sense that freedom may ultimately be meaningless" (23) without explaining the meaning of the passage. I interpret this rather opaque statement to mean that Edna is beginning to understand the reasons for her malaise: 'forbidding the way'conveys more than the fact that Edna has internalized prohibitions against transgression of social norms; it goes to the heart of Edna's unhappiness, at the root of which is her realization that her desire is as unattainable as it is impossible to extinguish. When Robert returns, after a long absence, and becomes again part of her reality, Edna realizes the futility of her desire. It is not because Robert did not wait for her return from the Rattignolles' that Edna feels profound sadness but because she becomes aware that she has been betrayed by

her own dreams, she realizes that nothing – not a lover, not her art or the bewitching music of Mademoiselle Reizs – will ever fill the void that only an absolute could fill. She now thinks of Robert as what he is: one in a long line of lovers none of whom sets her free, body, soul, and spirit. Edna yearns to experience a total relationship with The Other, a complete merging with the totality of being which nothing can provide except, perhaps, the melting of her self into the enormity of the living ocean.

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The heroines of Gippius's prose fiction and Edna Pontillier share a common feature: the core of their personality is what Giora Shoham calls a participant one, meaning that they desire a full participation in the object of their desire. In love, they need to experience a complete union with the loved one, a merger of their beings into one which, ultimately, is an expression of the desire to merge with the divine. In Shoham's view such a relationship between human beings is an existential impossibility, and longing for it can sometimes be sublimated through "legitimate" activities, such as religion, art, dedication to a cause, or adherence to mystical beliefs. However, if the longing for participation cannot be assuaged through any of the latter, a person might opt for the radical step of self-annihilation. The two authors develop this theme in crucially different ways. Edna swims out to sea as a fulfillment of her wish to merge her self with the totality of all, thus being reborn into another world, her world of fantasy. Gippius's heroines, as far as we can see, do not express such desire for merging but only for the stasis of non-being. While Edna struggles her way through life, Gippius' characters, such as Valentina (*Goldenflower*) or Charlotte

("The Living and the Dead") know *a priori* that their desire can never be satisfied through any activity such as work, art, religion, or love, and opt for death as the only way to stop desiring. Throughout their lives, they have been mourning something they cannot identify.

The difference between the two approaches to desire, in Gippius and Chopin, may be conceptualized as the Tantalic longing of Gippius's protagonists, characterized by passivity and surrender, in the face of the unachievable; and the Tantalic rebellion of Edna Pontellier, who struggles with everything that confines her in her attempt to free herself. Not quite knowing what her desires are, she searches for a way to fulfill them, and her search is intense. Her soul resonates with all that surrounds her: sensual nature, beautiful people and objects, the stirring of music, her art, her erotic stirrings. She rebels against the limitations, be they societal or metaphysical, and only gives up and acknowledges the impossible nature of her desire after having fought to find the way to fulfillment. And when she abandons the plot of "reality," she enters the plot of spiritual fulfillment and rebirth through her merger with the totality of being.

The contrasting approach to the theme of desire finds expression in many narrative strategies, such as the ending of the story, dynamic or static characterization, and interiority versus exteriority. The dynamic ending of *The Awakening* stands in contrast to the static endings of Gippius' stories. Edna's joyful and graceful swimming out to the sea, imbibed with color, smell, and sound -- "There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" -- defeats the very idea of death. In her last swim out, Edna never stops. As noted by Sandra Gilbert,

"Kate Chopin never allows Edna Pontellier to become immobilized […] she is still swimming when we last see her, nor does she ever – in Emily Dickinson's phrase – "stop for death."" Gilbert goes on:

> Together, her ceremonial nakedness, the paradoxically unknown familiarity of the world she is entering, and the "foamy wavelets [that curl and coil] like serpents about her ankles" tell us that she is journeying not just toward rebirth but toward an imaginary world beyond the restrictive culture of the nineteenth century. (32)

At the end, Edna never comes back to the island from which she swam away, returning instead to the smells and sounds of her childhood, symbolizing her rebirth in the mystical point of origin. Edna's swim takes her not into death but into the world full of life, it is portrayed by Chopin as her heroine's passage into transcendence, from the imprisoning "plot of reality" into the liberating "plot of fantasy," where she is reborn. It is not a swim to the end of being but toward a new existence as part of the totality of being.

> She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky,conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself. (74)

There is an overwhelming contrast between this glorious ending and the ending of "The Living and the Dead," with Charlotte freezing to death on the tombstone of her beloved, the heroine whose immobility epitomizes the finality of death and the impossibility of transcendence. In addition, the ambiguity of Chopin's novel' ending creates a fertile ground for readers' imagination allowing them to write their own meanings into the story. This freedom to imagine, characteristic of what Roland Barthes calls "writerly stories," is absent in Gippius's artistic prose where the meaning is determined by the voice of the author.

The contrasting endings are part of the overall difference in narrative presentation. The narrative tension of Chopin's novel depends on her dynamic approach to characterization. Edna does not stay the same from the beginning to the end of the novel, her development into a different person, her emerging awareness of her inner self change her dramatically, making her an interesting and believable character. Edna's ultimate turning inward, in search of her inner self, happens, as it should according to Kierkegaard, only after a period of doubt, struggle, and rebellion in active engagement with the world.

Silence, immobility, and the rigidity of Gippius's endings precluding all movement and change, are consistent with the absence of dynamics of conflict and struggle. Gippius's characters do not exhibit any change or development; *always already* passive, devoid of desire, and indifferent to life, their thoughts and feelings are the same throughout the stories. Valentina may frequently say that she is moving ahead and changing, but this assertion is not supported by the narrative. The reader

does not feel any empathy toward either Charlotte or Valentina because their actions, including the final suicide, are not narratively and psychologically justified.

Interiority as Chopin's narrative principle, allows the reader to witness Edna's struggle and change through direct access to her thoughts. The tension between Edna's outward self and the new self she is gradually aware of, her suffering and turmoil, her questioning of all her previous assumptions, are vividly conveyed in her internal monologues which permeate the novel. By contrast, Gippius narratives are characterized by exteriority. Nowhere in the stories do the readers have an access to the characters' voices; even when they speak for themselves, the lack of emotional component and hesitation, marks of subjectivity, betray the fact that they are always being mediated by authorial speech. The void created by the lack of interiority is filled from the outside, the inner voice usurped by the authoritarian voice of a Demiurge-creator. The characters in Gippius's stories are remote and emotionally vacuous, they do not seem to possess inner life. Rather than people, they seem to be vehicles for the author's ideas, the figures of clay into which the breath of life has not been infused.

Orientation toward interiority or exteriority finds expression in the different way both writers use sound and silence. *The Awakening* starts with the incessant chatter of birds and ends with the humming of bees. In between, the chatter never stops: dogs bark, children shout, mothers yell, women gossip. Edna and Robert chat all the time, and so does Madame Ratignolles. However, only the mundane is heard in all that chatter, while silence surrounds essentials things which are rarely expressed in speech. Leonce, Edna's husband, although unhappy with her lack of concern with the

children, does not or cannot express his feelings in language. The same is true of Robert whose inept attempts to express his feelings fail. Edna, too, expresses everything really important not in dialogue or mediated through authorial speech but as internal monologues. When she begins to feel the stirrings of her new self, she still does not have words to express it, although, gradually as her awareness grows, she is better equipped to do it. When Edna goes to the city, in the second part of the novel, the incessant chatter grows dimmer as the island, alive with sounds, recedes into the past. There is another reason, however: the inconsequential social chatter dies out as Edna gradually gives up her social obligations. As Edna fully acknowledges her new self, she also finds a voice. Simultaneously, her thoughts become more articulate and some meaningful conversations take place: with mademoiselle Reizs, with the family doctor, and finally with Robert. Edna's new voice and the blossoming of the "fantasy plot" coalesce in the glorious scene of the last supper when Edna narrates the conclusion of the story about a woman who went away with her lover, never to come back.

In Gippius stories, there is no silence that suggests hesitation and struggle. All the important ideas about love, life, and death are voiced, rendered, however, not in a subjective way reflecting the characters interiority, but rather in an authoritarian, demiurgic way of the author-creator. It is natural that such approach to narrative will not yield interesting and complex characters, and usually Gippius's attempts at creating such characters do not quite succeed. Rather, her characters are schematically conceived and belong in two main categories: on the one hand, characters representing the pneumatic, spiritual type, portrayed as devoid of bodies,

almost ephemeral beings, concerned only with higher ideas and oblivious to ordinary life; and, on the other hand, the opposite kind: the fleshy, life-loving men and women, interested in food and procreation. This superficial characterization may, perhaps, be explained by Gippius' viewing of her stories as, first and foremost, the vehicles for her ideas.

The prominent Symbolist poet Andrei Bely, in his review of Gippius's stories, reflects on the reasons why Gippius' stories fail to satisfy fully:

> In Z.N. Gippius's work, the thinker is clearly *not* connected to the artist.At times, she excites our thoughts, presenting us with the most complex antinomies of life, and we give ourselves entirely to the pleasures of hersharp intelligence. At times, however, we are taken aback by the sudden spicy artificialness of her style […] There is beauty of form in Gipppius, when the silver beauty of her prayers, appearing like a silver moon from the cloud of thought, submerges us, caresses and warms us. But all of a sudden, a scheme, a moralappears, in the middle of it, as an importunate cliff . One instant, and the enchantment is gone, irrevocably.[40]

The above passage reveals a contradiction frequently found in Gippius' work. The writer's attempt to voice her ideas in her artistic prose, as she does in her journalistic writing, runs against her unconsciously felt view of life that she shares with her protagonists. [41] This vision of life as loss and suffering determines her

protagonists' lack of desire and fear of love. For Gippius, as for Vladimir Soloviëv, sexual consummation of love presented a problem; the concept of erotic love, however, was for both of paramount importance. It was the only relationship which allowed people to free themselves from the prison of selfishness and achieve a genuine connection, a complete union with the other seen as an equally important being. In its mystical extension, such love should ultimately lead to a merger with the divine. Like other symbolists, Gippius, was greatly influenced by Soloviëv's views, and her essays speak of the striving toward such erotic love. Her fiction, however, shuns the very idea of the erotic connection, and many of her female characters choose death rather than engage in an erotic relationship. Desire, because of its impermanent and changeable nature, is linked to the passage of time and, therefore, to erosion, decay, and ultimately death. To desire is to become vulnerable to loss and subject to the changes brought on by time. Rather than going through this process, a self-imposed death or a voluntary withdrawal from life appear to the protagonists as acts of freedom and self-assertion, an escape from the existence whose ultimate destination is death. It is clear from Gippius' diaries that similar thoughts were not unknown to her in her moments of sadness and despair. However, her forward-looking, separant side propelled her toward life and achievement.

The theme of desire and its discontents is, therefore, a leitmotif for Gippius' life and work. Her poetry reflects the struggle between the soul, clinging to her earthly desire, a source of passion and suffering, and the spirit who wants the soul to give it up. The soul rejects limitations in its rebellious search for a union with the divine spirit, the union both mystical and sexual.

Gippius's wish for the "Sting of a Divine Love" is reminiscent of several Gnostic myths, such as the myth of Eden and Elohim, in which the soul strives to hold the spirit in the embrace of her desire, and the myth of Sophia's fall as a result of her rebellion against the injunction to search for a direct knowledge of God and be one with Him. Gippius sometimes professes this proud desire in her poetry – "I love myself like God, this love will be my salvation," - and sometimes acknowledges her heretical transgression: "I love the Devil because, in him, I see my own suffering." [42]

As her works in various genres demonstrate, Gippius was a person who was profoundly ambivalent about herself and her position in life. She feared death, illness, and change, trying to arrest time and unwilling to age. In Paris, already quite old, she insisted on dressing up and using makeup to defy the passage of time. She also possessed an ardent desire to live fully, a person who was always in motion because immobility, the status quo was unacceptable. She longed to be free of sexual desire and ultimately sublimated it through creativity. Desire for her was loss and suffering but paradoxically also the engine of being. She was also a person who longed to connect completely with another but chose a marriage that made the connection impossible. In different genres, the various aspects of her personality find expression. Her behavior, often seen as an attempt to shock and mystify others, was, in the view of this writer, very much an inner need to preserve complexity and avoid categorization. The conflicting aspects of Gippius's personality find expression in her poem, aptly titled "Contradictions."

Тихие окна , черные...

Дождик идет шепотом...

Мысли мои – непокорные.

Сердце полно – ропотом.

Падают капли жаркие

Робко, с мирным лепетом.

Мысли – такие яркие...

Сердце полно – трепетом.

Травы шепчутся сонные...

Нежной веет скукою...

Мысли мои – возмущенные,

Сердце горит – мукою...

И молчанье вечернее,

Сонное, отрадное,

Рание еще безмернее

Сердце мое жадное... (Zabytaia kniga, 85)

Silent windows, dark…

Rain murmuring quietly…

My thoughts are rebellious,

In my heart – a mutinous desire.

Hot drops fall down

Peacefully, timidly.

My thoughts are so vivid…

My heart is filled with shivering.

Sleepy grass is whispering…

Boredom, tenderly, in the air…

My thoughts are indignant,

My heart is burning with sorrow.

The evening silence,

Sleepy and quiet,

Is a painful wound

To my greedy heart. [43]

It was not easy for the writer and the woman to reconcile her heart with her mind, her thirst for life with the boredom and despair she sometimes felt. It was especially difficult for Gippius, in my opinion, to reconcile her uncompromising passionate nature with the cold rationality and abstractness of her famous husband, Dmitri Merezhkovski. However, in spite of the uncertainties and emotional conflicts, in spite of the difficulties, connected with leaving Russia for a life in exile, Gippius preserved, to the very end, her view of existence as movement and struggle, as the eternal striving toward the ultimate knowledge which always remains a point at the horizon.

Notes to Chapter 1

[1] Vladimir Zlobin, *A Difficult Soul: Zinaida Gippius* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

[2]Olga Matich, *Religious Poetry of Zinaida Gippius* (Minich: Fink, 1972).

[3] Temira Pachmuss, *Zinaida Hippius: An Intellectual Profile* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971).

[4] Quoted in J.R. Goodall, "Becoming the Alien Protagonists: Drama of Dementia and Gnosis," *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 567-579.

[5] Although men are sometimes afflicted by this paralysis of will, most such protagonists are women.

[6] Zinaida Gippius, "Vliublennost," *Dnevniki*, vol.1 (Moskva: NPK Intelvak, 1999) 257.

[7] Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991).

[8] Gippius, "Contes d'amour", *Dnevniki,* vol.1, 35.

[9] All translations from Gippius' diaries are mine.

[10] Olga Matich, "Androgyny and the Russian Silver Age," *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age,* ed. Boris Gasparov et al. (Berkeley: UC P, 1992).

[11] See the discussion in Eric Naiman, "Historectomies," *Cultural Mythology of Russian Modernism.*

[12] Gipppius, "O Byvshem"*, Dnevniki* vol.1, (Moskva :NPK "Intelvak"), 1999

[13] Gippius, "Literaturnyi Dnevnik," *Dnevnik,* vol.1

[14] Gippius, *Dnevniki* 256.

[15] Gippius, *Dnevniki* 259.

[16] Poetry quotations are from Gippius, *Izbrannoe,* vols. 1-2 (Moskva: 2001). My translations.

[17] Alien self and Alien God are Gnostic terms. Emergence of the alien self means, in Gnosticism, a nascent realization of the deceitfulness of the creation, presided over by the impostor – Demiurge. It has been often mentioned that Gnostic concepts are easily translated into psychological terms. Gippius uses Gnostic concepts creatively, which is justified by the absence of a rigid dogma and the existence of many varieties of Gnostic thought.

[18] Quoted in Jane Goodall, see note 4.

[19] Gippius, *Izbrannoe* (Moskva: Terra, 1997).

[20] The term and the concept of soul-making belongs to the work of the psychologist James Hillman.

[21] Gippius, *Izbrannoe*.

[22] By "years of change" Gippius means the atmosphere of hopelessness and stagnation following the failed revolution of 1905 and the resulting moral and spiritual paralysis of will.

[23] Gippius, *Izbrannoe* 18.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Paul Zweig, *The Heresy of Self-Love* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

[26] Gippius, "Arifmetika liubvi," *Russkii eros,* ed. Dziubenko. (Moskva: Progress, 1991). 208-214.

[27] Gippius, *Izbrannoe*.

[28] *Ibid*.

[29] *Ibid*.

[30] Emma Bovary notices and abhors the same thing about her husband.

[31] The subtitle of *Goldenflower*, "Petersburg Novella," testifies to Gippius' intention to insert her story into the body of the Petersburg text.

[32] *Izbrannoe* 586. All translations are mine.

[33] *Ibid*.

[34] Gippius, "Zhizn' i byt," *Dnevniki*.

[35] Her struggle between belief and disbelief in the other world is one cause of the pessimism of her fiction.

[36] Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* (Penguin Classics, 1986). All quotations are from this edition.

[37] See Daniel Rankin, "Influences Upon the Novel," *The Awakening*, 2nd ed., by Kate Chopin, ed. Margo Culley (New York, London: Norton, 1994) 181-184.

[38] J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995) 294.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] Andrei Bely, "*Alyi Mech* by Gippius", *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 3 (Moskva: Russkaia Kniga, 2001) 558. Italics in the text.

[41] I based this opinion on the many entries in Gippius' private diaries*, Les contes d'amour* and *About the Things Past*, which show how distressed she was at times at the lack of genuine connection to Merezhkovski and Filosofov.

[42] Gippius, *Zabytaia kniga* (Moskva: 1991) 83.

[43] My translation. Graphic arrangement in the original.

Chapter 2

The Passion of Flight and the Fear of Falling: Love in the Works of Galina Scherbakova

Democratic reforms in the late 1980's followed by the final collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of censorship, freed Russian writers from the constraints of Socialist Realism, as well as from the moral obligation shared by the "*shestidesaytniki"* (the generation of the sixties) to concern themselves first and foremost with political and social issues. In the late Gorbachev era and especially in the 1990's a search for new forms and topics began and many voices emerged. Free circulation of the previously unavailable books from the turn of the nineteenth-century, as well as of many "forbidden" modernist texts of the twenties, bridged the gap created in Russian literature by the Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet regime. During the 1990's, new literary movements, such as sots-art, conceptualism, postmodernism, and post-realism became the privileged forms.

The new literature appeared on the background of radical shifts in cultural and social life of the country. The old world of political and cultural oppression was replaced by a new society undergoing social and ethical transformation, often shocking in its brutality, and characterized by rapid and radical changes in cultural and ideological paradigms. By establishing what Mark Lipovetsky calls "a dialogue with chaos," [1] the new Russian literary modes of the late twentieth century emerged as especially appropriate means of reflecting new social realities characterized by unprecedented degrees of political, personal, and especially economic freedom.

However, the negative effects of these changes, their darker sides, were an increasingly radical polarization of society, a growing poverty gap, fear, insecurity, despair, and cynicism. The deep spiritual crisis revealed by Russian society unable, in the 1990's, to cope with the near unraveling of the social fabric, led to an increased awareness, within the public sphere, that politics alone could not solve Russia's problems, an awareness shared by many writers and intellectuals. Artistic and intellectual concerns turned, therefore, to questions of ethics, morality and spirituality.

This interest in spiritual, philosophical and metaphysical issues at the end of the twentieth century recalls a similar phenomenon at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the Symbolist movement broke with the tradition of Critical Realism and its exclusive emphasis on social and political issues. Another similarity with the end of the nineteenth century is the emergence of literature and poetry written by women, after half a century of relative silence. One hundred years later, this reemergence may be one of the most interesting developments in Russian cultural life. Women writers, such as Galina Shcherbakova, Liudmila Petrushevskaya, Liudmila Ulitskaya, Tatiana Tolstaya, and Dina Rubina, among others, whose writings differ in scope and style, share the following common characteristics: feelings of alienation and spiritual crisis, as well as determination to find the way out of moral and spiritual stagnation. In portraying hardships, cruelty and violence, eroding and skewed relationships, they engage in a "dialogue with chaos" with a determination, however, to find a way out of chaos toward harmony. In one way or another, all of them see achieving more genuine relationships to others as the

cornerstone of their quests. Questioning all aspects of life, they interweave the historical, social, and cultural aspects with religious, metaphysical, and spiritual concerns. Their writing seeks to encompass the totality of experience engaging the reader both on intellectual and emotional levels, an experience in which the body, soul, and spirit confront each other in an attempt to achieve the fullness of being.

Galina Shcherbakova was born before World War II and so belongs chronologically to the "shestidesyatniki"; her most important writings, however, first appeared in the nineties. For Shcherbakova, the fullness of being is redemption, a genuine relation of person to person in the sense outlined by Martin Buber. Shcherbakova is interested in all types of interpersonal relations: between friends, colleagues, neighbors, and relatives, but, above all, she is interested in erotic love, which she considers the highest and most important of all relationships. Embracing Vladimir Soloviëv's and Nikolai Berdiaev's ideas about love, the author follows her characters in their search for Perfect Love that will lead them out of the prison of self-centeredness.[2] Unlike Gippius, however, Shcherbakova sees love not as sexless and platonic but as a complete relationship capable of spiritualizing the erotic and eroticizing the spiritual, a relationship that involves the body, soul, and spirit. While such Perfect Love will lead to redemption, Flawed Love leads to death.[3] These are the important themes in Shcherbakova's works: love-salvation vs. love-destruction.

With different degrees of awareness, all the characters in Shcherbakova's books are searching for love and redemption. The central role is usually played by a woman who, like the fallen Sophia of the Gnostics, wanders through the maze of life in search of salvation and ascendance, salvation that can only come through love. To

bring salvation, this love must be a union that overcomes the gulf between physical and spiritual, earthly and heavenly, creaturely and divine. In most cases, however, what the writer describes is a relationship where love is absent or flawed. This kind of loveless relationship that other writers portray simply as a dull and joyless coexistence, in Shcherbakova's works always contains the germ of death, and is potentially fatal. Love can save or it can kill, there are no compromises. The author examines different kinds of love – between lovers, husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters – almost all of which inexorably end in physical death or in emotional and spiritual emptiness.

Although concerned with spiritual quest, Shcherbakova's narrative style could be described as realistic or even naturalistic. Deeply rooted in Russia's reality, its past and present, she describes in minute detail the ordinary lives of her characters, the dirt and dust of provincial towns, the scrawny countryside lacking in basic comforts; the poverty, humiliation, meanness, and lack of compassion. But behind the concreteness of her narrative style there is a desire to elevate the concrete and specific to the level of archetypal, symbolic, and spiritual. The stories embody a sense of striving toward redemption for individual characters and the country as a whole.

Although Shcherbakova is often presented in Russia as a writer of realistic romance novels and praised for writing about real life, both terms are blatantly misplaced because her books, in spite of their realism, cannot be reduced to realistic representation of life. Symbols permeate the narrative, but they are unobtrusive, symbols perfectly blended with the concreteness of here and now. Every story moves back and forth between an every day event and its transcendence, between the earthly

and the heavenly, the material and the spiritual, a movement that should culminate in a symbiosis, a creation of a new, spiritualized reality. Concepts of movement and space are important narrative principles: the horizontal is usually bounded by limits while the vertical, especially upward, is unrestrained. Movement in time is just as important as movement in space. Every story unfolds as a process of discovery, unveiling the meaning of particular events which, in their totality, should reveal the meaning of existence. Because the existences the author describes are poignant human histories rooted in concrete circumstances of time and place, this discovery has to include the unveiling of many riddles and secrets of the past. The intertwining of the characters' personal histories with the past of the country is revealed through the process of remembering and analyzing, discovering and rediscovering, connecting and reconnecting. Vertical movement in time – memories of the past, projections into the future – is embodied in the characters' conversations about their individual fates, the fate of the country, and, in an almost Chekhovian manner, their gazing at the stars and reflections about the future of the humanity. Horizontal movement in space is manifest physically in the movement from their houses to the little square and metaphorically in their gradual breaking out of their selves and coming closer to each other. These concepts of time and space inform Shcherbakova's texts and serve as investigating tools in the process of hermeneutics. Vertical movement can be thwarted as when the characters striving to fly are earth-bound because of the fear of falling; horizontal movement is often embodied in images of mirroring as the movement in and out of the mirror frame.

Although they differ in age, social positions, and level of education, the women at the center of Shcherbakova's stories share a poignant sense of the ugliness of life, its boredom and its dead-end quality. Although she employs metaphors and symbols to relay the universal nature of her characters' experience, Shcherbakova nevertheless describes their day to day existence with bleak, unsparing naturalism. It is a postmodern kind of naturalism, practiced by several writers in today's Russia. Its postmodern nature lies in the fact that every situation contains a seed of its potential reversal, its undoing. Sometimes this undoing appears as physical disintegration, a body (in most cases the body of a woman) undergoing a process of illness or decay. Shcherbakova uses the recurring and powerful image of a female body undergoing violence or in a state of pathology – illness, wound, surgery, beating, abortion, rape- to reflect on the bleak universe from which the redeeming grace is absent. It is a fallen universe, and suffering is a way of living in it. The fate of women imprisoned in this universe and suffering abuse and humiliation has its mythological parallel in the Gnostic myths of the fallen Sophia. A mystical allegory of a spirit imprisoned in matter, it is psychologically interpreted, in Shcherbakova's work, as the predicament of women in the world: their vulnerability, limitations, subjugation, and victimization. In Gnostic myths, women are often depicted as sinners, whores and victims. In *Exegesis on the Soul,* one of the most poetic Gnostic allegories of the fall of Heavenly Sophia into the physical world, the soul is described as a young girl falling into the material world of darkness, due to her rebelliousness and her refusal to conform. Here, as the Earthly counterpart of herself, she has to suffer rape, cruelty and persecution by the archons, the rulers of the material world of darkness.[4] A victim of

others, she is also a victim of her own destructive passions. Salvation is to come through her awakening from the slumber of forgetfulness and her remembering her own true nature.

To escape from this world, women search for their original spiritual self and for Perfect Love. The quest for self in a genuine relationship with the other necessitates qualities, such as independence and assertion, which women must acquire. Gnostic myths present women as active protagonists who often must transgress the rules to acquire the knowledge of themselves they seek. [5] The search for the self may bring pain and suffering. Like Dostoevsky, Shcherbakova seems to believe that suffering involved in the search for authenticity is the shortest way to awareness and salvation. In his book *Salvation Through the Gutters*, Shoham provides a poetic expression of the need to go through the metaphorical "dirt" to distill one's authentic self.

> If purity and holiness were scattered in all directions by some cosmic catastrophy…so that some of these fragments of sacred goodness were stranded in dirt, impurities , and squalor, one has to descend and *dive into the mud* to collect these shining gems. One has to wallow in profanity and sin in order to retrieve the holy particles that have been lost therein. (Shoham, *Salvation*. Italics added)

The pain and turmoil associated with the birth of an inner self, Shcherbakova seems to say, lead to increased self-awareness and inwardness without which transcendence cannot be achieved.

Transcendence in Shcherbakova's work is not, as it is for the characters of Gippius's artistic fiction, a turning away from the world of the living. Her heroines are, wittingly or unwittingly, on a quest for salvation in the midst of the world. The characters wander through the stories, bewildered and alienated, victims of violence and their own destructive passions, with varying degrees of awareness and insight into a path to salvation. Whereas Gippius's female protagonists reject outright the idea of active engagement with the world, abhor the idea of physical love fleeing instead into madness or death, the women in Shcherbakova's stories embrace love, in both its bodily and spiritual manifestations, in a quest for a Perfect Love as the only way out of the alienated, inauthentic existence. The longing for the kind of love described by both Vladimir Soloviëv and Martin Buber eliminates barriers between people, establishes the soul-to-soul dialogue and achieves the union between the earthly and the heavenly, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul, the everyday and transcendence.

A reading of Shcherbakova's stories through Soloviëv's and Buber's ideas on love as a path to redemption, reveals the spiritual dimension of her narratives. I shall read four narratives – three short novels and one novella – as variations of the main theme – the search for Perfect Love – and show how the writer uses particular tropes and motifs to elucidate this spiritual quest. The characters in the different stories vary in their degree of awareness of who they are and how they relate to others. The four

stories analyzed here also differ in the degree of success the characters achieve in their search for love, connection, and authenticity.

Three Loves of Masha Peredreeva (Три любви Маши Передреевой)[6], features a young woman totally unaware of her true self, whose relationships – to herself and others – are defined by objectification, Buber's I-it relationships, never rising to the level of I-Thou. The heroine of the *Actress and the Policeman* (*Актриса и миллиционер*)[7] has more awareness of the existence of a true self, to the extent of being given excessively to self-scrutiny. But in the maze of self-mirroring she loses track of who she is, setting herself up for an encounter with Flawed Love and possible death. In the novella called "The Wall" («Стена»)[8], the story hinges on whether the couple still has time to break out of their prison and discover their true selves, after a life-time of deception and self-deception. *At the Feet of the Prostrate Women (У ног лежачих женщин)*[9], is a novel about a possibility of transcendence of the pettiness and sterility of life via the emergence of the I-Thou. There is also a reflection on a potential for a more harmonious relationships between men and women resulting from some form of psychological androgyny, the incorporation into the psyche of contrasexual aspects.

I-it Relations: *Three Loves of Masha Peredreeva*

Masha, the protagonist of the novel, is at the lowest stage of self-awareness; she does not have insight into who she is and stands in a relationship of objectification to her own body, which she sees as a tool for attaining her goals of prosperity. Her relationships with others, primarily with her mother and, at first, with her own daughter, are I-it relationships. In this, she is not different from other

characters in the story: they all see each other as objects or tools for achieving certain goals. What makes Masha different is the potential for change: Masha has the first insight into her different self when, suddenly, looking at her newborn daughter, she feels, for the first time, the kind of selfless love that does not seek material reward. Whether Masha will fulfill her potential, remains unclear; the author does not express much hope for such development but wants to underscore the existence of a potential.

The title of the novel *Three Loves of Masha Peredreeva* presents the reader, if not with a paradox, then with ironic ambiguity. The use of the plural trivializes the very concept of love from the outset. As the story unfolds, the reader becomes aware of the "fallen" nature of the world in which the word "loves" is used to describe three episodes of degrading sexual encounters steeped in disgust, violence and humiliation. Masha's referring to those encounters as "love" suggests her very low level of awareness but, at the same time, a longing, a groping for a relationship that might lift her out of the "mud" of her existence. The "mud" of Masha's world – the confusion, aimlessness, and soullessness of her life and the life of the town, as well as the absence of love and respect for herself and others – is both literal and metaphorical. She lives in a dirty, dusty Russian provincial town deprived of greenery and, most significantly, lacking water. It is symbolic that the apartment where Masha is beaten and raped does not have a drop of water because "it couldn't be pumped to the seventh floor." The parching dryness of the physical environment, its deadliness underscored by the lack of water, parallels the sterility of Masha's inner world, simultaneously dry and lifeless as well as muddy and confused. It is a world lacking in genuine relationships, where no I-Thou dialogue is ever possible, not even between

mother and daughter. The I-It relationship is perpetuated from generation to generation. A lack of inwardness, or soul, is reflected in the complete ignorance of their origins. Masha does not remember her father and knows nearly nothing of her mother's history. The paternity of Masha's own daughter is uncertain, but Masha does not seem to care.

History, origins do not matter in this world of mutual objectification. Everyone is a mere object in the eyes of others, to be used or discarded. A mutual objectification is revealed in a sad and farcical episode in which the mother and daughter stand stark naked in front of the kitchen mirror locked in a hostile and ridiculous argument about who has a better body. Shcherbakova uses mirrors to underscore the characters lack of inwardness. In this episode the absence of inner light is reflected in a mirror image of two naked and angry bodies with no light to illuminate them from within. Masha's relationship to her own body is an I-it relationship. She sees it as an object that can be abused or a tool that can be exploited. Reading in a newspaper that in Moscow "they pay a hundred rubles for that" instantaneously produces a splitting effect in Masha's mind: she looks at her naked body's reflection in the mirror, appraising its potential monetary value.

Masha and her mother see each other as two objects competing for the precious space of a small apartment. Similarly, Masha sees her newborn daughter as an object, a means of achieving a goal: gaining access to the big house of a wealthy family whose son, presently away fighting in Afghanistan, Masha proclaims to be the father of her child.

Things are never clear cut in Shcherbakova's stories, however, but seen from opposing, even paradoxical perspectives. At rare moments, Masha feels an unusual harmony and wholeness within her self, a glimpse of a different kind of bodily beauty, a reflection of her hidden inner light. She remembers experiencing her body almost as sacred, part of the peaceful and beautiful nature, during summers she spent at her grandparents' cottage in a village.

> Сонная, разморенная выходила на солнышко, на теплое деревяннде крыльцо, садилась, жмурилась, гладила кошку, пахло землей, и травой, и яблоками, и молоком, такое расслабленное было тело, такое тяжелое и легкое одновременно, что на всю жизно запомнила это ощущение.[…] Ненависть уходила, она растворялась в душном тепле, рождая нечто совсем другое, какую-то истому, сладкую слабость и даже нежность...(42)

> Pleasantly tired after a nice sleep, she came out and sat on the porch letting the sunlight caress her. She squinted her eyes at the sun, stroked the cat. The air smelled of earth and grass, of apples, and milk…and the body felt so relaxed, heavy and light at the same time. She never forgot the sensation. […] Hatred was gone, melted in the enveloping warmth, and gave birth to a completely different feeling, something akin to languor, a sweet surrender, and even tenderness.

After the birth of her daughter, Masha again experiences her body as joy.

> Маша после родов ощущала здоровье всего своего тела как радость. [...] Каждая клеточка тоже журчала и пела, и Маша думала: как я правильно сообразила с родами. Значит, и все остальное тоже будет правильно. Жить мне ра берегу Рижского залива, жить! (53)

> After giving birth Masha felt the health of her whole body as joy. […] Her every cell was sweetly brimming with music, and Masha thought: how right I was about giving birth. It means that everything else will turn out right as well. I will live on the shore of Riga bay, I will!

The miracle of heightened spirituality that accompanies the birth of a child is a frequent motif in Shcherbakova's work. Moments like that are designed to show that although Masha's relationships are largely I-it relationships, there are glimmers of an alternative possibility.

Another instance of Masha'a instinctual groping for beauty is her dream of going far away, to live a "rich, independent and *radiant* existence" (italics mine). The "radiant existence" is an archetypal image of a place where the mud of existence will be replaced with the beauty and purity of an impossible dream. Another hint at Masha's hidden potential is her awareness of the lack of beauty and meaning in her surroundings. Sitting in a shabby town square, which, characteristically, faces the regional party committee's building, Masha tries to find a word to express her vision of a different life. The word that

finally comes to her mind is “oasis,” combining the idea of water as a source of life as well as an island in the middle of the surrounding ugliness. The awareness of the lack of beauty and meaning in her surroundings has ironically elevated the unwitting Masha to the rank of existential rebel. She finds no purpose to the pettiness and the absence of meaning in the life of those around her.

> Люди, правда, тут не задерживались, не засиживались, быстро проходилимимо, но это было понятно: что с этого оазиса простому человеку взять?Люди же не просто так идут и ходят. У людей же цель – пища или одежда. (53)

> People did not stop here, did not stay here for long but rapidly walked by. It wasunderstandable: what could an ordinary person want with this oasis? People don’tjust walk without a purpose, they always have a purpose – food or clothes.

Masha does not know what her “radiant” life would be, but she hates the life she sees around her: “all of it: people, houses, animals, plants. Why do they exist? What good are they to anyone?” The nausea she feels towards hair spray and other beauty products when she is pregnant is more than a mere physical symptom; it is an existential nausea. The world of things, like Riga Bay, can only have beauty when imbued with spirituality. These are not Masha’s conscious thoughts, they are only the germs of a potential rising of awareness of a different, more authentic self.

Masha, ignorant of her own self, nevertheless questions the lack of authenticity in the existence of those around her. Lying and pretense are the way of life in her world. Masha responds to the speeches at the Young Communist League meetings by breaking into irrepressible laughter. Her own mother, a false saint, is a vivid example of inauthenticity: an ascetic, self-denying woman who shrilly denounces all pursuit of material well-being and self-interest but who really is a repressed and hysterical misanthrope.[10]

Every time Masha is abused by the men she encounters, is humiliated by her mother, and scorned by the people she proclaims to be the grandparents of her child, her hatred of others and her alienation grow. But, at the same time, however, her suffering, her "div[ing] into the mud" and "wallow[ing] in profanity and sin" strengthens her desire to escape the ugly world in which she lives. Thus, Masha begins to feel the pull of two different opposing personalities: the one who experiences herself as a tool for obtaining material goods, and the other who longs for the "radiant" life. Just as Gnostic tales often present female figures split into their heavenly and earthly counterparts and endow them with both positive and negative aspects, Shcherbakova splits her characters into pairs of opposites or attributes contradictory, sometimes opposite, qualities to the same character. In *Three Loves* the splitting is effected through the introduction of two other female characters providing a frame for Masha. They both make a strong impression on her albeit for very different reasons. The first is a figure Masha meets on the train ride to Moscow. She is never referred to by name; she is completely objectified in Masha's consciousness, reduced to a mere body. Masha notices her smooth skin, pampered, perfumed and desirable body, and her sexy underwear. The woman provokes jealousy and admiration and strengthens Masha's determination to sell her own body at the highest possible price. Masha is not

interested in the woman as a person, she relates to her as to an object that can be used for the purposes of imitation.

Masha meets the other woman, incidentally named Sophia, when she arrives in Moscow to take part in a memorial ceremony for soldiers killed in the Afgan war. Sophia, with whom Masha happens to share a hotel room, [11] is mourning the death of her son. From the first glance she strikes Masha as the image of the Mother of God, a quintessence of mourning. She is the embodiment of spirituality and spiritual strength. Not very young, poorly dressed, "pale as death but impossible to take one's eyes off," she is surrounded by an aura of inner light. When pursued by a group of lecherous drunks in the hotel, she

> [София] хрустнула пальцами, прошептала какие-то слова и открыла.Они стояли толпой под дверью, распаленные мужики с противными глазами,носами, челюстями. София ладонью лицо прикрыла и сказала одно слово два раза – Геть! Геть! (63)

> …cracked her fingers, murmured some words and opened the door. They were standing right outside, excited men with red faces, disgusting eyes, noses and jaws. Sofia covered her face with the palm of her hand and just said two words repeating them twice – "be gone, be gone."

Between these polar images—of pure physicality and pure spirituality—Masha stands, unaware and confused. Will she go toward light or toward darkness? In the last

episode of Masha's trials and tribulations, the author skillfully portrays the uncertainty of the outcome. Desperately wanting to earn money, Masha has sex with an army major, one of the ceremony's organizers, who had been appraising her several days. On her last day in Moscow, he decides to make a pass at her, luring her into an empty army jeep. Incidentally, it is also the first time that Masha finds herself in the heart of Moscow and she is overwhelmed by the beauty of it.

> Две силы сомкнулись в ней – сила ошеломившей ее окружающей красоты и та тайная сила, что огнем в не горела. Красота парализовала, а тайная сила цеплялась за майора. В конце концов! А вдруг? (65)

> Two forces closed ranks within her—one was the overwhelming beauty around her and the other one that dark secret force that burned inside her. The beauty paralyzed her but the secret force made her keep clinging to the major. After all! Who knows?

This third "love," a degrading affair that takes place hurriedly inside a shabby old army jeep, fills her with hatred and humiliation. This event constitutes the most eloquent image of destructive and self-destructive forces that dominate Masha's life. While pushing her inside the jeep, the major "babbles [to her] about the advantage of being dead – one does not feel anything." Masha interprets his words as an admission on the part of the major of moral qualms about having sex with the wife of a dead soldier. Whatever meaning

Masha attributes to the words, Shcherbakova's intention is to underscore the gradual mortification of Masha's body and soul. Instead of bringing her closer to the understanding of the nature of love and connection to others, the incident "submerge[s] Masha in hatred," it makes the barrier between the self and the other more impenetrable, more ominous. "Later," she thought, "when I am rich, very rich, I will strangle them all. All of them. One by one."

However, to emphasize the essential openness of the future, even in Masha's case, Shcherbakova introduces at the very end of her strictly realistic narrative, a shift that points in a direction of a possible magical change. This element concerns time, which suddenly eludes the laws of a temporal-spatial universe, stopping for the duration of Masha's humiliation, to resume its passage when she emerges from the major's car. The actual duration of the degrading encounter is transformed by Shcherbakova into an archetypal mythical time through a metaphor of a golden car that does not exist in the temporal-spatial universe, thus suggesting a possibility of transcendence and a new beginning:

> ... Потом, когда Маша вышла из рафика, она заметила, что времени прошла всего ничего – один светофор. Во всяком случае, красивая неизвестная ей золотистая машина, ехавшая в потоке машин, скрыться с глаз еще не успела... (65)

> Later, when Masha got out of the jeep, she noticed how little time had passed—only the duration of one red light. She was aware of that because a handsome golden colored car of

> unknown make she had noticed earlier passing by in a flow of cars, had not had time to disappear…

Does the magical golden car express Masha's longing for beauty? Masha does not understand (and probably never will) but is aware of it in a vague intuitive way, just as she felt for a fleeting moment the radiant new beauty of her body, or when she imagined her dream life on Riga Bay. Is it the vision of Sofia's face, lighted from within? All these images, bathed in the light of heavenly beauty, the light of the soul, symbolize the possibility of transcendence through the discovery of the inner self.

Will Masha ever be able to comprehend he significance of these fleeting images of beauty amidst the ugliness of her life? The story ends with Masha making another desperate attempt to prostitute herself, bringing more hatred and humiliation. Masha, therefore, is on the lowest rung in the hierarchy of female characters in the works of Galina Shcherbakova in terms of self-awareness and the potential for finding a way out of the darkness of her existence. She may never find her real self, never experience the transformative nature of authentic relationships.

The Quest for One's Essential Nature: *The Actress and the Policeman*

The theme of this novel is again a search for the self and for Perfect Love which involves a descent into memory. *The Actress and the Policeman,* first published in *Novyi Mir* in 1999, is the second novel of the triptych. Its main protagonist is Nora, a single woman in her early forties, is in some respects the opposite of Masha. While the latter is largely unaware of her inner thoughts and motivations, the former is given to excessive self-analysis. Nora is, by her own admission, an intellectual kind of actress used to

meticulously analyzing the thoughts and feelings of her characters. Similarly, Nora constantly puts her own life, feelings and thoughts under scrutiny becoming her own other, one of the characters she plays. Besides moving in and out of self, Nora is constantly reminiscing about the past, the loves she had and lost. Physical objects reinforce the temporal connection: for example, a poster of herself as a young film actress in a glamorous (even slightly sexy) role. She worries that her visitors will see a sharp contrast between the real Nora and the image on the poster. Paradoxically, the self-absorbed Nora objectifies the selves from her past. Somewhere in that maze of self-mirroring, Nora loses track of who she is, especially when strange and upsetting events start happening in her life.

A man falls from somewhere in her building and the railing of her balcony is broken. In addition, her towel is found lying on the ground under the dying man; but Nora's apartment shows no traces of forced entry, and the door leading to the balcony is locked. Where did he fall from? Who was he? What was his connection to Nora? Nora thinks she recognizes the strange pattern of hair on the back of the dead man's head. Did she know him? When she most needs it, her memory fails to provide the answers. Then a few days later Nora's old lover unexpectedly reappears, spends the night in her apartment, and falls off her balcony to his death. Are these falls connected? Is there something in her past life that explains them? At this point, the story begins to unfold along two parallel lines: while Nora struggles to understand the true nature of the events, to the investigating officer and to her neighbors, her guilt is clear. Nora is a culprit who lures men into her apartment and kills them by throwing them off her balcony.

Besides the alternating plot lines, the story alternates between past and present: a chapter referring to present events is followed by one in which past events are recollected. Characters appearing from Nora's past, more specifically the loves she had and lost, link the two lines. The memory line narrates the story of a quest for Perfect love, love-salvation that transcends ordinary life, elevates the lovers above existential absurdity into a higher sphere of existence conferring immortality. Yet, all of Nora's past relationships end in death. She senses that her imperfect loves, falling into the ordinary, eventually fall into death.

None of Nora's affairs are true relationships. After her first husband leaves for America (we should remember the meaning of *going to America* in Dostoevsky's work, symbolizing a physical or a spiritual death) her two important love affairs occur when the theater is on tour. The men she meets are married men on business trips (*komandirovochnaya lyubov*), and the relationships are doomed to be limited, guilt-ridden affairs. There is a fatal quality in both relationships; both end with the death of the men but also the death of a child.[12] In the victim of the first fall Nora thinks she recognizes the child of her lover, now a grown man. Nora feels surrounded by death and, at times, the idea of death seems to her a relief and a solution. The broken railing and the void under it attract Nora like a magnet; she does not think of the falls as accidents and blames herself for somehow contaminating life around her with her "blueprint for death". Indeed the "blueprint of death" is not Nora's fantasy; everybody is drawn to death, enjoys other people's misfortunes, and expresses hopes for their neighbors' demise. While those around her fall, however, Nora glides. Her slow descent is a symbolic one into the labyrinth of memory and into the "precipice of guilt." The connection between the accidents, as Nora

darkly perceives, lies in her quest for love. This overwhelming need to love and be loved in conjunction with her confusion about her own self, blinds her to the flawed nature of the relationships she enters. When the love she imagines to be perfect fails, it brings death instead of redemption.

The absurdity of Nora's relationship with the policeman investigating the falls is already implied in the title, as is often the case with Shcherbakova. The two professions could not be more different. The purpose of the policeman is to pin people down, to bind them to the representations he constructs in his imagination, to transform them into objects. Nora the actress is constantly fleeing fixity being many persons and living many lives. Both Nora and the policeman want to uncover the truth but their discovery processes are not the same. He tries to figure out events from the position of cause and effect: he fell from your balcony, therefore he was in your apartment. Nora seeks a connection that defies rationality, a connection that brings her whole life into focus, mysteriously linking the strange deaths with her inability to find Perfect Love. He is pursuing a riddle, she an enigma, not only the enigma of her own life but also the mystery of Life. She longs to find a purpose but sees only absurdity. The absurdity of life mirrors the absurdist play in which Nora is performing. Nora, who is tall, finds it very difficult to say, "I don't take much room, I am small." In spite of the director's explanations that the words are meant figuratively, Nora is unable to separate reality from the play.

Part of the absurdity stems from Nora's attempt to understand her past while being unable to remember her own nature. "Remember your essential nature, the memory of your blood," says a fellow-actor, Nora's only friend. In the dark recesses of her memory Nora knows there is something different about her but cannot quiet remember why and how.[13]

She feels like a person "squeezed into uncomfortable clothes," elevated to "the perfection of ugliness."

As in the *Three Loves,* the physical ugliness of the landscape reflects the ugliness of human relationships that lack authenticity. The setting is no longer a provincial city but the so-called "new neighborhoods" of Moscow, a collection of gray cement buildings forming squares with a "playground" space in the middle. The buildings' multiple entrances are called "cages" (kletki), and people ask each other in which cage they live. Nora is painfully aware of living in a cage from which she cannot fly away. The story is predicated on the impossibility of positive flight – upward flight towards perfect love and transcendence. The only flights available are either horizontal – flying away, fleeing, giving up; or downward towards death. This awareness of her own "caged" predicament makes the downward flight, or the fall from the balcony, so irresistibly attractive. Indeed, Nora must lock the door to the balcony to ward off temptation. To fall down is also to descend into the labyrinths of memories, which have to be understood in order that the deadly plunges might cease. Thus while others fall literally, Nora plummets "into the precipice of guilt" from which she tries to escape by striving to understand her past and to discover the mysterious identity of the man who fell. She also hopes to redeem her guilt by rescuing the young policeman who has fallen into a prison of sexual ambivalence. His sexual attraction to women matches his hatred for himself and for women who, in his sick mind, are out to seduce and trap him. This is especially true in the case of Nora who embodies two women at once: the older one who could be his mother, and a young seductress, as she appears on a poster from a film she starred in years ago. Thus Nora sets the stage for the next, and possibly fatal, encounter with the Flawed love.

The story does not develop linearly: it starts with a scene in which Nora returns home holding a bottle of cologne, a gift for the young policeman-lover. In the final scene, the policeman walks towards Nora's house holding a flower. He thinks about what he is going to do to her: make love first and then throw her off the balcony. The flower is supposed to provide him with an alibi since, in his reasoning, what man would give woman a flower when he intends to kill her. The absurd disparity of their expectations is paralleled by his attempt at rationalizing the situation.

The policeman, Vityok, intends to kill Nora out of self-preservation. His motives cannot be explained rationally. Just as Nora is attracted to the dark emptiness under the broken balcony, Vityok is unconsciously both attracted to and horrified by the dark emptiness of loveless sex he is about to have with Nora. Nora is a danger because she is a seductress. Vityok does not like long legs or tall people, he hates height "that humiliates you by comparison." Vityok cannot put it in words but he knows instinctively that Nora only sees him as an object, someone to make her feel young and attractive. He makes Nora an object of his fury. Eroticism and violence are intimately interwoven in him. A violent episode, the savage beating of a man, precedes erotic excitement at the sight of Nora's legs. While going to make love to her he is thinking about what a pleasure it would be to torture her. Vityok fears and dislikes women who take an active part in sexual act; his sexual experiences are soulless affairs of mutual objectification. "A woman under a man," he says, "must appear as though she were dead." The necrophilic Vityok is not simply an innocent sexually confused young man. His own inability to love makes him into a blind necessity of Nora's existence, a force driving her closer to her own downfall, to the black hole of the broken balcony. Vityok becomes her final defeat, her abandonment of the quest for Perfect

Love. Thus love and death complete a circle within which the past, the present, and the future are intricately connected. This last fatal lover fully epitomizes the dark and deadly nature of flawed love and inauthentic relationships. The absence of love is this dark void under the balcony pulling like a magnet when "the realization comes that life is not worth living" (296).

Collapse of Context and the Emergence of Awareness of the Self: "The Wall"

The transformation of love into hatred or emptiness is deceptively simple and depends on such prosaic events as disputes over money, careerism, envy, and greed. Behind it all, however, a more profound and complex question arises: do we know our "essential nature," that part of us that reaches up to the stars. This question is the driving force behind the characters' introspection, their descent into the labyrinths of memory and attempts to solve the enigmas of existence.

As we have noted above, one of Shcherbakova's favorite devices for portraying her characters' quest for their essential truth is mirroring. The danger of the mirror may reside in its crookedness allowing only distorted reflection. Thus Masha and her mother see only their soulless naked bodies when looking in the mirror; Nora Laube sees her life reflected in the metaphorical mirror of a Ionesco's play in which she has a part, and feels that her rehearsing the absurd only "increases the absurdity of her real life." It is painful and difficult to force the mirror to render a true reflection, and seeing it can kill. Mirroring, Flawed love, and death also figure prominently in Shcherbakova's "The Wall."

In the novella "The Wall" a bedroom wall functions as a mirror. It reflects the light of a neon sign outside the window. It is a magic wall: no shades, no blinds will keep the reflection out thus depriving the couple of sleep. In the past they often have talked about

moving the beds to the opposite wall but have never done so. The wall that "writhes, winks, and dances" (134) is the reflection of their ugly, resentful inner worlds. They would like to shut off the reflection that dismays and frightens them, but are unable to do so. They have long since stopped talking to each other except for a few recriminations or words designed to hurt. They live in a kind of Sartrean hell, slowly dying in their prison of hatred.

The motif of death permeates the story. They talk about colleagues and friends who die unexpectedly, about a friend who is in charge of a cemetery and offers to get them lots at one of Moscow's famous graveyards. Death appears sometimes as a respite from their painful coexistence: "Thought of death came back to him several times that day, and, at the end, did not even frighten him. Rather, it was pleasant to think about it. Everything would be over… He would have peace… She would not be there" (127). As for her, the only thing she is afraid of is the unexpectedness of death. How will she look when they find her?

> Просто хочется верить, что будут ей дарованы за всю ее трудовую жизнь тни дня для наведения порядка. Вот тогда-бы три дня она не снимала бы грацию, ходила бы в капроне и нейлоне, сделала бы педикюр, причесалась бы сама, а не в парикмахерской. (132)

> She wants to believe that, as a reward for her lifetime of work, she will be granted three days to put things in order. She would not take off her corset for the last three days, would wear nylon stockings, would have pedicure, and fix her hair herself, instead of doing it in a hair salon.

The psychological suspense of the story hinges on the question of whether there is still time to break out of that prison and discover who they really are and why their relationship has failed. The dawning realization that their mutual hatred which "pokes into the soul and produces anxiety" is "somehow related to the wall" starts the process of discovery. As on a movie screen, the events of their lives are projected on the wall and pass before their eyes. (It does not matter that, logically, two people cannot see two different movies on the same screen; everything is possible with the magic mirroring wall.) Yes, there were people in their past with whom they could have found their real selves and formed an authentic relationship; but they were rejected as unsuitable for a variety of practical reasons. An aspiring careerist, he could not afford to marry a woman he loved because of her indifference to his aspirations to the prestige that money and power confer, and did not think it was beneath her to paint the walls of the communal apartment in which they lived at the time. As for her, the man she was beginning to love turned out to be a former political prisoner, and thus (although rehabilitated) not a promising match (*besperspektivnyi chelovek*). At present, both Iraida, the wife, and Viacheslav, her husband, move through life like social marionettes wearing their masks and afraid to stir up memories of the past confronting them with what could have been.

The discovery of what they have lost comes to them, albeit through a glass darkly, only at the end of their lives. The wall does not only reflect what they are but also reminds them of what they have lost: "something confused him, did not allow him to have a normal conversation [with his wife]. This something bothered him, alarmed him, and – Oh, God – was related to the wall" (144). Both husband and wife, for the first time in years, begin to

think about the past; and the more they remember it, the harder it is for them to communicate with each other. Each one, now, sees the other as an enemy instead of a "fellow-traveler" or a "comrade-in-arms," as Viacheslav used to think of them.[14] In their revisiting the past, even death acquires a different meaning, becomes death-redemption from the entrapment of the false self. When Iraida is reminded of her first youthful love who died in the war, "the strong and controlling woman" wants to "die in tears" so that she can return to the former life and former self and, who knows, reunite with the man she loved.

Viacheslav is also driven to revisit his first love. He needs to reassure himself that he had made the right choice a long time ago, marrying Iraida, attracted by the strength and the iron will that emanated from her. Instead, he is overcome with the feelings of his own falsehood and inadequacy.

> Странное было у него состояние. Все он делал так, как надо. [...] А правда... правды не было... Ничего не было... Всю жизнь... Всю жизнь он мечтал приехать к Насте и убедиться: тогда он поступил правильно. А получилось иначе. Настя засмеялась, и от надежды осталась пыль. (172)

> He felt strange. It seemed that he did everything the right way. […] And the truth? There was no truth… There was nothing… His whole life… His whole life he dreamed about visiting Nastya and proving to himself that he had made the right

choice. But everything turned out differently. Nastya laughed,
and his hopes disappeared.

For the woman, Iraida, another insight comes when she starts thinking, for no apparent reason, about two acquaintances. One, Maria, a colleague from work, is a woman of uncommon intelligence capable of solving the most complicated problems. Her intelligence is always surrounded by the halo of love Maria irradiates. "She appears in the nimbus of love towards her children, grandchildren, books, paintings, birds, dogs, [and the] path to her brain passes through this endless shining love" (163). The inner light Maria radiates reminds the reader of the radiance of another of Shcherbakova's doubles, Sofia, in *Three Loves of Masha Peredreeva*.

Another doubling for Iraida is her luckless friend, Zina, dying of cancer, lonely, without love, family, or belongings but possessing a rich inner life. When Iraida brings Zina to visit her country house, with the intention of cheering her up but also of boasting of her status and material wellbeing, Zina is unimpressed by the opulence. She finds the house cold and impersonal, the same as many houses around it. To her, it is a "loveless" place where "people do not leave traces but pass like shades" (165). To which Iraida, with her unbreakable wisdom, replies, "it's good they don't leave traces, it's good for the environment" (166). Zina, in an impulse to open her soul to Iraida, replies that she would like to live in a simple hut and to plant a pear tree next to it.[15] In spite of her contempt for her friend's station in life, Zina's words resonate in Iraida's soul.

А что, если и правда посадить здесь грушу? И она стала
искать место. Это былотрудно, потому что все давно было

посажено, посажено планово, разумно, апустые пространства имели целевое назначение – для сушки белья, для футболаили детских песочниц. ... Этот участок не для груш, здесь свой порядок. ...И тут этот всегда радовавший своей раскладкой порядок вдруг обернулсяв ней ощущением паники. Представилось, что она – Зина, у которой до самойсмерти не было изолированной квартиты, и не было денег […] и не было мужа, и не было груши. А вот теперь и самой ее нет. Совсем и нигде. Очень легко было почему-то перевоплотиться в Зинаидино ничто. (166)

What if I plant a pear tree here? She started looking for a convenient spot. It was hard to find because everything had been planted long ago in accordance with a rational, well though out plan, in which the empty spaces were designed for a specific function – to put up clothes lines, to play soccer, or to build sandboxes for children. But suddenly this order that she had never before failed to enjoy provoked in her a sensation of panic. She saw herself as Zina who had never had money, apartment, husband or a pear tree. And now she herself ceased to exist. She was nothing and nowhere. It was so easy to transform herself into Zina's nothingness.

Iraida does not understand that Zina's existence is not measured by material possessions but by the richness of her inner world, her dream of a pear tree. Iraida's fear of non-being is the mirror image of Zina's fullness, instigated by the realization of an utter emptiness that no love or dream can fill. This frightening feeling of emptiness marks the crumbling of the false self while the true one is not yet perceived. For an instant, Iraida's life is collapsing around her.

The meeting with the real self comes at the moment when, in the words of Martin Buber, "every means has collapsed,"[16] every pretense is unveiled. This meeting and the existential panic in the face of it result from the collapse of "a structure of ideas in which [a person] finds refuge and repose from the perception of nothingness" (Buber, 47). That is as true for the couple in "The Wall" as it is for Nora and many other characters in Shcherbakova's books. For Iraida, the comfort comes from the surrendering of her true self to the false self with its reliance on the accepted official wisdom; for Nora, it is her self-imposed belief in the order and rationality of her life, the belief she does not have the courage to question. The price for this reassuring structure is the self-objectification when, in Buberian terms, 'I' becomes an 'It' for itself. The I-it relation to oneself mortifies and cancels the true self which, thus, becomes supplanted by the false self, the public persona sharing unquestionably in the prejudices and falsities of accepted wisdom. The collapse of the protective structure – of the certainties provided by unquestioned beliefs –creates conditions for the real self to emerge, forcing a person to ask unsettling questions, creating in the process the interiority, or soul. This insight comes too late for Iraida and her husband

who are doomed to live and die surrounded by the absence of love and ignorance of themselves.

The Perfect Love the characters long for, is a relationship where 'I-Thou" needs to be said instead of 'I-It'. "So long as love is blind," says Buber, "that is, so long as it does not see a whole being, it is not truly under the sway of the primary word of relation" (Buber, 49). Such an absence of real relations leads to "a congealing of the soul" and the disappearance of the 'I'. And where there is no 'I' there can be no 'Thou'. Here Buber rejoins Soloviëv when the latter asserts that only by seeing the loved person as a whole being can one's own wholeness be realized. According to Soloviëv, love between two people is incomplete without their being open to all, to the rest of the world. Buber's 'I –Thou' also extends into the world of all relations, love being the basis of it, and erotic love a part of it. The true love is therefore impossible without true relations between person and person, person and object, person and nature, relations in which the true self of each is unveiled. Therefore it is significant that the unhappy, mortifying encounters of Shcherbakova's characters happen in the world of 'I' – 'it' relations. As was already noted in the discussion of *Three Loves*, the characters live in a world of relentless hostility and violence in which nobody is recognized as a 'Thou' by anybody else. Relationships among people are based on fear and distrust, a "joyful hatred" as one character puts it, a human desert in which death wishes are common occurrence. A death wish directed against oneself can produce similar effects when directed towards others. Thus, in *The Actress and the Policeman*, Nora believes that the death of two men who fell off

her balcony within two days of each other are the result of her own attraction to death functioning as a "blueprint of death, a mental hypothetical one." [17]

The Path to Transcendence: *At the Feet of the Prostrate Women*

An attempt at establishing more genuine relationships between spouses, friends, and neighbors is described in Shcherbakova' s novel, *At the Feet of the Prostrate Women* (*У ног лежащих женщин*), which first appeared in *Novyi Mir* in 1996 and later in two books, *The Year of Alyona* (1996) and *Love-Story* [18] (1999).

It is a complex tale in which introspection and a search for meaning are intrinsically connected with images of pain and suffering. It is also a story with a shift of emphasis. Whereas many of Shcherbakova's stories are meditations on the impossibility of shedding one's selfishness and alienation, *At the Feet* is a reflection on the possibility of transcending the alienated condition and finding a redeeming connection to others. It is also a gender conscious reflection on the costs and sacrifices men and women make to achieve this transcendence. Discovering a full being in another is inseparable from finding one's own true self. As we have already noted, the path to this discovery in Shcherbakova, as so often in Dostoevski, seems to pass through physical and moral suffering, when the usual reassuring structures do not work any longer. This loss of moorings causes introspection, questioning one's past and the dark secrets that did not need to be confronted when things were fine. It also means trying to understand the connection between the past, present and future.

Temporal and spatial organization is important in emphasizing two main thematic concerns: the boundaries between self and others are symbolically reflected in spatial boundaries, while, temporally, the story alternates between the present,

memories from the past, and inquiries and insights about the future. As if it were on a stage, *At the Feet* is organized spatially within a triangle formed by the houses of three couples. Each house contains an immobile body, the prostrate women of the title. All three women are completely or partially paralyzed – two cannot move but can think and speak, the third one, except for brief periods of lucidity, has lost her mind – and isolated from the world except for the link provided by their husbands. The husbands, of "non-heroic age," as Shcherbakova ironically yet affectionally refers to these no longer young men, dedicate their lives to taking care of their wives. During the day they go about their chores tiredly but happily, and every evening they gather for a short time in the center of the triangle to chat and to share news.

The three couples, who are now are brought together by their misfortunes, considered each other mortal enemies for many years. They are completely different in every respect – Soroka is a former apparatchik whose past the two other men despise; Shprekht (a German nickname) lived in Nazi-occupied territory during World War II and has played the part of a simpleton all his life; Panin, called "an intellectual" by the local folk (not without ironic contempt), spent time in Stalin's labor camps and has been, in his own words, "unloved" by "the people" his whole life. Then, out of the blue, their wives are struck by paralysis within a short time of each other. No medical explanation is given and the fact appears as an enigma which the readers and the characters are compelled to explain. This bizarre occurrence and the husbands' extreme devotion to their wives appear to be the only link between the three couples. But it soon becomes apparent that other invisible threads bind them together and that their lives are intricately interwoven due to some dark secrets from

the past. Only the women know of these secrets but since one of them cannot speak, another is considered insane, and the third will not talk, the secrets are never revealed but provide much food for reflection for both the men and their wives. The knowledge of the secrets at the heart of each couple's existence binds all of them together: men to men, women to women, and each one to his or her spouse. They struggle to understand the meaning of the strange events that have befallen them, a possible connection between those events and the secrets of the past, as well as the nature of their own devotion. Their search for meaning, however, is not limited to the specific events of their lives; their pain and suffering leads them to think and feel more deeply, to look into their own selves, and wonder about the nature of Life, Death, and the Universe. Soroka, the person least given to imagination, is obsessed with a star.

> Сорока стоял и смотрел на маленькую звездочку на небе. Она занимала его.Занимала непонятностью сущего. К примеру, есть она, эта звездочка, или еедавно нет, а есть только свет, который пока ... дошкандыбает, доковыляет до Сороки, но принесет ему уже сплошную брехню о небе.[...] Нет, сказал Сорока, мир должен быть устроен иначе, потому что если так, то пошел он тогда кчерту... мир... (162-63)

> Soroka stood and looked at a little star above. This tiny star attracted him, it was mysterious, as life itself is mysterious. For

> instance, does the star exist or did it disappear a long time ago, and only the light comes down to us? But by the time the light gets down to Soroka, reaches him, what will it bring him if not just lies about the sky? […] No, Soroka decided, the Universe should be organized in a different way. Because, if it is the way it is, well, then it can go to hell, this Universe.

A materialist who fought religion all his life, Soroka "dreams that he is walking in the desert, and God walks toward him. "I don't recognize you," yells Soroka. "I don't recognize you either," answers God and walks past him. Soroka cries in his sleep from fear and loneliness" (173).

Shcherbakova constructs her story by confronting a series of seemingly opposite situations which reflect each other as mirror images. Every perspective is mirrorred, coupled with its opposite, and the two are juxtaposed in a paradoxical way. In a truly carnivalized manner the men's appearance and their conversations oscillate between the lofty and the petty, the heavenly and the earthly, from the enigmatic star that appears to speak to Soroka, to Shprekht's abscessed toe, from the death of a man to the underwear he will be buried in. This oscillation seems to pose a question: what is the men's position in the scale of things and in relation to their wives? Are they above or below, higher or lower? The paradox is already contained in the title: if the women are prostrate, what is the position of someone at their feet?

Another paradox, also reminiscent of postmodernism, is the author-narrator's deliberate decision not to distinguish between the storytelling and reality. She begins

by warning the reader that certain conditions (of real life?) have to be met for the story to be told: the sky must be of a certain color, the stars must appear, and the dog must bark. Otherwise the men might not come out and there might not be a story. In such a way the narrator simultaneously assumes and relinquish control over the storytelling and over the the events and destinies of her protagonists. She does not know whether the story will be told and what the outcome will be. At the end, however, in a paradoxical reversal of the uncertainty about the status of the story, the reader finds out that the story already exists, has already become a legend. The story ends with a question that is on everybody's mind, "Why have they appeared, almost at the same time, in such a state?" (175) When out-of-towners ask for directions they are told to "go past the bodyshop, the store, the school, turn left past the "prostrate women" (175). The triangle with the prostrate women is a place from which every process of discovery will start. Therefore the story has to be told even if the narrator knows she can never comprehend the full meaning of the events.

"The curtain of history rises," the story continues, "and the three protagonists take their places exactly as prescribed to them by the *regisseur* of their lives" (90). The theatricality of the narrative is underscored by the description of the men as comical characters – Soroka wears a fedora and his wife's apron which is too long for him; Shprekht has pink slippers with pompons on his feet and pants which are too short . The comments on events by "the people," similar to the chorus of Greek drama, also reinforces the theatrical parallel. "The people" express their opinion about everything that happens but, unlike Greek drama, their comments resemble malevolent gossip rather than moral appraisal:

> Народ с улицы имел на все свою точку зрения. Сороки такие, потому какНапились людской крови, вот их и несет вширь. А Шпрехты – хитрованы, себе на уме. Дурачками прикидываются, но выгоду свою знают. А Панины что? Вонючая интеллигенция. Солому жрем, а форсу не теряем. (128-9)

> The people in town had strong opinions about everything. The Sorokas are fatbecause they've always sucked people's blood. The Shprekhts are cunning, pretending to be innocent yet minding their own advantage. And, then, what about Panin and his wife, the stinking intelligentsia? They eat stale bread but act as if they were better than others.

Thus while the author assumes responsibility for the narrative itself, someone else is responsible for *el gran teatro del mundo* in which the protagonists perform. Again, there are two lines of discovery, two hermeneutic procedures: one uncovering the life stories of the characters, with their secrets; the second one revealing the meaning of what has happened to them: the mystery and the enigma.

Shcherbakova's storytelling reminds one of Walter Benjamin's distinction between a modern historian and a medieval chronicler. A chronicler is a historian with an eye beyond the historical, the temporal, the explainable. He plunges into the historical place and time, into minute details of life, all the while remembering and

reminding the readers that there is a limit to our ability to explain, a transcendental level at which events cannot be comprehended by reason alone. Whenever someone offers an explanation for the events, a question still is in a reader's mind: Why? What is the meaning of it? Shcherbakova's writing reminds one of a chronicler's method. By piecing together the stories of her protagonists through their memories and reflections, she uncovers their pasts, fears, failures and dark secrets. The stories are told from the point of view of the women; they lost the ability to speak or walk, or both, and spend their time thinking about their lives and about the relationships that bind them to their husbands and to their neighbors. As the protagonists strive to find a meaningful connection between the past, present, and future, it becomes apparent that at the root of each individual story is a lie, a moral deficiency, or betrayal.

Example1. Before meeting her husband Soroka, Zina is an amateur pilot. She joins the airclub because of her infatuation with the flight instructor. Every time she flies, however, Zina feels uncontrollable nausea and fantasizes about throwing up and being expelled from the club. Being earthbound seems such happiness to Zina who, although she comes to hate the flight instructor and flying itself, does not have the courage to quit the club. Salvation, and the first lie, comes in the shape of Soroka, who marries her and takes her out of the club, explaining their sudden marriage by the fact that "he is a decent man." Zina, by agreeing to marry him, admits the implication that she had premarital sex with Soroka, sacrificing her own reputation as a "decent girl. The war was coming, and both Zina, training to be a pilot, and Soroka, a healthy young man, would be immediately drafted. Behind Soroka's sincere attraction to Zina, lies a not consciously acknowledged but nevertheless strongly felt wish: Soroka

knows that he is a coward and that he does not want to go to war, but he needs a moral accomplice.

> Не потому, что Сорока был человек плохой и родину не любил. Любил!Любил! Но и войны боялся тоже. [...] Такими мыслями не поделишься дажес самым лучшим другом, но пребывать в тайном капитулянстве в одиночествебыло тоже неуютно. Сороке нужен был кто-то, кто не осудил бы его, а понял.Зина была стопроцентно тем человеком. Выводя ее из будущей войны, он делалее как бы своей соучастницей... (101)

> It's not that Soroka was a bad man and did not love his country. He loved it! But he was also afraid of war. […] One cannot share thoughts like that even with your best friend but to be alone with such cowardly thoughts did not feel comfortable either. Soroka needed someone who would not judge him, who would understand him. Zina was a hundred per cent that kind of person. Protecting her from the coming war, he made her a sort of an accomplice.

As the years pass, Zina is weighed down more and more with the weight of material riches Soroka's government job provides and with pounds that firmly keep her on the ground. She understands that Soroka is not the simple man he pretends to be – "sometimes she felt an urge to get inside him, to know the essence of him but

something always stopped her" (102). She did not want to know, as she did not want to know of Soroka's constant sexual affairs. The women Soroka sleeps with are caricatures of the former flying Zina as they "surge up from under him like hens in a short flight" (102). Zina allows the lie to stand between them until, years later, her wish for earth-boundness is paradoxically met as total paralysis, "all three hundred pounds of her glued forever to the hard surface of her bed" (99). Zina loses the power of speech, and Soroka assumes that her mind does not work. But he is mistaken, although Zina cannot fly any longer, the physical flight is replaced by a wild flight of imagination as she watches pictures in her mind's eye of other lives she could have lived, with other husbands, other children. It is through Zina's recollections that we discover secrets unknown to Soroka. Zina finds a strange kind of happiness and safety in immobility.

> В жизни без движения и звука есть своя сила. Слабость – это по поверхности.Поэтому хрен ты меня возмешь, Сорока, если Людка откроет тебе глаза.[...]Да и зачем тебе меня брать? Твоя тайна, Сорока, страшней моей. (149)

> Life without movement and sound has its own advantage. It only appears as a weaknessat first sight. You have no way of punishing me, Soroka, if Liudka opens your eyes. And why would you want to punish me? Your secret is much darker than mine.

Zina feels invulnerable to the punishment for her own sin: Zina's son, the pride of his father, is not his son. He is the son of her neighbor Liudmila's former husband with whom Zina had a brief affair, out of pity for the nervous tick which makes his wife turn away and shudder when he tries to make love to her.

Example 2. In her youth, Varya had a reputation as a woman generous with her sexual favors. When the Germans were about to occupy the town, Varya's parents begged her to marry Schprecht, to keep her from the unwelcome attentions of German soldiers. Shprecht was then recovering in a hospital from an extensive operation on his stomach and it was uncertain whether he would live. Her parents looked him over, declared him "a normal dying person" and decided that he would be "a great solution to the problem of Varya's promiscuousness, especially in face of a possible German occupation" (110). Varya complied, they stayed together and had a son; however, Varya was not sure whether she ever really loved Shprekht. She was unfaithful to him, now and then, but all that did not alter Shprekht's feelings of absolute worship for Varya whom he considered "the most wonderful woman in the world." Now Varya cannot walk or even sit but she can speak and think. Her thoughts are about dying and killing. "Some days she woke up with a feeling of an all-enveloping hatred which, mysteriously, was concentrated on Shprekht" (151). She has a heavy glass ashtray under her pillow which she threatens to throw it at Shprekht's head. Or, one day "she will put a tie, hidden under the mattress, around Shprekht's neck and experience the joy of killing; then she will put him next to herself and set fire to the cover" (151). Or, she will strike a match and burn everything down; no way is she going to die and let them live.

Варя не боялась всего этого ничуть и дурным это не считала. Ибо не считала себя ответственной за это живущее в ней Нечто. Более того... Более... Втайне Варя любила эту свою ненависть, эту неистовую жажду разрушения. (151)

Varya was not afraid of all this, and did not consider it evil. She did not hold herselfresponsible for this Thing that lived inside her. Also… Also… Secretly, Varya lovedthis hatred she felt, this insatiable thirst for destruction.

Thoughts of destruction and death are replaced at moments by penetrating insights into the strangeness of the human condition and the impossibility of understanding human nature. Everybody appears to Varya not as one person but two, with their images in the mirror which does not reflect their true nature but the masks they wear. She thinks of herself and those close to her, all of whom have something to hide and do not live genuine lives:

Ну, прожил Сорока жизнь с чужой фамилией – ну и что? Стал он отЭтого счастливей? Все перепуталось. Все. Ее русский муж всю жизнь играет рольнемца полудурка, совестливый Панин рядится в принципиального хама. ...Все живут не за себя, а за того парня. Никто не живет в себе как в доме, а как голые и на морозе. (157)

> Soroka has always lived under a false name, so what? Did it make him happier? Everything is so confusing. Her own Russian husband has been all his life playing the part of a German clown. Panin, who is really a kind person, acts rude and insolent out of principle… People live lives that are not their own. Nobody inhabits himself as his own house. No, they all wander around naked in the cold.

The first time Varya has an insight into the paradox of self-perception and perception of others is when she sees her own reflection in a mirror.

> [Варя] увидела толстую тетку с ведром, идущую ей навстречу. Тетка была ей знакома. Знакомой была и дорога, по которой та шла. Но случилась странность. Странность в освещении. Варя шла по солнцу, а та с ведром шла как бы по серой погоде. (140)

> [Varya] saw a fat woman with a pail…She looked familiar; the road also looked familiar. But something was strange; it concerned the light. Varya was walking on the sunlit side of the road, the other woman walked in the shadow.

Example 3. Only after she loses her mind does Liudmila realize that her neighbors' son looks exactly like her former husband. Liudmila's mind, with its idealistic thoughts and aspiration for self-sacrifice, was her most precious possession.

Because of her ideals, Liudmila marries a shell shocked war hero with a disfiguring facial spasm , from whom all the girls in the university flee in panic when he tries to court them. Liudmila's idealistic mind, however, cannot overcome the sad reality of matter when in bed "at that very moment his face would twist into a spasm and her body would become a statue weighing a ton" (162). One day, Liudmila's husband who teaches physics in the same school where Liudmila teaches geography, is suddenly fired without explanation, by a decree from the local party committee (ostensibly for spoiling the radiant beauty of a Soviet school with his disfigured face) and is sent to a faraway collective farm. Liudmila is to follow him but she does not and "the people d[o] not judge her harshly" (117). One year later, and after months of assiduous courting on his part, Liudmila, burying her feelings of guilt, marries Panin. The teacher's dismissal remains a mystery for everyone, except for Zina, who arranged it through Soroka's connections when she found out she was pregnant with the teacher's child. When Liudmila was in her right mind, she never noticed an astounding resemblance between the boy and her former husband. Now, however, in her madness, Liudmila's unconscious knowledge becomes a conviction that the neighbors stole her child and also her mind, so that nobody would believe her if she told what she knew. Liudmila can even pinpoint the particular circumstance when the theft happened.

> Мысль: Сороки украли ребенка у нее и физика. Это виделось в подробностях.Она несет кулечек, а они вырывают его из рук. У нее всегда были такие слабыеруки.[...] А тут ребенок, он оттягивает ей руки,

оттягивает... И тогда Сорока выхватывает у нее ребенка.
Она так хорошо это помнит. (158)

The thought: the Sorokas stole hers and the physics teacher's baby. She could see the scene in vivid detail. She is carrying a package and they grab it from her. Her hands have always been so weak… And the baby's weigh pulls them. […] Then Soroka snatches the baby from her. She remembers it so well.

In her illness, Liudmila's mental defences are down, and feelings of guilt assail her in the form of the fantasy about her stolen baby.

Людмила Васильевна снова зацепилась за щель. Ее ребеночка украл Сорока.Мальчика, похожего на контуженного мужчину, но совершенно неконтуженного, совершенно! Такого, как она намечтала, когда шла замужкак на подвиг. Когда целью виделось исправление изъяна в природе ивосстановление справедливости к несчастному лейтенанту […] (161-2)

Liudmila Vasilievna seized on the thought again. Soroka stole her baby, a boy who looked like the shell shocked man but perfectly healthy and whole. A boy she dreamed about when she envisaged this marriage as her own heroic deed. When she

> saw the correction of a flaw in nature, restoration of justice toward the unhappy lieutenant […] as her own noble goal.

When, in a moment of lucidity, she shouts, "Soroka's son is not Soroka's son," her intelligent and rational husband gives her a tranquilizing shot.

The same disturbing feeling of living as false selves that permeates the *Three Loves* and especially *The Actress* is at the center of *At the Feet.* The story postulates that the mysterious illness can only be cured if the enigma of "who we are" is solved.

Shcherbakova's assumption that the solving of the enigma must be the collective work of each couple and all three of them together echoes Vladimir Soloviëv's idea that salvation can only be achieved together with others. This conception of *sobornost'*, of the collective work of salvation, determines the structure of the work in which recollections and reflections by all the protagonists complete and clarify each other. It is reflected in the many indications that the former animosity between neighbors must give way to solidarity and compassion. Panin thinks about their differences which seem so unimportant in the face of the shared feeling – "an impossibility to live without our wives" (159). "Varya falls asleep feeling pity for Zina and Liudmila, for Soroka and Panin, and even for Shprekht… the awkward fool" (158). Even "the people watched with interest a growing friendship between former implacable enemies who had not spoken to each other for so many years." In the process of soul-making, the husbands and wives discover a strange new name for the feelings they experience: Zina calls it "happiness-sorrow," and Shprekht thinks of it in the following way:

> Одновременно Шпрехт пребывает в двух [...] полярных состояниях, но эта невыразимая путаница – не горе, не страдание, а самое что ни на есть Шпрехтово счастье. И хоть он ни черта в этом не может понять, ... но он сейчас испытывает ненавидимую любовь и самое что ни на есть счастливое горе. (108)

> Simultaneously, Shprekht finds himself in two states […] radically opposed to each other but this incredible confusion is not pain, not suffering but his own Shprekhtovian kind of happiness. And, although he does not have a slightest idea of what it means, […] he is now experiencing hateful love and the happiest sorrow.

As the inner monologues by the wives and the husbands start to fit together and form a pattern, a feeling emerges that the husbands' extraordinary devotion has a quality of atonement for sins whose nature is not immediately clear. As mentioned above, at the root of all three relationships lies a deficiency, physical or moral. Thus we discover that Soroka is not who he says he is. In his youth he has run away from his first wife and children, leaving them to possible starvation in the post-collectivization Ukraine. His true name is Grach (a rook), he changes it to Soroka (a crow) when he finds documents with this name on a dead body by the roadside. In his own words, at this moment "he died for the future." The dead spot behind Soroka's

vivacious personality drives him to pursue Zina in order to make her an accomplice in his moral untidiness. All his life he must live with this knowledge about himself and the fear of being discovered. To allay the fear and his bad conscience he persecutes people he sees as potential enemies: Panin, who has been in the camps and Shprekht, who has lived under German occupation. The Soviet Union has collapsed leaving people like Soroka disoriented and frightened. When Panin and Shprekht accuse him of having dodged the mobilization during the war, his first thought is about his KGB acquaintance who would, in the old times, have silenced the two insolent men. But now, his friend is dead, as Soroka's whole protective structure is dead, leaving him vulnerable to the accusations of his two enemies-friends.

Shprekht, in his turn, knows that the only reason he won Varya, "the best woman in the world," is because he has a huge part of his stomach cut out as a result of ulcers, "the rotting inside him" (109), and thus is not sent to the front. For what other qualities, he thinks, does Shprekht have? What does he possess inside him except a huge hole that nothing can ever fill? Is that why he obsessively keeps medicine and food in the cupboard until they spoil and then buries them in a hole in the courtyard? The emptiness inside has to be filled, the non-existing self must be reasserted through gathering, collecting and inserting.

Panin, the intellectual, too is marked by a lack. He is painfully aware that "people around him did not like [him]" (115). It has always been like that: in school, in the army, in the labor camp. In childhood he used to examine his face in the mirror searching"for a defect in construction" (115), and could not find any since the treacherous reflection showed him a perfectly normal, likeable face. Then he "made a

decision not to think about this non-love, a highly irrational thing, and pretend to live in-love," finding a woman "with whose love he could fence himself off from the general non-love of others" (116). In spite of the fact that he has suffered himself, he rationally and "instinctively […] turns down any woman who has had bad luck in life, for example, a divorcee or a virgin" (118). Meeting Liudmila, Panin first notices her prettiness and reflects that appearance is important because "it does matter to a man what face and what body wake up next to him in the morning" (118). Thus, not knowing Liudmila's secret – her failed marriage to the war veteran – Panin looks at Liudmila and says, "something of this kind." In an ironic twist of fate, he marries a woman who is at once a divorcee and a virgin.

Each character's story is told as an inner monologue not shared with other protagonists but links gradually emerge both between the husband and wife and among the three couples. This underlying pattern of relationships reveals a rhythm of sins and punishments. The husbands' devotion may be seen as atonement for sacrificing the women to their own selfish needs. Although the exhausted, lonely husbands suffer as well, the women are the ones whose dreams of flying, literally and figuratively, have been thwarted; they are the ones bound to passivity and immobility. It is not a coincidence that we always see the women in horizontal and the men in vertical positions. The images of failed flight are symbolically important in the novel. Zina is pulled down by Soroka, himself a bird without wings. Varya's flights of erotic imagination are cancelled by Shprekht's awkward, timid attitude. The exhilarating freedom to fly and the enslaving pull of gravity surrounds the episode where Liudmila, a geography teacher, drops a globe, and "continents liberated from the

force of gravity soared through the air with joy and autonomy" (160). Liudmila, whose noble thoughts of healing the wounded hero had elevated her above the callousness and the lack of compassion of others, was thrown back to earth when she became a passively consenting party to her husband's banishment.

The women are not only victims but also willing participants in this game of false pretensions. They allow themselves to be pulled down by the mortifying force of gravity of flawed love: trapped in mutual resentments and selfish isolation from the rest of the world. They have not succeeded in finding their true selves and transforming their flawed loves into redeeming relationships. Zina has lived herself and allowed Soroka to live a life of lies and moral degradation. Varya does precious little to help Shprekht find dignity and his true self. Liudmila enters the marriage without revealing to Panin her feelings of pain and guilt. Now she and the other two women depend on compassion; the only love that can save them is an all-embracing relationship that mixes empathy, erotic-love, and love-caritas. The men, who admit that they will not go on living without their wives, equally depend on this redeeming connection. Both husbands and wives go through a process of painful askesis, a process of soul-making to use James Hillman's terms. Through memories, reflections, compassion, bursts of anger and moments of quiet desperation they establish inner links between events, elevating events into experiences, heightening their significance and raising questions about the meaning of life. In the process they strive to find their own true selves and a redeeming connection to others. The protagonists are constantly searching for answers to the enigma: why a prostrate woman in every corner of a triangle? Why do the three old men resembling characters from *commedia del arte*

meet every evening at the center of the triangle? What are they searching for? “What does it all mean,” thinks Panin, the intellectual:

> Панин думал о треугольнике жизни […]. Ничего особенного, обыковенный, равносторонний. Просто в каждом его углу по неподвижной женщине. И трое пожилых, да что там, старых мужчин, один из которых в галошах, другой в шляпе, третий в диагоналевых брюках, сходятся в центр треугольника каждый вечер.Что это все значит? Случайное стечение строительств домов? Сила притяжения судеб? Неизученная инфекция, ударившая локально? (174)

> Panin was thinking about the triangle of life. […] It was a regular triangle, equilateral. With an immobile woman in each of its angles. And three middle-aged, actually old, men, one wearing galoshes, another one a fedora, and the third one pants made of cheap fabric, gather every evening at the center of the triangle. What does it all mean? An accidental choice of building lots? The pull of gravity bringing their fates together? An unknown virus striking locally?

There was an enigma there, “the incomprehensibility of life which was given to him to ponder about” (175). The answer lies perhaps not in reason but in love.

> Когда же жизнь подсунула ему испытание в виде полубезумной, горячо любимой женщины, то Панин окоротил себя в стремлении к познанию. Жизнь вставала перед ним во всем своем могуществе тайны и непредсказуемости. И Панин сказал: «Пусть! Значит так тому и быть». Он полюбил с той минуты не только Людочку, но и жребий, который выпал. А когда увидел три жребия на одном пятачке, то ошеломился судьбой и странноватым, колющим в подреберье ощущением зло-счастияю (175)

> When fate threw him [Panin] a trial in the shape of a half-mad beloved woman, Panin decided not to seek the knowledge. Life emerged before him with all the awesome power of its mystery and unpredictability. He loved not only Liudmila but also his bitter lot. When he saw three identical lots of fate on a small piece of land he was overwhelmed by fate and by a strange feeling, like sharp piercing under the ribs, the feeling of bitter-sweet happiness.

Where reason fails to provide an answer the imagination takes over. The fate of the "prostrate women" becomes the stuff of legends and stories perpetuating the enigma and the search for its meaning. It is tempting to allegorize the silent inert

bodies of women into the image of Russia just as Aleksandr Blok saw it: good and evil, loving and hating, victim and victimizer, given to the passion of spiritual flight and to the dulling pull of gravity. If the prostrate woman are meant as the symbol of Russia itself, is it true that her sons and husbands can only learn to love her in suffering? The allegory is there but only as an undercurrent that gently pulls the reader away from the text's surface. But the richness and vividness of Shcherbakova's writing makes us to want to linger longer on the image of the triangle formed by three silent and immobile female bodies, doomed and hopeful, tender and vengeful, miserable and happy; and in the center of the triangle three pathetic old men striving to talk to the stars.

Shcherbakova's prose is deceptively simple; the ultimate questions of life, death, love, salvation are not in the foreground of her narrative but illuminate it from inside. *Realnost'* is distinguished from *deistvitelnost'* which roughly corresponds to Dostoevsky's notion of "higher realism." She is strongly rooted in her historical time and space; her stories provide gritty and vivid descriptions of life in Russia, in the provinces and in Moscow. Reading her stories is like sinking one's teeth into the fabric of life. Her writing and plots, like the lives she describes, are funny, melodramatic, poetic, ironic and serious. It is worth mentioning that descriptions of nature are practically absent from her texts. Instead we see small confining apartments, decrepit houses, ugly squares and parched, dusty towns that seem to be dying from the lack of water. It is these settings that create the impression of confinement and entrapment as women try to make ends meet, to raise children, to put together a family, to relate. They are ordinary women fighting to survive but they

are also women searching for a love that would give a meaning to existence, and allow them to elevate themselves from "dirt, impurity and squalor." They look for the salvation that should come with Perfect Love, embracing body, soul and spirit. Finding it would mean conquering their fear of falling and letting them satisfy their passion of flying. Whether their longing for the perfect union between the self and the other can ever be realized is the question Shcherbakova does not answer. Her work is an ongoing, life-long project, with each new work presenting a new possibility, a new departure. The outcome of the project is not known to the author any more than it is known to her readers or to her characters; they are all together in search of an ending. It is clear, however, that many individual lives as well as the life of Russia depend on the outcome.

Shcherbakova is neither condescending nor sentimental about her characters; in fact, she likes to set them up in fairly ironic situations. Masha, in *Three Loves*, dreams of a different, "radiant" life and of being loved. Meanwhile, she goes about finding it by prostituting herself and becoming more bitter and unhappy with each humiliating experience. Nora, the actress, spends her life analyzing herself, trying to find out who she really is. But all the while she takes on the identities of others, as if she were permanently on stage. Her last performance is her murderous affair with the mentally unstable policeman, in which she stages herself as both his seducer, his rescuer, and his victim.

The protagonist of "The Wall," Iraida, experiences the crumbling of her false self as panic and confusion. But, apparently, it is too late for her to change. She will spend

the rest of her life feeling the anxiety of living in the void unable to see beyond the metaphorical wall of her empty life.

There is a shift in *At the Feet* toward a more hopeful denouement. After Zina, Varya, and Liudmila become bedridden, their husbands realize that a powerful connection binds them to their wives. Being literally and metaphorically at the feet of the women, who are lying flat, they experience the miraculous selfless love of which they never thought themselves capable. The men's relationships to each other also undergo a change. The former enemies – the ruthless careerist Soroka, a former prisoner, the intellectual Panin, and apolitical Shprekht, always suspect in the eyes of the authorities because he lived in occupied territory – most unlikely people to become friends find their common humanity in the devotion to their wives. They also show a deepening interest in the future of their country, the meaning of life, and humanity's place in the universe. But there is irony here as well. While men come closer to finding their true identities, transcending hatred and pettiness, the women are more limited in their spiritual development. Their illness and immobility prevent them from translating their insights into establishing contacts with others. Thus, again, the question arises whether men's quest for redemption is predicated on women's suffering.

In her later novel, *A Prayer for Eve*, Shcherbakova is concerned primarily with friendship. In it, a murderous hatred felt by three women friends toward another woman leads to an attack that puts her in a hospital with serious injuries. As the women look at themselves in horror, realizing their loss of humanity, they repent and extend their friendship to the former enemy.

While in *At the Feet* the writer meditates on the possibility of Russia's redemption through genuine connections among its people, her latest work marks a significant shift toward a more resigned and pessimistic outlook. Her pessimism concerns primarily the situation in Russia in which Shcherbakova perceives a growing rift between people, making hopes of national cohesiveness seem more remote. In term of individual relationships, there is an emphasis on lowering one's expectations and accepting reasonable compromises. Perfect Love and total communion of the souls seem extremely rare, if ever possible. The goal is then to try to create relationships in which as many instances of 'I-Thou' as possible can occur, with the understanding that they happen in between the more common 'I-it'.

The most satisfying connections, the writer seems to say, are not always those of erotic love. Creativity, friendship, raising lovingly other people's children, helping others, to mention a few examples from Shcherbakova's books, can all lead toward redemption.

Shcherbakova's books present manifold variations of the same theme: searching for inner spiritual truth through love and connection. To achieve that, people should try to avoid objectification of others, opening a possibility for a more authentic dialogue. Similarly to Buber, Shcherbakova believes that the enhancement of the I-Thou relationships is the only path to personal salvation and for her also the salvation of Russia.

Notes to Chapter 2

[1] A concept frequently used by Mark Lipovetsky in his *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, ed. Eliot Borenstein (New York: M.E. Sharp, 1999).

[2] Although I do not know whether Shcherbakova is familiar with Buber's, Soloviëv's and Berdiaev's ideas, there are many indications in her texts that she makes those ideas the corner stone of her views on love and relationships in general.

[3] The terms "Perfect Love" and "Flawed Love" are mine.

[4]"Exegesis on the Soul," *The Nag Hammadi Library,* ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

[5] In some Gnostic myths, Sophia is expelled from the Pleroma because of her decision to create/procreate on her own, without a male counterpart. Another reason for her expulsion is her rebellious desire to possess a more intimate, direct knowledge of the Godhead.

[6] Galina Shcherbakova, *Tri liubvi Mashi Peredreevoi*, *God Alyeny* (Moskva: Vagrius, 1996).

[7] Shcherbakova, *Aktrisa i millitsioner* (Moskva: AST Press, 1999).

[8] Shcherbakova, "Stena," *Aktrisa i millitsioner* (Moskva: AST Press, 1999).

[9] Shcherbakova, *U nog lezhachikh zhenshchin*, *God Alyeny* (Moskva: AST Press, 1999).

[10] The work of Shcherbakova and of other contemporary Russian writers contains many references to such false saints, people who are hopelessly stuck in denying the body but cannot find spirituality either.

[11] It was not unusual in the Soviet Union to share a hotel room with a stranger of the same sex.

[12] While the birth of a child, in Shcherbakova's universe, is a source of joy and renewed hope, the death of one is seen as an ominous event.

[13] It reminds me of a play by Leonid Andreev, *He Who Gets Slapped*, in which He tries to explain to the young actress that she is really a Goddess who does not remember her origins.

[14] In this context, "fellow-traveler" and "comrade-in-arms" do not refer to the political and ideological sympathizers to the Soviet regime, but mean the husband and wife's complicity in their greedy, acquisitional (*potrebitel'ski*) approach to life.

[15] The pear tree, not an apple or a cherry tree (more common symbols of Russian culture), is possibly a reference to Saint Augustine's *Confessions* in which he tells of his first mystical experience under a pear tree.

[16] Martin Buber, *Writing*, ed. Will Herberg (New York: Meridian, 1956) 47.

[17] In another example, Nora's neighbor looking at a picture of the young Nora in a revealing summer dress, becomes better at a recollection from her own youth, remembering her brute of a husband who never made her feel loved but would simply grab her at night and, having satisfied his lust, without a word of affection, would turn his back to her. In a longing for something she never knew and cannot even define, the old woman compares herself to Nora, and her previous sympathy and friendship turn into hatred which she rationalizes as her disgust towards the actress's unwholesome way of life.

[18] *Lovecmopия* in original.

Chapter 3

Love, Death, and Redemption: Stories of Women by Lya Luft

No amor pensamos viver finalmente
o mito da fusão com o outro.

In love, we hope to finally live
the myth of fusion with the other.

Lya Luft, *Perdas e Ganhos*, 83

Introduction

Lya Luft, writer, poet and professor of literature is considered one of the most prominent women writers in Brazil today, often said to follow in the tradition of Clarice Lispector and Lygia Fagundes Telles.[1] Luft herself, however, denies any resemblance to Lispector, noting that her fiction does not offer the verbal innovation characteristic of Lispector's work, and that she writes in simple prose, easy for everybody to read. [2] Luft's true originality, as critics have noted, lies in an almost unprecedented immersion in her protagonists' psyches and in the writer's profound reflection on the eternal questions of life, death, and fate. In this chapter, a detailed analysis of Luft's novels will follow a general assessment of her themes, style, and unique genre.

In addition to several books of poetry and essays, Luft has written six short novels -- *As Parceiras* (*Partners In the Game*), 1980; *Reunion de Familia* (*Family Reunion*), 1982; *O Quarto Fechado* (*The Island of the Dead*), 1984; *Exilio* (*The Red House*), 1988; *A Asa Esquerda do Anjo* (*The Left Wing of the Angel*), 1991; and *A*

Sentinela (*The Guardian*), 1994. The last one, according to Luft, signals the completion of a thematic cycle. There is a recurrence of principal motifs and images in all the novels mentioned above, making it possible to read them as a single text with variations on a theme.

Born and raised in a family of German descent, Luft was steeped in German language, folklore, philosophy, literature, and poetry, especially the poetry of Rilke. This fact may explain her European frame of reference and her preoccupation with the question of identity. Many of her characters share an uncertainty about their identity and a feeling of always being between two worlds, of being estranged from their environment. Moreover, like Gippius, Chopin, and Shcherbakova, Luft writes predominantly about women. Although men and women alike are depicted in her stories as both victims and victimizers, women remain the central focus of her writing. Luft acknowledges that she writes predominantly about women because of her knowledge about "what they feel, think, fear and desire." [3] But, she adds, also about "men and children, houses with attics and basements […], and about the family – protection or jail" (*Entre Resistir*, 153). Women characters are often portrayed as victims of their own fears and insecurities, of the internalized feeling of inadequacy. They suffer from the patriarchal constraints and prejudices in their families and in Brazilian society. Undoubtedly, Luft pays attention to the negative effects of social repression on women, but her stories go beyond the social and the psychological spheres to the existential and the metaphysical questioning of the human condition itself, including the mystery of existence, the nature of connection between people, the vicissitudes of love, and the possibility of redemption through art. After all the

social and psychological effects on her heroines' fates have been explained, a mystery that underlines the human condition still remains, says Luft, a mystery she wants to investigate.

Therefore, to declare that Luft's female protagonists are victims only of a patriarchal society would be a great simplification. Readings Luft's texts by many scholars (Medeiros Costa among them) only as demystification of the patriarchal ideology whose social institutions appear to be the source of all the conflicts in the lives and psyches of women, constitutes a reductive approach to the writer's thinking. Many women protagonists in Luft's books are outwardly liberated, professional women – doctors, teachers, and artists. Still, in spite of their apparent potential for independence, inside they are trapped, inadequate, and doomed to fail in the game of life.[4] As the protagonist in *Partners in the Game* succinctly puts it, "we are a family of women who always end up losing."[5] It is, therefore, important to pay attention to Luft's insistence on the importance of inner freedom achieved as a result of the person's liberation (material, emotional, and psychological) from dependence on others and her/his ability to "recreate an identity, recreate herself as a subject of one's own active voice – about self, Other, and one's place in the order of the universe." [6] Her interest in women's social and spiritual liberation and her deep insights into her heroines' inner worlds certainly qualify her as feminist writer, yet the intellectual scope of her writing is much broader. Her "focus on women leads to questioning of the human condition" in general, [7] that representing women in "crisis, abandonment, death, loss" the authors intends to portray "human condition through her female protagonists." [8] Luft addresses the issues of inequality based on gender, race, and

class, prominent in Brasil's cultural and political discourse but, as her fiction and her essays attest, she is also interested in the spiritual development of her protagonists. Issues of identity and attaining inner freedom are uniquely important to the writer because only through finding their true selves her protagonists will be able to free themselves of their dependency on others. The wide scope of Luft's investigation determines the complexity of her narratives resulting from an intimate interweaving of the social, psychological, and metaphysical approaches and constituting the true originality of the author's style.

The author shows her heroines in a situation of "existential crisis and profound pain,"[9] a situation that engenders a process of self-discovery the outcome of which determines their future. The starting point of Luft's novels is always a family with dark secrets in its history: a traumatic marriage to a depraved abusive man; the absence of a loving mother, suicide, madness, the death of a child, or birth of a deformed one. The children who grew up in these families are incapable of finding their true identities and of making meaningful connections with others. The origin of evil is situated in families marked by absence of love and a history of tragic events.

Family dysfunction, however, is only a sign of a deeper evil, which propagates in ever widening circles, touching the root of life itself. Luft creates a world in which suffering seems to be all pervasive. The sheer accumulation of tragic events and their omnipresent nature and persistence throughout time transform the stories of dysfunctional families into a myth of an evil curse hanging over people's heads. The houses-fortresses which protect the families from intrusion by the world beyond, have cracks through which an existential horror penetrates. What, Luft asks,

lies behind the tragic lives of her protagonists? Is it chance – a random occurrence in an indifferent universe – or fate, or the result of their childhood traumas? Is there a curse passing from one generation to another?

In order to underline the coexistence of different factors affecting the protagonists' fate, Luft places them, in all her novels, in the same predicament – immersed in grief, isolation, and despair, and turning away from life. When they return to their childhood houses, they remember the past and attempt to understand it, in the hope of leaving it behind and making the future possible. Children of absent, dead, indifferent, cruel, or hostile mothers, they grow up without love--bearing the burdens of tragic family histories and of personal losses. They carry this alienation from the mother, who is seen as an inaccessible being, a Queen or a Goddess, into their adult lives, making it impossible for them to believe in their ability to be happy or even to survive. The lack of love, often combined with the repressive family atmosphere, stifles their attempts to form a sense of identity and of personal value and uniqueness. Later, in their adult life, they try to overcome the insecurity and the feeling of alienation; they want to love, have children of their own, to cheat the curse. But, inevitably, a moment arrives when the protagonist realizes that no amount of hope, enthusiasm for life, professional success and happiness in love will save her from her fate, which is to fail "in the game of life."

The evil pursuing her is depicted as not merely incidental, resulting from circumstances, but metaphysical, pervading her entire universe. The perception of evil as metaphysical is revealed in the way the women explain their misfortunes as a curse handed down from generation to generation. Their individual consciousnesses

participate in the collective consciousness of what one protagonist calls "a raça dos exilados" (race of exiles) from life. [10]

The curse primarily affects the protagonists' experience of erotic love and motherhood. Time and again, in Luft's novels, what begins as a happy mutual love turns out to be a destructive force, a betrayal of expectations leading to an utter despair and a sense of abandonment. The characters alternate between turning away from love and obsessively pursuing it; both impulses predicated on the fear of failure and resulting in a sense of loss and guilt. As mentioned above, motherhood also turns out to be a curse: children are stillborn or die, suffer accidents that leave them severely handicapped, or find refuge in madness. Even when the children are healthy, they are separated from their mothers by forces the mothers cannot control. Motherhood thus is transformed into a tragic event: the inability to give and sustain life is both psychologically determined and metaphysically linked to the inescapable nature of life – its inescapable finality. Eva Paulino Bueno rightly observes that the beginning of self-discovery often follows the loss of a child: "In all the novels, the confession happens only when a child [of the protagonist] is dead. The mother's voice appears when her motherhood seems to have been snatched from her by death, and her confession is transformed into an instance when she has to question the reasons for her existence."[11] First, this is not textually correct: the loss of a child does not always mean physical death (actually, only in *The Island of the Dead* and in *Partners in the Game* do the protagonists' children die) but, more broadly, as the realization that she will never have a child (*The Left Wing of the Angel*), the forced separation from a child (*Red House*), the fear of being alienated from her child (*The Guardian*).

My main disagreement with Bueno concerns her interpretation of these events. She likens Luft's mothers to the mythical figure of *la Llorona* from Mexican folk lore—condemned to be a symbol of loss, defeat, abandon and death—a women whose existence must end with the end of motherhood because she cannot see herself in any other role. In a rather unfounded statement, Bueno wonders how is it possible "that in the present historical moment when almost all over the world women obtained the right to participate in social, artistic, political, and professional life, the mothers in Luft's novels […] should have such power to affect readers. The novels […] seem to say that women's enslavement to their uteruses and reduction to the position of mothers eternally brought to tears, have a cost."[12] Since, Bueno states, female sexuality has been reduced by social expectations to producing a child, the death of the child represents a moment of liberation, with women unconsciously wishing their children's death, since it allows them to fight against the symbol of that which "chained them to motherhood and domesticity they were unable to avoid" (Bueno, 603). Bueno concludes that in Luft's novels, female sexuality, being the vehicle of life, is thus transformed into a vehicle of death. This is a good observation arrived at by faulty reasoning. Bueno's point is that the forced motherhood is a direct result of women being expected to enter into heterosexual relationships which "do not always mean love" (great discovery!) instead of the homosexual ones the protagonists desire. This conclusion is not in the least supported by Luft's texts. There are homosexual desires in Luft's texts but, when this is the case, the author speaks about it clearly, without recourse to subterfuges.[13] It is clear, however, that for the majority of characters in Luft's novels, women and men, being parents is a natural desire.

Bueno's assertions could be more justly applied to the previous generation, the mothers of the protagonists whose emotional withdrawal or downright hostility toward their children stem in part from their awareness of "being chained to motherhood and domesticity" (Bueno, 603).

The theme of suffering and loneliness in family life is depicted with an uncompromising bleakness and intensity, and is, with different variations, ceaselessly repeated, in book after book. The intensity and the repetition cause the individual tragedies to transcend the categories of the "particular" and the "real" to attain the level of the general, metaphysical horror, similar to the horror portrayed in gothic novels. Although Susan Candy calls the cruel and demeaning family life described in Luft's works as a "traditional pattern" in patriarchal Brazilian families,[14] the circumstances portrayed can hardly be described as "traditional." Filled with madness, deformity, suicide, death, houses full of ghosts, cross-generational curses, Luft's texts exhibit their propensity toward transforming reality into myth, particular into universal, physical into metaphysical. According to Luft**,** the roots of the horror hovering over the lives of these families cannot be located only in the persistence of social and cultural assumptions that women's most important role is to provide happiness to others, primarily their husbands and children. Also, they cannot be fully explained, in Luft's view, by the psychological traumas of their upbringing in patriarchal families – their lack of self-reliance, a week sense of identity, and the internalized expectation of failure. Beyond all that, Luft seems to say, their tragic fates are linked to the suffering that is an inexorable part of human life, lying at the very heart of existence.

In Luft's repressive families, it is often a woman who imposes the law of the father. Such a woman can be a real head of the family (like Frau Wolf in the *Left Wing of the Angel*) or a seemingly submissive wife who is a virtual tyrant ruling the lives of her husband and children (for example, a mother in *The Guardian*). The mothers are often hostile or indifferent; they resent their motherhood and see their femaleness as an obstacle to the realization of other pursuits. Their children long for a mother, a longing that can never be satisfied. This desire becomes the dominating passion of their lives, taking on religious overtones.

The alienation from the mother is the first experience of abandonment for the children, the experience akin to the feeling of being thrown defenseless into a hostile and frightening world. [15] The sense of self, the feelings of belonging depend on the benevolent attitude of the mother, whose love the children long to have. This explains why so many of Luft's characters, in situations of despair, try to recover the image of the mother as an omnipotent and loving being capable of giving them the strength to go on living.

Fathers play a secondary role in their children's lives, while the mothers become mythological figures with powers of giving and taking life. The absent God the Father in Luft's narratives is replaced by the mother, a female Goddess. However, unlike the Mother-Goddess depicted by other feminist writers, Luft's Mother-Goddess is often a malevolent, devouring monster who refuses love and, thus, gives death just as she gives life. The mother resents her motherhood, in ways both explicit and veiled. Her indifference and/or hostility toward her children (*Partners in the Game*, *The Red House, The Guardian*), her physical or emotional absence from their

lives (*Family Reunion, The Left Wing of the Angel*) start a chain of tragic events which result in illness, madness, and death, often by suicide. The ambivalence toward motherhood is often shared by the daughters who see "life springing out of suffering and blood, hope and fear" (*The Red House*, 38) and whose own attempts at motherhood often end in tragedies.

The characters' fixation on the mother reflects their need to see the perfect image of themselves in the loving gaze of the Other and points to the desire for a complete identification with the Other, even at the expense of losing one's own self. The wish to merge with the mother, to retreat into the womb, which becomes, on a metaphysical level, an impossible longing to merge with the Divine, competes with the characters' fear of losing a separate identity. The resulting desire – to merge with the Other but also to keep a separate identity – is profoundly ambivalent and results in the characters' entrapment in the maze of reflections. The solution to the problem of the relationship between self and other is, therefore, an issue of great importance, often a matter of life and death. Garcia dos Santos locates the characters' difficulties of establishing relationships between self and Other in their quest for complete fusion, a search for "harmony on the path that can never lead to it" [16] because "although one day we were one, once separated, we can never recover the unity in our embrace."[17] This impossible search for unattainable unity is manifest in "the inner split experienced by every human being, and the desire for connection and unity each individual seeks to achieve in different—and mostly failed ways."[18]

According to Martin Buber, a strong sense of self is necessary to fully accept and validate the Other. Luft's women strive to live the Perfect Love, a harmonious

union of I and Thou, in Buber's terms, but instead of *forming a dialogue between two equal subjects*, try to achieve the union by putting themselves in the position of *objects*.[19] Ettore Finazzi-Agro calls this frightful repetition of self in the other the "mortal reflection," the "claustrophobia inherent in the predicament without an exit toward the rest of the world," since their universe is limited to the self as reflected in an other.[20] Luft's protagonists often fall into the trap of flawed relationships in which participants stumble endlessly into one reflection after another and never find their true selves.

As mentioned before, Luft's dark tales are characterized by an abundance of strange, even grotesque events; fantasy and hyperbole are taken to the limits of unreality. She engages in creating mythologies; her characters have an archetypal aspect, many are identified not by name but by their functions – Mother, Maids, Male Nurse, Dwarf, and, of course, House. Although the descriptions of family life and the psychological portrayals of the characters are specific and realistic, they are presented in such a way as to transcend this specificity and acquire a mythological or metaphysical relevance. The result is a unique genre: a mixture of existential angst, magical realism, and deep psychological insight.

Magical realism is an important component of Luft's unique genre in several significant ways. The introduction of fantastic events, "irreducible" elements of magical realism,[21] into essentially realistic narratives creates an atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty, characteristic of Luft's views of life as ultimately mysterious. [22] This ambiguity results from the fact that such irreducible events can be interpreted in different ways – either as fantastic events, beyond the scope of natural

explanation, or as projections of particular mental states of the protagonists. Luft achieves her goals by subtly using the strategies of magical realism in her stories, sometimes as barely a hint at some strangeness, a slight shift in a realistic scheme of events, which suddenly fail to conform to the laws of the physical world. A bizarre idea formed by a character in a moment of shock is neither refuted nor confirmed by others. Although the testimony of other characters could assist the reader in deciding whether the event is a psychological projection or a supernatural occurrence, Luft intentionally makes it difficult by writing her books in first person narrative.

Even when situations in Luft's novels are described in such a way as to allow for both interpretations – supernatural or, alternately, psychological – there are signs that point to the metaphysical aspect of narration. For instance, when, in the novel *Family Reunion*, an old man complains that worms swarm in his ears trying to eat at his brain, it appears to be a symptom of hysteria brought about by the helplessness and humiliation of old age, or by terror in the face of approaching death. However, there are indications, which fit within the plot of the story, that the psychological is just one of the factors at play here, and that the mythological dimension is present as well, the worm being, according to Jung, a "libidinal figure which kills instead of giving life."[23]

Ambiguity on every narrative level is an important feature of Luft's writing. In Luft's own words, the ambiguity is unavoidable, because

> […] por mais que o contexto paralelo da arte expresse o profundo contraditório sentimento humano, embora dance a

> nossa frente e nos convoque até o último fio de lucidez, o
> essencial não tem nome nem forma:
> **é descoberta e assombro, glória ou danação de cada um.**
> (*Perdas & Ganhos*, 156)

> no matter how much […] art strives to express the deep and
> contradictory feelings of human beings, no matter how it
> dances before us promising to reveal the ultimate meaning, the
> essential thing has no name and no shape:
> **it is always discovery and wonder, glory and damnation of**
> **every one**. [24]

Luft's thematic ambiguity finds its parallels in the ambiguity of recurring images that embody the author's philosophical concerns. The world of Luft's novels is ambiguous, shifting, and fluid. Opposites here compete for ascendance, and everything is interchangeable: the real turns imaginary, animate inanimate, and life and death turn into each other. Techniques and strategies of magical realism that serve to cast doubt on the veracity of portrayed events, as well as unusual, often startling, images which engage the readers; imagination, are used to achieve the effect of this ambiguous fluidity. The transformations that the images undergo in Luft's narratives and their inevitable recurrence, as well as the overall oneiric atmosphere of her novels, help create the impression of a single consciousness shared by "many possible selves" [25] traveling from novel to novel, via their author's visions, in a universe that is in the grasp of nightmare.

The dualistic nature of Luft's images fits well with the magical realism's orientation toward the blurring of the borders between the literal and the metaphorical. On the one hand, her images are highly symbolic reflecting the author's views on existence. On the other hand, they stand on their own, constituting the first, surface layer of the narrative, which, while connected to the second, symbolic level, still functions independently. Luft's images, thus, are truly polysemic, capable of providing signification on different levels of narration.

The analytical psychologist James Hillman, who creatively expanded the ideas of Carl Jung, speaks of the essentially poetic mechanism of thought creation. According to Hillman, we think in images which we then transform into meaningful symbols. Similarly, Luft's symbols/images lead the reader toward an intellectual (symbolic) interpretation, while simultaneously fostering an esthetic and emotional response. Visualizing these images, to the point of being able to perceive their physical properties – almost being able to touch, smell, and taste them – readers are encouraged to stay with them, engaging in a process Hillman calls "soul-making," a process that creates interiority transforming events into deeper experiences. The work of imagination engages the soul along with the mind and, since imagining is limitless and unbound, it sharpens perception and makes the reader consider the image from multiple new perspectives.[26] Alberto Moreiras also underscores the absence of direct relationship between symbol and interpretation by saying that "the reading process does not necessarily end in the reduction of thematic structures of the text to symbols."[27] The play of images resembles the play with the sliding signifier, forever widening the sphere of perception. In the words of Moreira, "the difference between

the signifier […] and the signified […] results in the sliding of the sign which infinitely delays the discovery of its referent" (Moreira, 253).

Overall, however, the tension between the symbolic and the imaginary in Luft's work points to her general desire to minimize the intellectual interpretation of her images acknowledging, at the same time, their symbolic value. As she mentions in *Perdas & Ganhos*, "I agree with Virginia Woolf when she says: "when my symbols are explained, I lose all interest in them" (57). In another account of her method, in *The River Within*, she says, however: "What matters to me mostly are the symbolic and allegorical elements [in my novels] since they express my particular myths. I am unable to decipher most of them but attempt to control them through the magic of language." [28] Any interpretation of Luft's imagery has to take into account the tension between the symbolic and the imaginative, as well as Luft's aversion to intellectualizing works of fiction.

In addition to creating a sense of pervasive ambiguity, the use of fantastic elements provides a medium for the inclusion of the spiritual, the metaphysical, and the mythological dimensions, very important in Luft's work. The spiritual dimension allows the characters to move freely from the world of experience to the world of imagination. From their childhood, they experience the world as a mysterious place. As her characters grow up, the desire to unveil the mystery remains, prompting them to create their own imaginary worlds. These imaginary worlds are also the space of the unconscious, important for the protagonists to acknowledge in order to gain a fuller awareness of who they are.

By combining elements of realism and magical realism Luft creates two intersecting worlds – the world of reality and the world of magical reality. The uncertainty between real and unreal, factual and imaginary, is created by the introduction of objects residing in the interstices between the two worlds, whose ontological status is always questioned. A strange man standing in the door opening attracts a young girl's attention in *The Left Wing of the Angel*. He always stands there, "exposed and humiliated," calling for someone who never comes. In fear and fascination, the girl looks through a crack at the incomprehensible and frightening figure from the adult world, yearning to grasp the mystery at the heart of life. Here detailed realistic descriptions of people, places, and events are fractured by cracks, spaces from which fantastic events may emerge, making it possible to problematize the very notion of reality and existence. Sometimes a representation is substituted for a living person, when, in his mother's eyes, a doll comes to take the place of a dead child; or, in another example, a drawing presented to a mother has an uncanny resemblance to her absent son whom the artist has never seen. These "stand-in" objects function as the postmodern simulacra, appearing real without being so, representing "reality" in such a way as to pose questions about the nature of existence.

Luft's questioning of the ontological status of people contributes to the ambiguity and the open-endedness of her narrative. Is the mysterious woman whom Anelise, in *The Partners*, feels a strange need to meet, a figment of her imagination or a ghost of her grandmother whose tragic fate has haunted Anelise all her life? Are they two different people, or does the protagonist assume her grandmother's identity

in a daily ritual that is essential to her attempt to understand the forces that determine her destiny? And when the two women finally meet and walk together, whose gaze can attest to the event? Like some postmodernist writers, Luft questions the nature of reality and leaves such questions unanswered, keeping the ontological uncertainty unresolved.

The complex interweaving of authorial positions and characters' points of view and the agility with which Luft negotiates the transitions from the real to the unreal are inextricably linked to her narrative strategies – the thematic and structural devices central to her philosophy and present in the totality of her work.

One such device is mirroring and reflection which allows for a successful narrative coexistence of two distinct but interconnected worlds: reality and magical reality. Mirrors are present in all her narratives; in *The Family Reunion*, for instance, the mirror serves to show the protagonist a self she always longed to be. There is a crack in the mirror, however, functioning as the intersection between what is and what could be. Someone's gaze can also function as a mirror in which a protagonist seeks an ideal image of the self. The desire to be reflected in someone or something leads the protagonists to Finazzi-Agro's "mortal reflection," a claustrophobic imprisonment in the Other, making characters unaware of the real self and of the world beyond.

In all her novels, the protagonists question their memories seeing themselves as reflections in the mirror of the past. Their memories often are the imprisoning mirrors reflecting the protagonists' failure to be loved and to find their identities. Yet, the process of remembering is crucial for the necessary leap from their perception of themselves as reflected in the Other to their attempts to form a personal identity and

access their real selves prompting them to start on the path toward personal discovery. Thus, according to the author, the process of self-discovery by the character, as well as the process of interpretation by the reader, must begin with remembering, subsequently transformed into a creative re-imagining of the self and the text.

To demonstrate the gradual process of self-discovery, Luft uses a particular narrative structure. All her novels (except for the *Island of the Dead*) are first person confessional narratives unfolding on two temporal planes. In the present day narrative, or frame, the protagonists return to an old family house and chronicle their solitary existence in a detached and unemotional manner. A sense of urgency is created, however, as the reader is led to understand that the present time is the critical point, a kairos, in Bakhtin's terms**,** which will determine what the outcome will be: life or death. The women seek solitude and, above all, the house itself, a symbol of the past, to engage in the process of self-discovery, a painful self-examination in the search for identity, and perhaps for the absent Mother.

The present tense narrative is constantly interrupted by recollections of past events that are supposed to explain the present and determine the future. The narrative space is also double: the women simultaneously live in the house as it is now – old, empty and unthreatening – and in the house of their childhood, the starting point of the evil, where the conjured ghosts of the past come to life. In this literal and symbolic confinement the women attempt to give birth to identities, or selves, that had never been fully acknowledged. The intermingling of past with present unfolds through a process of self-discovery, as a result of which a new self must be created in order for the protagonist to survive; failure to produce this new self spells death.

Alberto Moreiras conceptualizes the narrative time in Luft's *Family Reunion* (the distinction can be applied to other novels as well), as the intersection of two temporal planes – intratemporality which "defines the "normal" time of the quotidian" [29] and the historicity which absorbs the memories and projections of the narrator, and makes the gap between the two a precondition for the construction of meaning.

> La "repeticion" lectora del pasado de Alice se da en la brecha entre intratemporalidad e historicidad narrativa. Ese lugar vacio que el lector salta en la configuracion revela la conexion esencial entre narracion e interpretacion.)[30]

> The"repetition" of Alice's past takes place for the reader in the gap between narrative intratemporality and historicity. This empty space which the reader must fill with meaning, reveals the essential connection between narration and interpretation.

Later I will come back to Moreira's ideas in relation to my discussion of ambiguity and indeterminacy of meaning in Luft's works.

As with the plots and structure of her narratives, Luft's consistent use of archetypal images/symbols highlights the author's themes and motifs, pointing to the continuity of approaches and concerns. The recurrence of archetypal images and plots that begins with *Partners in the Game* and ends with the most recent novel *The*

Guardian, gives credence to viewing Luft's novels as variations on a single text constructed as a cycle

Deadly Eros: *The Left Wing of the Angel*

In her first novel, *A asa esquerda do anjo*, (The Left Wing of the Angel) Luft reflects on the protagonist's weak sense of the self and her inability to love, instilled in her by a rigid and puritanical grandmother, in a house where sex is associated with disease and death. The angel that presides over the family tomb is an ambiguous figure, shaped as simultaneously male and female, whose right wing points upwards to the sky while the left one points down to the grave. The hermaphroditic figure seems to suggest the sterility of both directions with no fertile space in between.

The Left Wing of the Angel is Luft's only novel to raise directly the issue of the immigrant's identity and of the character's relationship to his or her adoptive country. Gisela, the main character of the novel is the embodiment of a person suffering from lack of identity. Her grandmother, the old Frau Wolf (note the name's symbolism) is a German immigrant living in Brazil who rules over her family with an iron fist. Her oldest and favorite son has broken an unspoken rule by marrying a native woman from the Brazilian Northeast. Their child, Gisela, whom Frau Wolf insists on calling by the German equivalent Guisela, is tolerated by the grandmother on the condition that all trace of 'Brazilianness' be eradicated. In trying to form a sense of identity little Guísela/Giséla does not get any help from her mother, who herself has a diminished sense of self-worth as an intruder trying to please and placate her mother-in-law.

> Minha mãe assumia a attitude de uma collegial. E eu não podia me esquecer de falar só alemão. […] gestos, expressóes, linguagem, tudo falsificado na montagem daquele teatro em que se fraudava, até o menor resquício, a nossa identidade. [31](45)

> My mother would act like a schoolgirl, and I was not allowed to forget to speak only German.[…] gestures, expressions, language, everything was falsified in that theatrical farce in which our identity, every trace of it, was made a fraud.

This situation is unbearable for the girl. She is teased and disliked by her schoolmates who resent her grandmother's contempt for the country where she grew up, married, and had a family. Gisela is neither fully accepted by her family nor by her Brazilian schoolmates. As for her parents' marriage, Gisela realizes, it is a source of shame, guilt, and sadness :

> Mais tarde fiquei sabendo que o casamento de meu pai com elatrouxera grande desgosto para a família, especialmente Frau Wolf.Otto, o filho querido, primeiro membro da família a se casar comalguem que não era de origem alemã: quando minha avó me fitava comdesagrado, eu me envergonhava como se fosse mestiça. (46)

> Later, I understood that my father's marriage [with my mother] causeda great distaste in the family, especially for Frau Wolf. Otto, her favorite son, was the first to marry someone not of German descent. When my grandmother looked at me with displeasure, I felt ashamed as if I was a mixed blood.

Love itself seems at fault, as an act that earns disapproval and censure. Gisela's first unconscious linking of eros and death occurs on hearing the story of her beautiful cousin Anemarie, favorite granddaughter and perfect embodiment of blond elegance, beauty, and purity. In one scene, Gisela watches her cousin playing cello and sees Anemarie's burning sexuality as inseparable, in Gisela's mind, from sadness and death.

> Abraçava o violoncello, colocava-o entre as pernas, aquilo me parecia um pouco indecente, mas a musica gerada no abraço era melancolica, pesada: fazia-me pensar no Anjo do Jazigo. Majestoso e sensual. (23)

> She embraced the cello, holding it between her legs. I found it vaguely indecent but the music born of this embrace was melancholic and grave. It made me think of the Angel presiding over the family tomb. Majestic and sensual.

Anemarie runs away with her aunt's husband and is cursed and banned from the family by Frau Wolf. Years later Anemarie comes back to her old house dying from uterine cancer. When she arrives, her body is the devastated body of an old woman. The unconscious linking of sex to disease, procreation, and death is reinforced in Gisela's mind.[32]

Other events from her childhood confirm her in the conviction that body and sex are impure and alien to the sanitized environment of her grandmother's world. The conflation of identity crisis (who is she – a German Guisela or Brazilian Gisela?) and fear of erotic love is exemplified in the novel by the grandmother's view that the "dirtiness" of body and sexuality is intimately linked to the foreignness of her adopted country and, therefore, rejected.

"Foreign," Frau Wolf's ultimate Other, is Brazil itself. For Frau Wolf, all things Brazilian are foreign, especially anything from the Northeast, where the influence of African culture is strong. Brazilians are seen by Frau Wolf as possessing "foreign" bodies: sensual, lusty, and unclean. Moreover, the notion of the "foreign body", in this context, also includes sexuality in general and the sexual act in particular, with its image of a parasitic entity invading the body and leading to disease and death. The horror of the intrusion of the foreign is evident in a scene where Gisela sits on the beach playing with sand. Her grandmother, horrified, scolds the girl's mother:

> Mais que falta de hygiene! Marie, voce sabe que uma menina, principalmente, uma menina, nao pode sentar assim na areia! A areia esta cheia de vermezinhos que nao se ve! Guisela, va se

> lavar, depressa, depressa! Guaranto que voce ja esta toda cheia de bichinhos imundos! […]Levanto-me, tropeço, caio, tenho dificuldade em me livrar do peso da areia molhada nas pernas. Começo a gritar horrorizada, sinto-me invadida por milhares de vermes nojentos que se agitam, estou irremediavelmente imunda. (60)

> What an unforgivable lack of hygiene! Marie, you do know that a girl, specially a girl, cannot sit on the sand like that! The sand is full of little worms that cannot be seen! Guisela, go and wash yourself, hurry, hurry! I am sure that you are already full of these dirty little animals. […] I get up, stumble, fall. It is difficult to get rid of the weight of wet sand on my legs. Horrified, I begin screaming, I feel invaded by thousands of disgusting worms stirring up inside me. I am irremediably unclean.

Worms entering Gisela's body through her vagina constitute an intruding foreign body, which is both highly sexual and dirty. Early on, Gisela internalizes her grandmother's apprehensions and disgust of sex. When, later in the story, Gisela overhears maids talking in the kitchen about a woman "in whose belly lived an immense worm devouring her from inside" (61), her fears about her own sexuality, and about the inevitable destruction that follows sexual congress, are confirmed. "Love is not clean" is the conclusion Gisela learns (65).

When Gisela grows up and falls in love with Leo, the unconscious linking of eros with death makes her unable to accept sexual love. Torn between sexual longings and fearful repugnance, Gisela breaks her engagement with her fiancé and retreats to ponder her true identity. Frau Wolf's obsession acquires an ontological reality: Gisela eentually becomes aware of the worm living in her belly. The grandmother's prophecy has come true. Now Gisela's body cannot contain anything except the foreign body of a monstrous worm.

The story of Gisela's fear and rejection of physical love is transformed by Luft into a reflection on the very nature of life and death at the moment of conception. Anemarie's cancer started in the womb, "death chewing at the root of life"(123). Unable to open herself to love and life, Gisela watches death swallow everybody around her, until she is left alone in the old house. The last one to die is Leo, her former fiancé who, in despair, kills himself by driving his car into a wall. The day after his death Gisela gives birth to the worm. After hours of labor the worm comes out, "in a paroxysm of vomit" (139). As the worm "is calmly drinking the milk" (140), Gisela doubts the reality of the event. "I cannot believe that it is really there. Until the end I kept thinking that it was a nightmare, a hallucination, my unbridled fantasy. But now it's there" (140). Her thoughts turn again to the link between love and death and the animality of sex.

> Nos filmes as pessoas sempre parecem sofrer na hora do amor.
> As imagems são assustadoras. Carne quente de galinhas sendo
> degoladas na chácara, e eu obrigada a assistir. Virgem sangra
> na primeira noie, acho horivel. Porcos guinchavam nos

> hiquieros, estãó sendo esfaqueados ou É outra coisa? Não, nem por Leo eu me teria sometido.[...] Anemarie esta tocando, o corpo dela feito um com o violoncelo do qual surge a voz doAnjo. Dos abraços de tio Stefan brotou a morte.O amor é a morte? (140)

> In films people always seem to suffer when making love. The images are frightening. As when I was made to watch chickens when their heads were twisted, their flesh still hot. A virgin bleeds on her first night, it seems horrible. Pigs are screeching in pigsties. Are they being slaughtered, or is this other thing? No, not even for Leo's sake would I submit myself. […]Anemarie is playing, her body made one with the cello from which the voice of the Angel springs forth. Death sprang forth from uncle Stefan's embrace. Is love death?

In the whirlwind of ontological confusion between reality and delirium, the question of identity comes up anew: "My identity – what is my identity?" (141) Gisela gives birth to a creature that, like her, is devoid of identity. Her confusion and inner turmoil are not resolved, but merely acquire an external expression in the returning gaze of the worm.

> Ele vai me fitar, sem olhos, sem nariz, sem feiçoes. Sem identidade como eu – qual é o meu nome? Onde fica o meu lugar? Como se deve amar? Neve ou fogo? (141)

He is staring at me, with no eyes and no nose, without features.
He has no identity, just like me. What is my name? Where is
my place? How should one love? Snow or fog?

As the featureless creature threatens to swallow the woman who has given birth to it, the absence of self is revealed to be deadly. The conclusion to the story is informed by a touch of gothic horror, where the creature, although separate from her now, is still forever inside the woman. "My *inhabitant* and I are the *only creature* alive in this room"(141, the italics are mine). Here, as elsewhere, Luft seems to suggest that Gisela's defeat is a direct result of the character's perpetual ignorance about her identity, making regeneration impossible.

Pregnant with Death: *Partners in the Game*

Identity crisis continues to be Luft's thematic preoccupation in the author's second novel, *As parceiras* (*Partners in the Game*.)[33] Here again it is linked to the identification with the family's tragic past, the identification that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for Anelise, the novel's protagonist. Having internalized the fear of a curse hanging over the women in her family, Anelise is unable to separate her own destiny from that of her family and to succeed in love and motherhood.

Three generations of females in Anelise's clan have experienced tragedy. It all begins with Anelise's grandmother, Catarina von Sassen. At the age of fourteen Catarina is married off by her own mother to a debauched thirty-year-old syphilitic.

Four daughters are conceived in marital relations described as periodic instances of rape by a husband who is the personification of an evil fate: "jealous destiny chased her around the rooms of the great house…And Catarina succumbed to the great terror of sex and life" (14).[34] Her letters to her mother are unanswered. Catarina's mother, the first in the gallery of absent mothers, virtually washes her hands of her daughter's fate and returns to her native Germany. Paralyzed by fear and horror, Catarina withdraws into an attic room decorated in white to match the young girl's room from which she is snatched into this marriage-rape. As time passes, Catarina becomes a recluse, stops talking, and finds refuge in her "gentle madness" (18). When the family discovers Catarina's erotic love for her female nurse, the only person with whom she has contact, the scandalized family throws the nurse out of the house. Deprived of the only person for whom she feels love, Catarina jumps off her balcony, to her death.

In different ways Catarina's misfortune affects her own daughters. The youngest one, the result of the last rape, is a mentally retarded dwarf. Her name, Sibila, or Bila, refers, in a dark ironic mood, to the prophecy of a disaster that hangs over the fates of all the women in the family. The three older daughters are all emotionally damaged, in one way or another. Beata, the devoted church goer, marries only to see her husband shoot himself after two weeks of marriage, unable to endure the shame of impotence resulting, as Luft seems to suggest, from his wife's inability to love: "I think she did not want to be loved. It was safer not to be involved in a relationship that was doomed to end in death and pain" (36).

Anelise's other aunt, Dora, a successful, generous, vivacious, and independent artist, seems to have escaped the family curse. Behind her apparent stability, however,

she is also marked by lack and failure. Dora's own fears are revealed in her art: the angels in her paintings contrast luridly with the demons that are depicted in her preliminary sketches.

Anelise's mother, Norma, the one who most resembles Catarina in appearance, is an infantile woman whose only human connection is to her husband, who protects her from the world outside, replacing the mother she never had. Norma is unable to be a mother to her daughters, so Anelise and Vania grow up with the parents who are "handsome, happy, calm, and distant" (33).

From her early childhood Anelise is overcome with fears she cannot discuss with anyone. Will she become mad like her grandmother? Or never grow up like Bila? The tragic events are so ominous and unrelenting that they transcend the randomness of life and assume the mythical proportions of a curse. Anelise is driven to conclude that hers is a "family of women who always end up losing" (18).

The tragic childhood death of Anelise's only friend, Adelia, possibly by suicide is the first of a series of losses that convince Anelise that life is a game of chance, and she is but a pawn in the hands of unknown players. "It is as if life were a game in which the pieces change but the players remain the same"(44). Soon her parents die in a plane crash, and she and Vania have to live with their aunt Beata, a devout catholic who takes care of the girls out of the sense of duty, not love or affection. The years the girls spend in the old house exacerbate Anelise's fears of madness and death.

> O medo que povoara minha infância tornou-se naqueles anos do casarão um pavor profundo. E rebeldia também, de medo eu me revoltava, não queria aquela vida, nem aquelas idéias, nem aquela religião. Tudo era frio, escuro. Muito castigo. (38)
>
> The fear that surrounded my childhood was transformed, during the years I lived in the great house, into a deep terror. And also rebellion. I revolted against fear, I did not want that life, those ideas, that religion. Everything was cold and dark. A lot of punishment.

Unable to stand the oppressive atmosphere, Vania marries early to escape the house and the past associated with it. Her marriage turns out to be her undoing, a constant reminder of the curse afflicting the women of the family: her husband, fearful of her terrible family inheritance, forbids her to have children lest they be born with physical or mental defects. She ends up an unhappy, frustrated woman, and is virtually abandoned by her husband who finds solace in a series of extramarital affairs.

Anelise, determined to overcome the curse and achieve happiness, marries Tiago, the man she loves. Yet, inwardly she is beset by the ghosts of her childhood. The absence of a loving Mother and her identification with the perceived family curse prevent Anelise from developing a strong sense of self and identity. In love, she seeks a complete fusion with the Other, either by devouring him or dissolving in him. “I

wanted Tiago inside me all the time, my deepest flesh had to be his, the remotest place in me, the most fascinating seduction" (101).

Anelise finds herself split in two: the bad self, the one that defines itself in her family's troubled roots, struggles to become another, ideal self, one that will achieve happiness in love and motherhood. The best proof that she may have a chance at winning the game of life would be giving birth to a healthy baby. It becomes her obsession, her only fixation: "I lived for this child only. It was my struggle with the sick roots. I needed an enemy to triumph over" (114). In successful motherhood Anelise seeks another reflection with which she can identify. But the phrasing is obviously ambiguous: who is the enemy, the child she desperately wants or the fate that prevents her from having it?

New blows shake the feeble foundation of her hope: consecutive pregnancies all end in miscarriages. Deeply rooted in her psyche is a fear that prevents her from carrying her pregnancies to term; the fear embodied in her dwarf-aunt: "This dwarf aunt was the most elaborate fruit of the fateful tree, the family tree of which I also was a part" (103). Has Anelise internalized the idea that her body can only bear sick fruit, so that each miscarriage becomes the expulsion of a foreign object, an intruder? Or is there really a curse afflicting her family? As usual, Luft leaves the answers open to interpretation.

After many fruitless attempts, Anelise gives birth to a beautiful baby, only to find out that a birth trauma has left him brain damaged. He becomes the embodiment of death in life, an immobile beautiful mask covering a great emptiness. The tragedy renews Anelise's suspected fear that "death was not the only traitor, life was a traitor

as well" (96), impermanence and decay, "a sure and inexorable erosion" (96). When, at the age of two, her son dies, Anelise retires to the family's former cottage by the sea, to reflect on the past and the future. Having failed at love and motherhood, she perceives herself as a void, "a body with memories, like an attic inhabited by weird dwellers" (93). It is here that she begins her quest for self-knowledge and a possible regeneration.

Luft makes it clear that Anelise's search for identity is a matter of life and death, the last chance to find her true self and to heal her soul.

> Meu corpo estava tão bem quanto minha alma estava encolhida e apavorada. Fizera um sotão para mim mesma, com traves, madeirames, tijolos tirados das escuridões desde a minha infancia. Ali moravam as mulheres da minha familia; meus mortos; […] pedaços de gente perdida no mar, nas pedras, fragmentos, alusões, esboços de anjos or de monstros. Bila.Vozes alquebradas na sombra. (121)

> My body was fine while my soul was shrunken and terrified. I built my own attic with a frame and wooden beams, with bricks taken from the darkness of my childhood. There lived all the women of my family; my dead ones; […] pieces of people lost over the sea,over rocks, fragments, allusions, drawings of angels and monsters. Bila. Faint voices from the shadows.

As a result of her failed attempt to have a child, Anelise's marriage begins to erode. She refuses to make love when she is pregnant out of fear that "Tiago might kill the child inside" her (119). Again, the psychological and the mythological are intertwined. In Tiago, Anelise fears the punitive figure of the Father transformed in her unconscious into Catarina's monstrous husband, Anelise's grandfather, but also into the indifferent or malevolent God. Both, in their own way, create damaged offspring and the suffering humanity. Real tragic events and the unknown dark terrors become blurred in her mind. The legacy of her family, the curse that afflicts them all condemns Anelise to generate madness, deformity, decay, and death.

The terror experienced by Anelise and by other female protagonists of Luft's other novels is a result of their perception of life that equates motherhood with death. Instead of a vibrant force, the woman's body becomes the source of death and decay. Life becomes death at the very moment of conception, and all of Luft's mothers are pregnant with death. As we have seen above, Gisela in *The Left Wing of the Angel* ultimately gives birth to a murderous worm, in *The Partners* Anelise's children do not survive, and the Mother in *The Island of the Dead* blames herself for her daughter's paralysis. Death becomes these characters' ultimate "mortal reflection" imprisoning them in a universe ruled by "the two old witches playing a game; the shadows running across the board, jumping, falling, and devouring each other. A person desperately lighting candles, the witches blowing them out forcefully" (66).

As we will see below, Luft's solution to the problem of hopelessness and claustrophobia, inherent in seeing oneself as a reflection of the Other, lies in the emergence of a true and independent self, achieved by transgressing limitations

imposed by family history, childhood traumas, fears of failure and solitude, as well as the internalized societal notions of right and wrong.

To Merge or Separate – Mortal Reflection in the *Island of the Dead*

Seeking reflection in the Other may take the form of a desire to be fused with the Other, to achieve wholeness through dissolving one's own self. This desire goes against the Jungian definition of individuation as wholeness achieved by fusing all the aspects of one's self, particularly the female and male elements of the psyche, the fusing that would result in true psychological androgyny.[35]

The wrong understanding of wholeness, the desire for a connection taken to its ultimate limit, and clashing with the reverse desire to be a separate individual, is at the heart of the conflict in *O quarto fechado* (*Island of the Dead)*, Luft's most celebrated novel.

At the center of the story are twins, Camilo and Carolina, trapped in a mutual reflection without an opening to the world outside precluding the growth of their independent selves. It is figuratively and literally a "mortal reflection," leading to the physical death of one and emotional (and potentially physical) death of the other. The novel opens on a scene where the twins' parents, now separated, watch the coffin containing the body of their son Camilo who has died while trying to ride a wild horse. Camilo's death is a disguised suicide, and all the characters in the novel are trying to understand what made him embrace death. Their mother, Renata, blames herself for not having been able to love her strange children and for not having done anything to offset their excessive dependence on each other. Since birth, the twins

have shared a union that excluded all others. Although sometimes they tried to seek other friendships, it was clear to everybody that

> […] Era só aparencia, era provisório. Os dois como bonecos aos quais alguém fosse entrançando juntos os cabelos, amarando uns nos outros braços e pernas, e roupas, de modo que o menor movimento de um resultaria em movimento do outro. [36](27)

> This was only appearance, only temporary. The two of them were like dolls whose hair had been braided together, whose arms and legs, and clothes had been tied together so that the slightest movement on the part of one would result in movement of the other. [37] (17)

Puzzled by their relationship, Renata wonders whether it was a "luminous or perhaps a somber pact?" (15) as she watches her dead son and thinks of her daughter questioning her ability to survive her brother's death.

> Camilo e Carolina, fruto que nascera partido em dois, dedicados a refazer essa fragmentação que talves lhes fosse um sofrimento: por isso teriam aqueles corpos exauridos, os grandes olhos de quem sente dor mas nada pode dizer? Os gemeos habitavam uma caixa de vidro, inacessivel aos demais.

> Precisavam ser parecidos, precisavam tornar-se um so, nao
> tinham outra escolha. (26)

> Camilo and Carolina, a single fruit born split in two, dedicated
> to repair the rupture they had suffered. Perhaps that is why
> their bodies looked wasted, their eyes big with a pain they
> couldn't name. The twins lived in a glass box, inaccessible to
> everybody outside. They had to be alike, they had to become
> one, they would accept nothing else. (16)

There is, however, a fatal flaw, a crucial imbalance in their relationship. Although connected to his sister by unbreakable links, Camilo understands the tragic inequality inherent in their union: he leads and she, the female, follows, she is merely "the trace, the shadow that followed" (89). Confused about who he is and what they constitute together, he seeks an answer in his sister's eyes, "a word," but does not get it. The "forbidden knowledge" about the mystery of life and death he seeks cannot be revealed by his sister, since she, only a shadow, does not have words to express it.

> Era uma procura agoniada or doce; as vezes, assustadora. Ele
> afundava nessa contemplação, insistia, e ela não tinha
> respostas; era apenas um eco; eu sou um eco, dizia o olhar dela.
> Uma palavra, que palavra? (33)

> It was a search for something, a search at times agonizing, at
> times sweet, at times frightening. He probed deeper and deeper,
> with greater and greater persistence, and she had no answers
> for him. She returned his gaze as if she were an echo, only an
> echo. A word? What word? (22)

Camilo discovers a paradox: "to touch each other, souls need bodies" (89), but the perfect union of souls is not possible in bodily existence, a painful contradiction that he cannot solve. If he and Carolina are destined to be forever split, to live as doubles, incapable of becoming truly one and yet unable to separate, life will always be "transitory, impossible to maintain forever" (114). In their redoubling, their mutual mirroring, each of them is forever a reflection, a prisoner of the other's gaze. His sister, Camilo realizes, is not enough for him: "how could he live only with Carolina? With nothing to take him out of this cold, silent existence" (90).

The physical impossibility of becoming one generates a sense of inadequacy possible to surmount only by achieving individual wholeness as a psychologically androgynous self, a solution they do not contemplate. Luft appears to suggest that it is Camilo's realization of the impossibility of achieving wholeness after separation that drives him to choose death, a place where he thinks he can be reborn whole.

> Tivera de morrer: nao se contentava com as debeis luzes nos
> olhos de Carolina. Sua existencia fora atormentada:
> insuficiente porque so se completaria sendo tambem Carolina;
> excessiva, porque, sendo arcialmente a irma, acabava sentindo

> tudo em dobro, vivia duplamente a sua propria experiencia, e a
> de sua outra parte. (113)

> He had to die: he was not satisfied with the weak lights in
> Carolina' eyes. His existence was a torment: insufficient
> because he would only be complete if he were also Carolina;
> excessive because being partially his sister, he would feel
> everything in double, would live in double his own existence
> and that of the other part. (88)

Clearly, it is in death that Camilo hopes to reach the state of perfection, of union, "to arrive at the paradise that challenged, and called, and gradually opened itself to devour him" (89). As suggested by the last sentence, however, death is not the privileged place where contradictions are resolved; to embrace Death is to find a paradise that devours. Instead of desired wholeness, Camilo faces the loss of self through reflection in the ultimate Other.

Freeing himself through death, the ultimate transgression, Camilo does not find fulfillment but only eternal opposites locked in a permanent embrace. Here, and everywhere else in the novel, Camilo's experience (his voice from beyond the grave) is revealed through the voice of the omniscient narrator:

> No fundo do poço encontrei o enlaçe. A Vida e a Morte,
> masculino e feminino, o Eu e o Outro, entredevorando-se como
> uma serpente que engole a propria cauda. Da treva e do delírio

saltou a Morte de braços abertos: prostituta, donzela, promessa, danaçao. (118)

At the bottom of the well I found united Life and Death, masculine and feminine, the I and the Other, devouring each other like the serpent that swallows his own tail. From the darkness and insanity Death leaped out, opening her arms wide – prostitute, damsel, promise, damnation. (92)

Death, portrayed here as a female seducer, is not a rebirth in light and clarity, but a place of violence and struggle where contradictions are not resolved. In accordance with metaphysical dualism, the Universe has been engaged since its creation in the eternal struggle of the opposites impossible to resolve. Thus, in Ettore Finazzi-Agros' words, Camilo's experience of death represents a kind of "infernal epiphany."

Il trapasso sembra divenire il luogo ambito di una epifania suprema: quella che svela, finalmente, l'individuo a se stesso, in una identificazione senza residui, in una perfezione abissale – infernale, forse – che dovrebbe ipoteticamente conchiudere il cerchio dei rinvii dell'io al suo altro.[38]

The trespassing seems to become a sphere of ultimate epiphany through which the individual is revealed to himself in total identification, in abysmal perfection – which is also infernal –

that should, hypothetically, close the circle of the incessant send-off of the self to his Other.[39]

Some interpreters (Finazzi-Agro among them) believe that Camilo kills himself because he can not bear his father's disappointment at his son's lack of masculinity -- his lack of interest in traditionally male occupations and hobbies, as well as his effeminate demeanor. That is a misreading. The text clearly states that Camilo has long ago left behind such preoccupations, and has become indifferent to his father's views on what represents proper masculine or feminine behavior. The real catalyst for Camilo's suicide is the emergence in the novel of a new character – a Stranger, or Intruder, a young man Camilo met in unknown circumstances, to whom both brother and sister are darkly attracted. He is a complete opposite of the twins: "a beautiful boy, a young man, with a robust body, […] and a slightly vulgar laugh" (90) and, above all, a remarkable gusto for life. [40]

Camilo sees in the Stranger a possible liberation from his stultifying connection to his sister, a way to break the doubleness that can never become oneness. Alternately, if both Camilo and Carolina feel a passion for this intruder, would it be a proof that they are one single being? "By way of the Other, through his madness and his pleasure, could they finally become one forever? Or would they find some form of liberation at the end?" (91)

Camilo's and Carolina's confusion is expressed in sexual fantasies that neither dares to acknowledge. The Intruder himself is sexually ambiguous -- "In his pleasure he felt terror at his own ambiguity: in the naked face of Carolina he had

wanted to kiss and bite the face of Camilo" (92). His ambiguity results in sexual violence: "Hunting her and being hunted by her, he was really chasing her brother and being chased by him, and it was he whom he just raped in a profoundly perverted act" (92). Like Death, the Intruder devours as it promises liberation. For Camilo, his sister's sexual union with the Intruder, although marked by "anguish and pain" (92) means liberation, a way to take his quest "beyond everything, past their searching, out of their boundaries" (91).

Camilo's death wish is anticipated in the triangular relationship: Camilo, Carolina, and the Intruder are all ensnared by the game of seduction in which sexual desire is inseparable from the desire for death. A paradox of double-ness versus self-ness remains irresolvable both for the living and for the dead. After Camilo's death, Carolina realizes that their involvement with the Intruder had been a prelude for the seduction by Death; their search for resolution – oneness or separation – leading only to a further confusion in the whirlwind of reflections.

In Luft's novel, like in so many other modern texts (Lars von Trier and Robert Stone come to mind), a male quest for wholeness seems to require sacrificing the female. Camilo chooses to die in the hope of completing his quest and finding answers to questions that torture him. For that, he needs to leave Carolina and continue alone. Carolina's fate, her loneliness and isolation do not stop him, and he leaves her without much thought. However, the sacrifice is in vain: Camilo does not find his answers in death, while Carolina's confusion about her identity increases. Uncertain about who she is – Camilo, Carolina, or both – she wonders whether "she lost Camilo or assimilated him" (102).

Either way the outcome is the same. Wholeness comes at the price of imprisonment, self-sufficiency at the price of loneliness: "from now on pleasure and love would come from within her own walls, where there were no windows or doors, where she was totally alone" (101). She is increasingly more aware of the futility of attempts to resolve the conflict either through their relationship with the Intruder or through Camilo's death: "Was this the right way? […] theIntruder forcing himself inside her, saw himself desiring Camilo, like someone desiring his own death " (99).

After Camilo's death Carolina cuts her hair to look like her brother; in effect, to become him. She faces the difficult task of learning how to experience everything from inside her own being, rather than through the reflection in her brother. The primary question for Carolina is whether Camilo has received, at the price of abandoning her, some kind of final revelation, an answer to the questions that consumed him: "why [he] was born divided in two. I wanted to comprehend the enigma of Life and now all I found was the face of Death, which I'll try to learn now" (88). At one moment, she feels her brother's presence as if they have finally become a "single body. After the pain of being separate, now they were, perhaps, a single soul. Lips, gash, mouth, *word*" (italics in the original, 102). The word Carolina is seeking is not revealed; at the end of the novel, however, Luft gives an ironic and enigmatic hint at a possible interpretation. It seems that the exact nature of that word, designed to unveil the mystery of existence, is deliberately left for the reader to decipher.

The "mortal reflection," as exemplified in this novel, is the irrepressible desire for completeness achieved through a perfect and total reflection in another. "This desire is revealed in the "impure" passion for a double,"[41] in the "heresy of self-

love"[42] revealed in the gaze of the Other. *The Island of the Dead* is the only novel in the cycle told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator with access to the minds of all the characters. The narrative polyphony generated by this approach creates a sense of commonality of preoccupation with a profound lack of wholeness and desire for identification with the Other, shared by all the characters in the novel. Unable to escape a sense of inferiority rooted in their own mirroring psyches, Luft's characters are compelled to go beyond the mirror into the seeming perfection of Death in order to seize the self's perfect image.

Camilo's death forces everybody to look into their own abyss and ponder their relationships to each other, as well as their losses and their guilt. With different degrees of introspection, the self-analysis reveals the characters' own sense of insufficiency and their need to fill this lack through identification with an Other. The mother, Renata, has more awareness than the rest: she remembers her life as a series of identifications with something or someone. When music, which had been for years her only passion, proves insufficient to assuage her feeling of loneliness and desire for love, she gives it up and throws herself into a marriage with Martin seeking in his passion a reflection "in order to preserve the wholeness of the soul" (12). The marriage does not fill the lack in her soul, for nothing ever will: "everything is a disordered beat, the search for the meaning of life" (12). Renata's inner chaos is amplified by the internalized feelings of guilt and remorse. Unable to love her husband and her children, she feels responsible for Camilo's death, Carolina's distress, and Martin's unhappiness.

Her husband Martin is a needy, insecure person whose attraction to Renata is driven by her otherness. She possesses an inner life that he cannot comprehend, one that he struggles to possess and appropriate, in order to find in her his own ideal reflection. He also tries to see himself in his son but fails completely, since Camilo does not resemble him in the least. Martin cannot understand Camilo's suicide in terms of Camilo's own struggle but assumes that his son has killed himself in order to punish him, the father. Martin is also aware of his betrayal of Ella, his first love. Although not related by blood, they were brought up together like brother and sister. Viewed by society as incest, erotic love between the two is deemed impossible. When Ella's mother (and Martin's adoptive mother) demands that he give up Ella, he appears to conform, not daring to transgress the values imposed on him by society. However, Martin and Ella continue to see each other secretly, until Ella's near-fatal accident. Martin's public disavowal of their love has grave consequences for Ella who falls into a vegetative state, leaving Martin with a feeling of perpetual guilt and the memory of a lost love.

Clara, Martin's sister and Camilo's aunt, lives as a recluse in the family house, nursing an injured psyche and forever awaiting a Lover who never comes. Clara is haunted by the memory of a priest who "had tossed the stone of his strange passion into the placid waters of her body, of her soul, and had gone away, leaving a whirlpool that would not end. […]He entered her hidden forest and planted madness there. And he ran away" (78). It appears that Clara's imaginary Lover, whom she calls the Father, is a phantom bearing the features of three figures: father, priest, and God.

In Clara's recollection, the priest, who often came to the house and formed a friendship of sorts with her, eventually asked to see her naked body and sex. According to the priest, seeing Clara intimately was going to liberate him from his inner turmoil without it being a sin. It would be, in his words, "a mystical vision. […] to look at a woman's sex. […] he would be contemplating the fountain of life, and that could not be sinful. He would seek in the chasm of life a salvation she could not give him" (80).

As a Catholic, Clara is ashamed of being in love with a priest. She also feels that God has abandoned her. In Clara's mind, God, in his solitude and narcissistic desire, wants to see his perfect image reflected in his creation. Instead, when he finds only imperfection, the messiness of life, sex, and the body, he withdraws.

The concept of an absent God who withdraws from creation is a common motif in Luft's work. When a protagonist in another novel, *The Family Reunion*, cries out in despair, the others are not sure which word they have heard: is it "Mother" or "God"? Whether Mother or Father, masculine or feminine, it is always the unfulfilled desire for connection with origins, with the source of life and love that is at the root of unhappiness. Clara is represented here as both a Daughter and a Mother whose connection to her Father/Son/God has been severed. She lives enclosed in her own memory of unfulfilled love whose only counterpart is her fantasy of a great love to come. The memory and the fantasy reflect each other, imprisoning Clara in her own self-deception.

Another character in the novel who is consumed by guilt and tries to see her better image in the gaze of the Other is the Mother. She is in fact only Ella's mother,

her daughter a fruit of a drunken one-night stand that she would rather forget. She is not allowed to forget, however, since her now monstrous daughter demands to be cared for by the Mother, not accepting anyone else. The daughter haunts her "glued to her […] sucking her blood with a thousand tentacles, demanding the love and understanding that were given so scarcely when Ella was healthy and beautiful" (59). Thus, she assumes the exclusive care of Ella, but her dedication is not love; she actually feels "relieved, absconding her daughter away in that [figurative] island" (95). Instead, she is motivated by fear and guilt, a fear of seeing herself as she really is: a mother without motherhood, a mother who gives death at the moment of giving birth. Much later she comes to question her part in Ella's tragedy: "To forbid love was to forbid life, the forbidding of love engendered death, whatever kind of love, whatever kind of forbidding" (97). The Mother in *The Island of the Dead*, as the following quotation underscores, is the quintessential embodiment of Luft's recurrent motif: Mother as the Absence of Love.

> Mamãe pensava: Ella estara se vingando porque não a amei direito? Ou porque lhe neguei o amor de Martim? O corpo mole que se cobria de escaras ainda produziria pensamentos? Odio, rancor? […] Sera que ela rí de mim? Pensava Mamãe. Sera que ela sabe que sempre atendo porque tenho medo? Nunca me queixo, nao reclamo: medo. (112)

> The Mother thought: Is Ella avenging herself because I did not love her enough? Or because I denied her the love of Martin? Could this inert body covered with scabs still produce thoughts? Hatred,

> resentment? […] Is it possible she is laughing at me? Is it possible she knows that I always takecare of her because I am afraid? I never complain, never reproach: fear. (96)

Trying and failing to find fulfillment in others, the characters are drawn into a labyrinth of reflections ending in Death, the ultimate Other. The theme of Death is more prominent in this novel than in any other work by Luft. The majority of characters share Renata's conviction that life and "all human relationships are suffering" (105), an embrace that fails to satisfy, an illusory closeness that leads to suffocating claustrophobia. The only escape from the deceitful closeness, according to Renata, is solitude or death. Renata feels that she is beginning to love death seeing "after all only Death is certain, […] always waiting, still. We are but a breath of air in the dark, a flight that terminates in the womb of Death, the only reality" (60). Death also attracts Martin, unhappy in his marriage and a stranger to his children. For him, the death wish is embodied in his continuing love for Ella "already dead and still alive" (57) whom he visits regularly, especially after his marriage to Renata begins to deteriorate.

> Ella, antiga e perfeita, esperava ainda pore ele para viverem um ardente amor. Então Martim falava do fracaço e da solidão em sua vida com Renata, dos estranhos filhos, das decepções. Era como se Ella o pudesse ouvir, apertar no seio quente o rosto dele e o consolar. (58)

> The Ella of the past, still perfect, waited for them to live
> together in love. Martin then talked about his failures and about
> his loneliness living with Renata, about his strange children,
> about his disappointments. It was as if she could hear him, hold
> his face against her warm breasts tightly, and console him. (42)

Carolina's self effacement, manifested in the act of cutting her hair to resemble Camilo completely, reflects her desire for the total extinction of the self. She is seen by others as "a person condemned to death who had already begun to die. Carolina's arms and legs, body, soul would slowly die, and there was nothing anyone could do" (57). Dying, she hopes to be united with Camilo forever: "It was like two souls tearing themselves free of the anguish and violence of flesh, sensuality, perfume, and pleasure. After the pain of being separate, now they were perhaps, a single soul" (102). Clara, suspended between memory and fantasy, is already dead to the present, living in the past and the future.

Death in the novel is conceptualized as a metaphysical Fall, resulting from betrayal and withdrawal of love, and embodied in the image of a physical fall. Camilo falls off a horse, "Angel Rafael," Renata and Martin's young son, falls down the stairs, and Ella falls from a fence. Renata's "compulsion toward the abyss" (26) is echoed in Clara's recurrent dreams of falling off a cliff:

> parada á beira de um penhasco ou no peitoril externo de uma
> janela muito alta. Era sugada para baixo, alguma coisa a

> chupava pelos pés, era nojento e irresistivel. Ela sabia: se se entregasse, não voltaria nunca mais: prazer ou morte? (92)

> standing on the edge of a cliff or on the outside ledge of a high window. Something was sucking her down, sucking her by her feet, something irresistible, repulsive. She knew that if she let herself go she would never return. Was it pleasure or death? (72)

Finally, the house itself is precariously perched on a cliff, battered by snow blizzards.[43]

"Falling" can simultaneously refer to a number of things: random occurrences, results of a moral flaw, a family curse, human intolerance, and lack of love. In Luft's novels, as in Galina Shcherbakova's *The Actress and the Policeman,* the physical falls symbolize the existential fall into self-deception, and endless reflections. On the metaphysical level, they can be interpreted as a fall into the imperfect world. At the moment of Carolina's rape by the Intruder, for example, it occurs to her that the link between pleasure and suffering is but a reflection of the inseparability of life and death:

> Tudo acontecera antes mesmo de nascerem; ainda na semente: quando a Morte faz o primeiro gesto, e caimos para o mundo, vindos de baixo do seu manto. (116)

> All that was to happen was there before they had ever been
> born, when they were still in the seed, even before the seed –
> when Death first signals, and we fall into the world, coming
> out from under her cloak. (91)

Underscoring the unity of opposites, Luft represents Death as a two gendered entity – both feminine and masculine – identifying it with the horse, "a murderous lover" of unknown gender (88), the Intruder, who makes love both to Camilo and Carolina, and, finally, embodying it in Camilo's vision as a female Seducer – "prostitute, damsel, promise, damnation"-- into whose embraces Camilo throws himself (92). Actually, every character in the story personifies death in one way or another. One of them is Ella, a monstrous presence, locked in a room upstairs. Ella/She is another embodiment of death, repulsive and attractive to all in the House, an indecipherable enigma of existence. Another one is the Mother, a grotesque mask, a parody of a living being. Gazing in the mirror, without her make-up and her wig, attributes that give her an air of authority, the Mother sees the image of her monstrous daughter: "She lifted her arms and slowly took off her wig, revealing a round head, almost bald, the skull of Ella" (122). The Mother is revealed as a fraud, someone who brings death into her children's lives, "leading them toward a tragedy, precipitating them into the abyss that swallowed everything and everybody" (Finazzi, 101).

Death is also the theme of a painting, central to the symbolism of the novel, hanging on the wall in the room where Camilo's casket lies. It is a reproduction of

Bocklin's *Island of the Dead* depicting a boatman taking a casket across the river to the Island of the Dead. Renata, whose gaze shifts between the painting and her son's casket, notices that the boatman in the painting is not a male figure but a woman.[44] For Renata, Thanatos is the ultimate Lover/ Mother; a Lover who invites to die in the object of the desire, and a Mother who is the source of death but also the source of life.[45] Looking at the painting Renata wonders, "where is Camilo?" and "what is Death?" (115) "If Renata knew the answer, perhaps, she could participate in Camilo's new dimension. If there were words" (103). But she cannot hear his words -- her son, whom she did not know how to love, is lost to her forever. In another attempt at self-deception, Renata reasons that now she can possess her son, forever appropriating his unchanging image. As Gippius' Charlotte in *The Living and the Dead* saw herself reflected in the dead beloved, Renata needs an unchanging image of her dead son to see her ideal reflection as a loving mother: "The dead, defined forever, remain what we want them to be" (103).

Not only Camilo and Carolina, but every inhabitant of the House shares with some other character an essential fault or lack, in a game of mutual reflections. Renata and the Mother are both incapable of loving their children, and are tormented by guilt. Ella, half dead but clinging to life, as if she expected a miracle, resembles Clara, who is "preparing herself for a love postponed forever" (77). Carolina thinks that she will become just like Ella, that she has begun to rot, that Camilo's death "will contaminate [her], his worms will eat [her] eyes and choke [her] veins" (98). Martin, disturbed by his son's effeminate appearance and demeanor, which he attributes to the twins' excessive closeness, tries to separate them by assigning them rigid gender

roles. In this, he repeats the action of the Mother who, separating him and Ella, caused their downfall. The space of the novel itself is structured in such a way that different spatial locations appear to mirror each other. The "Closed Room" of the original title, where Ella lies suspended between life and death, is reflected in the chamber containing the casket with Camilo's body and in the painting enclosed in its frame, as well as in individual characters trapped in their own psyches.

The House itself is a place of entrapment and isolation, separated from the outside world and frozen in time that stands still. The House-prison has secrets that need to be revealed if the inhabitants can hope to escape its firm hold on their fates. Will it release them? What is the way out – death or rebirth? Renata, sitting over Camilo's casket, contemplates the possibility of such rebirth. She is singled out among other characters in her willingness to face the self-deceptions that shaped her life. Her name, which means "reborn" in Portuguese, also suggests the privileged position Luft accords to her in terms of gaining self-awareness and trying to become her own self.

> Eu traí a mim mesma, quando abandonei música para ser infeliz no amor. Mas o que é traição? Não estou sempre trocando uma coisa por outra porque meu coração decide que essa outra é melhor, e a ela é preciso ser leal. (131)
>
> I betrayed myself when I abandoned music to be unhappy in love. But what is betrayal? Am I not always trading one thing

> for another because my heart decides that the other is better
> and so I should seek it instead? (105)

A sudden calm comes over Renata, she feels that "the anguish that had punished her, the compulsion that had moved her, that made her moan like a soul in torment, had also died within her" (105). As in Luft's other novels, the final reckoning involves the need to give birth to a new self. But in Renata's case, it is a strange rebirth since all she feels is "emptiness [where] there will finally be rest" (106).

However, two unexplainable events that occur at the end of the novel, point in the direction of Renata's rebirth as a new self. At first, a "gasping, throaty" demonic laughter is heard coming from the closed room upstairs. Ella, who has not produced a sound for thirty years, is laughing. "She was laughing so much that her enormous body shook, she shut her eyes tight, in a fit of frensy, she pressed the pillow with her head again and again" (106). Her voice joins the voices of other characters, including Camilo's voice from the world beyond, and individual consciousnesses melt into one collective consciousness gathering a momentum that will bring about the explosion of the "sick heart of the house" of the quotation below:

> O coração doente da casa explodia. Como um animal que
> reuniu em sua cova excrementos, folhas podres, vermes, a dor
> acumulada, a consciencia repugnada de si mesma e a repulse
> dos outros começavam a rebentar. (133)

> The sick heart of the house was exploding. Like the excrement,
> rotten leaves, and worms an animal accumulates in his cave,
> the accumulated pain, the consciousness repugnant to itself,
> and the repulsion of others began to explode. (106)

And then the laughter becomes a breath of cold wind traveling through a house in which all doors and windows are closed. Where does it come from? It circulates through the House, lifting dust from hidden corners, blowing up Renata's skirt, touching Martin's back, leaving as suddenly as it has come, "out of the window and […] through the spirals of fog in the garden. Over the black treetops the pulsations of a new day forced light into the thick fog, and the light struck the living room […]" (106).

A true rebirth must take Luft's protagonists simultaneously in two directions: inside and outside. The inward movement affirms the birth of a true inner self, free of reflections; but to realize its potential it must turn itself toward others and the world beyond the "sick house" of entrapment. The wind in the final pages of the novel is the breath of fresh air that opens a possibility for a true rebirth, not just into silence and immobility but into accepting life and the new self.

The paradox of oneness or multiplicity, wholeness or fragmentation can never be solved, according to Luft. Self and Other, Life and Death mirror each other in an endless exchange of "mortal reflections." When one accepts this fact and settles for a compromise, existence becomes tolerable. Giora Shoham talks about legitimate and illegitimate ways of dealing with the unattainable longing of a total merger with

another. In *The Island of the Dead*, Luft often refers to an enigmatic "word." Survival, she says, is in the "word." Does she mean, like Giora Shoham, that finding a legitimate way to sublimate the desire for a total immersion in the Other, becoming one's own self *is* the "word?" (my emphasis) Is it the inner truth that we find when we look inside ourselves rather than seeking reflections? Luft does not give an authoritative answer; perhaps, such an answer does not exist, and everyone has to find it on her or his own. It is true, however, that the final paragraph of the *Island of the Dead* offers a potential for renewal, striking a positive chord, pointing to a possibility of a new day outside of the House.

Exiled from Life: *The Red House*

As in *The Island of the Dead*, themes of loss, insecurity, and the search for a true self play an important role in the novel *Exilio*, (*The Red House).* A woman who has lost all the things that defined her identity – her "house, job, friends, city, security" (15) and, as a result of separation from her husband is cut off from her only son – comes to the Red House to examine her soul. Her ostensible reason for coming to the town where the Red House is located is to be with a man she loves and whom she sees as her "only hope of salvation" (14). She intends to reestablish her professional life, a new family, and to be a mother to her lover's child. Things turn out differently than expected, however. Her hopes of being reintegrated into life are crushed when she meets her lover's severely handicapped son. Suddenly, the woman realizes that she cannot bring herself to love this creature, especially when her own beautiful and healthy son is taken away from her. Failing at love and motherhood she

sees herself as following in the steps of her own mother, becoming an absent parent to a child who, like herself, will grow up without his mother's love.

As in Luft's other novels, the protagonist's identification with her past leads to insecurity and fear of life. Her own mother, an incurable alcoholic who eventually shoots herself to death, is remote and indifferent, treating her children as if they were a nuisance. The protagonist's internalized fear of never achieving happiness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of her defeat. The fate of her little brother is even more tragic. A toddler at the time of their mother's suicide, he is found lying next to her, sucking on her breast filled with blood. He never develops normally, and as an adult, lives in a twilight zone of insanity. As the protagonist's relationships fail, the ghosts of the past come to haunt her again, causing her to doubt whether she can go on living.

The Red House replays Luft's familiar themes with two key differences. First, the author widens the scope of her investigation. Here, for the first time, the house is not a single-family residence but a lodging house, an impersonal and strange abode that attracts the lonely, the sick, and those scorned by society. Among the lodgers are two women lovers, one of whom is dying; a father and daughter who seem to have a strange, sad relationship with a hint of incest; and an old woman who awaits the return of her sons who have drowned a long time ago. There is "the strange woman covered in pockmarks, who always keeps her head down and does not speak to anyone" (14); a dwarf; and the protagonist's mad brother with his male nurse.

The wider circle of characters allows Luft to present the themes of suffering, solitude, and abandonment on a larger scale. Also, by transforming the Red House

from a family dwelling into a refuge for the whole "race of the exiled" (47), Luft puts in relief the metaphysical elements of her work, including the idea that the universe has its malevolent aspect. The smothering family dwelling of her previous novels becomes a more sinister entity. The house surroundings –the jungle, a steep cliff, and a dead-end street – all reinforce the feeling of isolation and entrapment. This setting matches the protagonist's emotional state described as "an entangled forest in which I have become trapped" (15). The dwellers in the Red House do not inhabit it; rather, they are possessed and imprisoned by it, with death being their only means of escape. The epigraph to the book sets the melancholy tone by addressing the inhabitants, who can never escape their suffering.

> Oh, wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and misery,
> why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most
> expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly
> beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be *nothing.* But
> the second best for you is to die soon.
>
> The words of wise Silenus in *The Birth of Tragedy* by
> Nietzsche

The characters living in the house, although highly idiosyncratic, come to represent all humanity, and its uses capital letters to name them): the Dwarf, the Girls (the Brunette and the Blonde), the Maids, the mysterious Madame (the owner of the Red House whose existence is questionable), the Nurse-Torturer, and others. The protagonist-narrator refers to herself as "I." Neither she nor the other residents of the House are identified by name emphasizing the notion that they are simultaneously

everyman/woman but also form a special group, rejected by the society at large and subject to different laws than those governing the natural world.

Indeed, the laws of nature do not apply to the inhabitants of the Red House. The second new feature in this novel is Luft's greater use of the elements of magic realism. The universe of the *Red House* is ambiguous and uncertain, the borders between reality and fantasy more fluid and shifting, and the ontological reality of people is questioned. The owner of the Red House, known as Madame, never appears, and the protagonist's inquiries about her are met by the maids' ambiguous smiles. A voice calling the protagonist on the telephone is not identified, and may not even exist.

Another way Luft chooses to problematize the notion of existence is to have characters from her other novels reappear in *The Red House,* in a variety of forms. For example, a toy clown, who stands in for the dead boy in *Family Reunion*, appears in *The Red House* as a drawing by the protagonist's mad brother. Even though the boy has never been seen by the mad artist, the drawing bears an uncanny likeness to the protagonist's son. The characters' appearance in different forms or a substitution of simulacra to the living being serves to question the ontological status of reality. Anelise's dwarf-sister in *Partners in the Game* reappears in *The Red House* as a dwarf from the protagonist's childhood. The dwarf's existence is also uncertain: he may or may not be an imaginary friend helping the girl to cope with her mother's suicide. His reemergence in the Red House equally cannot be taken for granted, neither can it be easily dismissed as the protagonist's fantasy. When the protagonist asks the maids about the dwarf's presence in the house, they only look at each other

and smile. Are they smiling at her "insanity," or do they know a secret they will not reveal? Moreover, in the space of the novel, the dwarf changes shapes, first into a cat, then into a little child, and back into a cat at the moment of his death.

As in other novels of magical realism, events that defy rational explanations or, that at least, cannot be reduced to natural explanations, occur in the Red House. The reader is uncertain whether the seemingly fantastic events actually take place or merely exist in the minds of the characters. Most of these fantastic visions are experienced by the protagonist. One day, she sees her neighbor, the old woman, crouched at the edge of the roof.

> Vejo-a nítida, recortada diante do céu. Tão espantoso que quase dou um grito, Sai apenas um som roufenho da minha garganta. [...] O cabelo branco desgrenhado, tremula como farrapos; vira –se para o mar, quase de costas para mím. As pernas descarnadas, expostas, o vestido arrepanhado. (178)

> She is clearly outlined against the sky. I call out in terror but all that comes from my throat is a low rasping. […] Her disheveled white hair blows about in the night air; she turns towards the sea, almost with her back to me. Her emaciated legs bare and exposed, her dress badly creased. (157)

Another time, she sees the lesbian lovers dancing on the same roof. What makes it more difficult to ascertain whether it is a supernatural occurrence or a vision brought

about by the protagonist's inflamed imagination, is the fact that she is a doctor, trained to interpret events within a rational and scientific framework. Luft makes interpretation even harder by writing the novel as first person narrative, from the protagonist's point of view, so that refutation or confirmation by other characters is not available.

Dreams, another device used in magic realism, play an important part in the creation of the oneiric atmosphere of the novel. In *The Red House*, not only is it difficult to distinguish dreams from reality, but some dreams, although dreamed by the protagonist, seem to be shared by the inhabitants of the house. It is a collective dream of a community of people united by their sense of loss and despair. In the "coffin" dream, the protagonist dreams about her lost child who, simultaneously, is the suffering child of her lover, as well as the lost children of the old woman, and, perhaps, the child the lesbian lovers will never have. Her fear of life is expressed in the image of being precariously perched between the consoling words of the nun and the daunting ones of the trickster.

> Levo pela mão meu filho, inundada de alegria, há quanto
> tempo não sou feliz ? Mas de repente não é mas ele é l Anão,
> sua pele áspera, um sapoentre meus dedos. – A vida é dura –
> ele coaxa, andando a meu lado.- Deus é grande, Deus é grande
> – entoa irmão Candida, mas não mecomforta. (188)

> I joyfully take my child by the hand. It is a long time since I last felt such happiness. Suddenly my child has vanished. The dwarf has taken his place, his skin as scaly as that of a toad as his hand grabs mine. “Life is grim,” he mutters under his breath. “God is kind and all merciful,” intones sister Candida, but her words fail to console me. (166)

A “birth” dream reflects the recurrent motif in Luft’s fiction of mothers giving birth to death. In this novel, the motif is embodied in the madness of the protagonist’s brother but also in the protagonist’s fear that her own son will grow without his mother’s love.

> Estou diante de uma mesa cirúrgica cesariana. Fiz centenas na vida conheçode cor o ritual. Sei onde piso. […] Mas desta vez entendo que não é para tirardali uma vida, e sim para enfiar ali uma morte. [...] Alguém coloca nas minhas mãos o bebe que preciso meter nesse ventre abersto, mas não é um bebe é o Anão, encolhido, nu, sem chapéu. (194)

> I am about to perform a Cesarean operation. I have performed many such operations: I know the routine off by heart. […] but this time I am not about to withdraw a living creature from a womb but to insert a corpse. […] Someone hands me the child I am to place in this open womb. But it is not a baby, it is the

Dwarf, huddled up, stark naked, and without his bowler hat.

(171-2)

The presence of the dwarf in the protagonist's dreams is not coincidental. A trickster figure, a questioner and a doubter, the dwarf is a catalyst who forces the protagonist to face her conscious and unconscious fears and the ghosts that hold her captive. Provocative and sometimes cruel, the Dwarf has been the only mirror in which she can search for her real self. He mentions her astonishing likeness to her mother, a troubling observation for the protagonist, who simultaneously wants to forget her mother and recreate her in a new image. He also reproaches her for not visiting her brother, kept in a room upstairs and attended only by a Nurse-Torturer.

The most important function of the dwarf, however, is to force the protagonist, by his taunts and comments, to stop seeing herself as a reflection of her past. A journey into one's past is partly an ego-driven process of remembering, analyzing, and sorting out, and partly an emotional process of soul-making, of creating meaningful experiences from events, a process necessary for the emergence of a true self.[46] For Hillman, as for Jung, the soul is the link between the ego and the self which otherwise remain separate and often opposed to each other. The deliverance from the past, in this novel as in Luft's other novels, is predicated on freeing the self from its dependence on the past, so that a new self may emerge. The trickster-dwarf, by pointing out the protagonist's resemblance to her mother, simultaneously provokes in her the desire to separate, to view the events of her life as material from which she fashions her own experiences.

The dwarf's role in the novel is, however, ambiguous. As a trickster, he can be both malevolent and benevolent. Having, uncannily, an unlimited knowledge of the protagonist's past, the offensive and sometimes brutal dwarf provides the only venue in which she can look for her past. While he is helpful to the protagonist in her journey of self-discovery, he also makes her utterly dependent on him, a reflection in his gaze. "I no longer fear him. But the thought of living without him fills me with panic. […] [T]his little man [is] part of me, the fruit of my shadows and longings, my partner in exile" (175).

Alone and disoriented on the sinking ship of the Red House, the protagonist reaches out to the world beyond, trying to anchor her existence in others. But all her attempts are thwarted, as death encroaches on everything she hopes to achieve. The nun, her only friend and support in the convent where she was sent following her mother's suicide, dies. So does one of the lesbian lovers, a devastating blow to the one who remains. The only two people with whom the protagonist formed something like a friendship are no longer available to her. Unable to stand the sight of her lover's sick child, she breaks off the relationship, on which she had placed her hopes for happiness. The last to go is the dwarf. One day the protagonist finds him dead in her room, "curled up, motionless, and dressed in black" (174). Her first reaction is grief and panic: "I cannot remember ever having cried so much. The tears of someone giving birth to herself, painfully opening her legs to release blood and pus and groaning all the while" (175). She is unsure of her ability to continue the quest alone:

> O meu homenzinho mutilado tomou a minha morte; usurpou a
> minha liberdade, me obriga a completar o círculo da minha

> procura aflita. Ou saberia que talvez haja saída? Que afinal conseguirei conviver com toda a solidão, a loucura, a merda toda, a culpa? (197)

> This deformed little man has usurped [her] death, stolen [her] freedom, forcing [her] to continue [her] anguished quest to the last. Or could he have known that there is some way out of this labyrinth? That I shall finally come to terms with this loneliness, madness, degradation, and guilt? (175)

As it happens, the protagonist is unable to find her way out of her self-reflecting psyche. Thus begins her descent towards the blind center of the labyrinth. Instead of freeing herself from the "mortal reflection" in others and in her past, she identifies herself with it even more strongly. This process is expressed in a series of images running in the protagonist's mind. In one scene, the Dwarf becomes a dead child sucking the breast of the barren mother, in a twisted reflection of the protagonist's brother's attempts to obtain nourishment from his dead mother. "I barely support him in one arm as if he were an infant sucking milk" (178). As she simultaneously mourns him and tries to get rid of his dead body, she becomes "the child of [her] own solitude, of [her] orphanhood, of Gabriel's madness, of Mother's insatiable thirst, the child of this swamp engulfing all of us" (176), realizing that "she has lived all these years without ever having learned how to love" (200). To find the

love, to recreate the mother the protagonist starts on her last journey into the heart of the jungle.

As often is the case in Luft's novels, the ending of *The Red House* is ambiguous. Just before she discovers the dead Dwarf, the protagonist announces that she knows "where [she] must go," that she will find a clearing in the jungle. Is the "clearing" a place in her psyche where she can finally find herself independent of others? Or is it the place of her final rest in the Jungle, a site that has tempted and seduced her throughout her stay in the Red House? It is all of that and, more importantly, it is the image of her mother as she hopes to recreate it: "My mother was a forest of enigmas.[47] I shall find the way to some clearing where I may quench my thirst" (172). But the encounter with the mother she longs for can only take place in death: "I long for death," she says a few lines later. We last see the protagonist as she enters the jungle through the secret entrance that the Dwarf has shown her earlier. Images of decay and rebirth, violence and peace intertwine, forming a continuum in which life and death are united in an unbreakable embrace.

> Primeiros passos, tropeçando. Cheiro de mato, almíscar,
> miusgos úmidos.Decomposiçao e nascimento, cogumelos
> soltando do esterco.Depois, meu passo se firma. Aqui e ali,
> reflexos verdes: ratazanas não temolhos assim. Aqui haverá
> enfim lugar, como numca tive. Avanço rápido,arfando – Mãe,
> mãe… Não me quis a morte: o Anão assumiu todo o meu
> espaçodentro dela. Fiquei de fora. Mas posso me aninhar num
> regaço transitório, entre essas raízes cúmplices, chão eterno.

> Auscultar o coração e,aramanhado das coisas, que empurra as torrentes da vida e da morte que nos levam.Talvez eu não consigo chegar em casa. Talvez, chegando, não possa ficar. Quem sabe? (200)

> The first faltering steps. I can smell the forest, musk, damp mosses. Nature withering and reviving. […] My steps become steadier. Flashes of green here and there. Like the gleaming eyes of rats. Here at last I shall find the refuge I have been seeking. Breathless, I rush ahead: 'Mother, Mother…'Death refused to claim me. The Dwarf has taken my place. I have been left outside. But here I can rest awhile amongst these comforting roots on eternal soil. Probing my inner turmoil, my troubled soul buffeted by the onslaught of life and death. Perhaps I shall never reach home. Or perhaps I shall get there only to be sent away. Who can tell? (178)

The protagonist's search for the Mother continues but on different terms: she is propelled back to her childhood home, in the hope of finding a different past, a different Mother, and of learning how to love. But this magically altered past can only be found in a world beyond this one, where life and death endlessly spring from each other: "nature withering and reviving." As in Chopin's *The Awakening,* death here is not represented as immobility and stasis; instead, we see the protagonist moving, rushing ahead toward rebirth and reunion with those she has always longed to love.

Both Luft and Chopin refuse to present their protagonists' death as an absolute end of existence. Like Edna Pontellier, the heroine of the *Exilio* is never seen stopping; she continues her joyful march towards the ultimate unity with the unknown. Like Edna, she abandons the world of the living and passes into some other form of existence, her own "fantasy plot."

The Woman Who Learned to Sing: The Guardian

The cycle of novels which starts with *As Parceiras*, ends with Luft's last novel to date *A Sentinela* (*The Guardian*). Since the appearance of *The Guardian*, Luft has published memoirs, books of essays, and poetry but no further novels. In all the previous novels the woman-protagonist is only partially successful in her struggle to free herself from the ghosts of the past and from fears of the future. Nearly all characters gain some awareness about who they are, but this revelation comes too late to empower them or to give them the strength and desire to live. In a letter to Pedro Paulo de Sena Madureiro, Luft says about her last novel:

> Talvez esta seja uma virada em minha obra: personagens nao mais exclusivamente tangidos por fatalidades, mas responsaveis. E, por isso, um livro mais esperancoso: alguem renasce em si e de si mesmo e, ainda que guarde um ultimo misterio indecifravel na gruta de seupantanoso jardim (o interno e o externo), lanca-se na vida e recria o mundo. O *seu* mundo, que miticamente irrompe de sua voz. De sua palavra.[48]

> Perhaps [this book] represents a turn in my work: the protagonists are no longer molded by destiny alone but assume personal responsibility. Because of that, it is a more hopeful book: a person is reborn in herself and by herself. And although an ultimate undecipherable mystery remains, lying in the grotto of her garden (internal and external), she throws herself into life and recreates the world. *Her own* world that springs mythically from her voice. From her word.[49]

The Guardian features a heroine, Nora, who succeeds in achieving wholeness, learns to establish sustainable relationships and transforms her loneliness into a creative solitude, the source of artistic inspiration. Nora grows from being a lonely neglected child, frustrated lover, and insecure mother into a woman aware of her creative gifts, one who celebrates life and contains within herself the whole universe.

Like all the other female protagonists in Luft's novels, Nora carries the burden of an unhappy childhood, of being unloved by her mother and neglected by her father. She harbors a self-imposed feeling of guilt about the death of her sister, her mother's favorite, of whom she has always been jealous. Always in need of security and of someone to support her emotionally, Nora, to paraphrase Luft, is one of the many women in her novels who always end up losing in the game of life. The man she loves comes and goes, never giving her assurances about his return. Nora's son Henrique is her only hope an enduring connection but, unwittingly, she forces him to

leave with her excessive neediness and anxiety. She cannot accept that he is different and does not conform to the ideal of masculinity embodied in the figure of her dead father. Her son refuses to go to college, to have a career, and instead spends his time playing the saxophone. Even his music, soulful and dreamlike, worries Nora; he is one of several androgynous figures in Luft's novels, characters who are usually associated with artistic temperament, empathy, and refusal to conform.

> A musica de Henrique e uma das coisas inqietantes nele. […] Quando toda em seu quarto, sem que eu o veja, a musica me arrasta para um territorio que punge, assusta e atrai. Ha nela algo de lamentoso, como de um animal atocaiado; de sensual como de um corpo chamando; de sombrio, como alguem inaugurando a propria morte, ou querendo voltar dela, desassossegado.[50]

> Henrique's music is a disquieting thing about him. […] When he plays in his room, out of my sight, the music drags me into a territory which frightens and attracts. There is a sound of lament in it, like that of a caged animal; sensuality, like the call of the body; somber quality as if someone were inaugurating his own death, or trying to come back from the dead, an unappeased spirit.[51]

The words Nora uses to describe her son's music could be applied her own inner world which likewise "frightens and attracts" her. Her challenge is to be able to access this world, by becoming free from the trap of other people's reflections. Nora considers herself a failure, and seeks fulfillment through her son's worldly success: a job, marriage and children. When he rebels and leaves their home, Nora, like many other of Luft's women characters imagines that her life is not worth living.

Yet in this novel, by introducing a powerful female character, the guardian angel of the title who is able to change the course of events, Luft gives Nora a better chance to succeed. Olga, Nora's half sister, has known the sorrows that pervade Luft's universe – the lack of maternal love, abandonment, insecurity – but has found enough inner strength to overcome the odds and to live a fulfilled life. She is a good doctor, a happy wife and mother. Her strength does not abandon her even when tragedy strikes: an unexpected stroke that leaves her husband completely paralyzed. Olga's strength and empathy allow her to become a guide in Nora's life.

Like a midwife, Olga helps her sister realize that only by breaking out of the habit of looking to others for one's identity – as a mother, wife, or lover –can Nora give birth to her own self. In this, Luft's "much happier book,"[52] the reader witnesses Nora's changing relationship to her old house as she begins to take control of her life: from a menacing, hostile house full of the ghosts of the past, it becomes a nurturing habitat, a harbinger of good things to come.

> Estou ligada a esta case como se ela manejasse os cordoes de minha vida. Respiro, aspiro, toco as coisas amadas, sozinha na manha que tambem se inaugura; e nao sinto terrior, panico de

> estar em falta; dor de ser insuficiente. Estou bem, como se
> retivesse nas maos as redeas de mim, observando sem espanto
> os trechos a percorre. (30)

> I am joined to this house as if it moved the ropes of my life. I
> breath, I touch my beloved objects, all alone with this morning
> that also begins itself; I do not feel panic and am not terrified at
> the idea of lacking; the pain of being insufficient. I am well, as
> if I held in my arms the reins of myself, seeing without fear the
> paths still to be traveled.

Nora founds her own business, a workshop for weaving rugs for which she creates designs. In doing that she achieves several things: she creates a group of women friends who work together and provide emotional support for each other; she takes care of her financial situation; and most important, Nora discovers a freedom to create and transforms her painful memories into art.

> Tudo nasce da minha fantasia, da memoria da funda garganta
> do pensamento, onde nem eu penetro, mas de onde sou parida
> todos os dias, dormindo e acordada: e de la que venho, dedos
> enredados nos fios que transformo em tapetes. [...] Chamei
> minha empresa de *Penelope*, nada original para uma tapeceria.
> Nao desmancho de noite o que foi feito de dia, [...]; vou sempre
> em frente. (14)

> Everything is born from my imagination, from memory that comes my thought whose deep end is impossible for me to reach. But I know that it gives me birth every day, whether I am asleep or awake. This is where I come from, with my fingers tangled in the threads which I transform into tapestry. […] I called my enterprise *Penelope*, which is nothing original for a tapestry workshop. I do not undo during the night what was done during the day, […]; I am always going forward.

Nora's dreams and fantasies are now embodied in the intricate tapestry designs, in which her "stories are to unfold and dreams to be realized." Her art has a liberating quality. The ghosts of the past still confront her but she is ready to absorb them and relegate them to the past. For the first time she feels comfortable with herself, desiring others but not needing them. Through her art, barren loneliness is transformed into a fruitful solitude.

> A sensacao de conforto move-se nas minhas entranhas, torna o meu corpo leve, arrepiada a pele: e a sensacao de ter voltado para casa, feshado um ciclo, concluido uma fase importante de uma complicada tapecaria. (12)

> A feeling of comfort is moving inside me, it makes my body light, gives goosebumps to my skin. It is a feeling of having

come home, closed a cycle, concluded an important phase of a complex tapestry.

The birth of Nora's new self is expressed in the metaphorical figure of her voice, which begins and ends the novel. At the moment of her father's death, she emits an inhuman moan; later, her voice is an agonized cry of a woman in love abandoned by her lover. In both cases the agonized voice is the voice of a woman who is utterly dependent, psychologically and emotionally, on men whom she can never fully possess. By the end of the novel, her cry is transformed into a song that gives birth to a new world.

> Entao, da sua alta janela escura, a mulher pos-se a cantar. […] Cantava sem se importar com nada mais, cantava jorrando fios de musica sobre as coisas todas, como tentaculos. E do seu canto foi brotando o mundo: dele nasceram as arvores e os caros e as casas; os caminhos dos amantes; as grutas de noite, e o ventre do dia; a morte nascia dessa musica; e a vida tambem. (163)

> Standing high above in her dark window, a woman began to sing. […] She sang as if nothing else mattered, throwing threads of music, like tentacles, over all the things. And from her singing the world was emerging: from it trees, cars, and houses were born; the paths on which lovers walked; the

> nocturnal grottoes, and the belly of the day; Death was born
> from this music, and life as well.

Nora's newly found freedom goes hand in hand with openness to life. She accepts things to come, as well as the impossibility of foreseeing or controlling the future: "I do not know anything, and it brings a great relief: I do not need to know" (162). Mysteries exist but they do not need to frighten; some thing will forever remain unknown and will be transformed into fantasy and imagination. Free from fear, Nora feels a wondrous connection to all things, perceiving life as a flow in which things are always in a state of becoming and of being transformed into each other: people, trees, animals, joy, suffering, life, and death. This understanding marks the beginning of Nora's journey toward discovery of a new self.

> Estou no coracao de um ciclo que se fecha; eu sou o mar, com
> peixes e medusas, sou a viagem tambem. Nao ha garantias, nao
> existe seguranca: alguma vez e preciso a audacia de se jogar;
> de delirar, como Herique, neste momento, jogando alta a sua
> musica pela noite, com pedacos de entranhas, de pensamento,
> de coracao, meu filho parindo a se mesmo como mae alguma e
> capas de fazer. (162)

> I am in the heart of a cycle that is closing; I am a sea, with fish
> and medusas, I am also a journey. There are no guaranties,
> security does not exist: sometimes what is needed is the

audacity to throw oneself into the abyss; to be delirious, like Henrique now playing his loud music into the night, with fragments of his insides, of his thoughts, of his heart, my son, who is giving birth to himself the way no mother could ever do.

One of the mysteries remains: the head of Nora's father may or may not still lie hidden under bushes and leaves, may or may not be a fruit of Nora's imagination.

La [na gruta] ficou occulta a cabeca do meu pai […] Ninguem sabia, senao eu; tornei-me portanto, sua guardia. Em meus pesadelos descia ate la, cada vez mais occulta porque minha mae se desinteresara de tudo, especialmente do jardim. E eu via: via a cabeca de meu pai, cabelos ainda crescendo, agora broncos como as musgos em que se enredavam; boca e ovidos cheios de terra e folhas, insetos entrando e saindo pelo nariz, e vermes. Mas ele parecia nao se importer: agora Mateus *era* a natureza. Os olhos estavam vivos… (71)

There [in the grove] the head of my father was hidden…Nobody knew, except for me. So I became its guardian. In my nightmares, I went down to it, more hidden from view with each day that passed because my mother became disinterested in everything, especially the garden. And I saw: I saw my father's head, the hair still growing, now white

> like the moss intertwined with it; his mouth and ears filled with earth and leaves, insects coming and going into his nose, and also worms. But he did not seem to mind: now Mateus *was* nature. His eyes were alive…

With her fear of life gone, Nora is not in a hurry to find out what became of the head: the mystery, like memory, has become a source of creativity. The head, real or imaginary, now part of nature, is evidence, in Nora's mind, that life has no end. Nora is now her own person, free from dependence on others; in her newly found wholeness she feels as if her son, her lover, her father, and the whole world are somehow within her and she is part of the whole living universe.

When she begins to understand the limitations inherent in our existence as separate individuals and the unrealizable nature of her yearning for a complete union with the Other, Nora finally sheds her fears and insecurities.

In her book of essays *Perdas & Ganhos* (*Losses and Gains*), Luft states her personal position on the impossibility or fusion with others clearly:

> Na arte como nas relaçoes humanas [...] nadamos contra a correnteza. Tentamos o impossível: a fusão total não existe, o partilhamento completo é inexequível. O essencial nem pode ser compartilhado: é descoberta e susto, glória o danação de cada um – solitariamente. (15-16)

> In art as in human relationships we swim against the current.
> We attempt the impossible: total fusion does not exist,
> complete sharing is unattainable. The essential can never be
> shared: discovery and fear, glory or damnation – all in solitude.
> 53

In her fictional take on the same issue, Luft describes Nora's "awakening" as a path that connects her to others through art.[54] A place, where "the artist and the viewer, or the reader, will see together, like two lovers" (16) is provided by Nora for Nora by means of her beautifully created tapestries.

The House, the Dwarf, and the Double: Luft's Personal Myths

As previously noted, one of the most significant of Luft's symbol/images is the image of a house, an important topos of Latin American novels of magical realism, such as *The House of the Spirits* by Isabelle Allende and *A Hundred Years of Solitude* by Garcia Marques, among others. The House, in terms of its significance, may be considered another protagonist in Luft's novels. The image of the house is highly ambiguous, both malevolent and benevolent, a space of entrapment and liberation. It is inhabited by the ghosts of the past who perform a double function. On the one hand, they cling to the protagonist trying to convince her of the impossibility of escaping her past; on the other hand, they function as a catalyst to the protagonist's desire to break free separating herself from it. Although the protagonist remembers

the house as an imprisoning, stifling place, now it provides her with the solitude and security needed to give birth to a new self, to engage in the process of self-discovery. The House, like the character's mind, embodies a space where a struggle takes place between the security of the familiar and the yearning to break out. In *O rio do meio* (*The River Between),* [55] Luft reflects on the significance of houses in her novels:

> In bedrooms, hallways, and living rooms the secret and the trivial flow intertwined between parents and children, death and birth, resentments and love. Houses are important for me – my books talk about them. Inside the house, the tread passes from one hand to another…In the houses, future memories take root; these memories, together with what is innate in us, will make us stronger or more vulnerable. Life has many rooms, and "in the back room sits a solitary soul waiting for the steps that never come."

The belly of a pregnant woman is a variation on the theme of the house: it can be a place of entrapment. Imprisonment in the image of an unloving mother is a variation of this motif. Luft's stories contain many images of tragic births ending in the death of the baby or in a birth of a sick child. However, the mother's womb can also be a place that shields and protects. Expulsion from the safety of the womb into a world devoid of love parallels, according to Giora Shoham,[56] being thrown into the indifferent and hostile universe, becoming a pawn in a game of life and death.

Like Luft's house, memories can also entrap or liberate, imprison us in the past or be a source of creativity and a way of survival.

> I also wanted to remain; afraid of the loneliness of those who are forgotten. If one day, they saw my old clothes, my doll, my love letters – would they know who she was, that woman, and death then would not be final?
>
> In a corner, a mirror in which the reflection remains of the hands saying farewell to a beloved face; shadowy figures turn, lips open – all that, illuminated by the clarity whose origin – solar or lunar – is not known. Human fate still lives there calling to me to tell its story. (*The River*, 139)

The theme of memory is intimately linked to the image of the house in which both entrapment and liberation can occur. In addition, the formal structure of Luft's works is inseparable from the theme of memory: the opposition between the external and internal narratives reflects the struggle between the past, with its dependence on others, and the present which harkens a discovery of an independent self.

Memory and the struggle to emerge from the prison of the past are also responsible for the prominence of the image of the dwarf who is capable of continuous transformations and whose ambiguity rivals that of the image of the house. According to J.E. Cirlot, the dwarf personifies forces "outside the orbit of consciousness."[57] The folkloric tradition depicting a dwarf as a "mischievous being

with certain childish characteristics" (Cirlot, 91) perfectly describes the dwarf in *The Red House.* He protects the protagonist and forces her to face the painful repressed memories of her childhood, but also contributes to her feelings of inadequacy. On the other hand, dwarfs' abnormal smallness, according to Cirlot, "may be taken […] as a sign of deformity, of the abnormal and inferior" (Cirlot, 91). The perception of the dwarf as "abnormal and inferior" informs *The Partners in the Game*, embodied in the retarded sister-dwarf.

In works of fiction that rely heavily on the thematic and structural approach of mirroring and reflection, the presence of doubles is almost a given.
Doubles in Luft appear in different images and forms. Alice, the protagonist of *Family Reunion,* for example*,* sees her alter ego in a split mirror. Luft explains the genesis of this type of character in *The River Between*. She "wanted to create a soul devoid of perplexities; but a malevolent force insinuated itself into the text: Alice of the funereal mirror" (48). There is no such thing as a simple self, according to the author, because

> a duel is always being fought between the two personalities
> that inhabit perhaps everybody: a conventional one who does
> everything 'right'; the other – a strange creature crouching in
> the cellar of the soul or in the dark attic; mad and frightening,
> she wants to smash the lawgiving tables, to transgress, to fly
> with witches, to break with the quotidian. (51)

There is, however, a more sinister connotation of a double, that of the doppelganger, or the body snatcher. Images of dolls, puppets, or their pictorial representations figure prominently in most Luft's novels. Sometimes they serve as consolatory objects designed to provide comfort in the face of a loss of a loved one. At other times, however, they are endowed with a frightening aspect of dead representations of living beings.

Doubling is closely related to one of the most important themes of Luft's novels: the desire of two people to become one. In its positive connotation, this signifies the desire to achieve psychological androgyny and, therefore, wholeness. However, in Luft's novels, such as *The Island of the Dead* and *The Left Wing of the Angel,* among others, this desire is more frequently translated into a wish to consume or become lost in the other.

The choice between sameness and alterity, fusion or separateness, losing the self or achieving wholeness, is the dilemma Luft's characters are called upon to decide. Since the achievement of wholeness, or individuation, is incompatible with the yearning to lose oneself in the Other, the characters must decide which path they will take: personal growth and development of a true self or losing themselves forever in the "mortal reflections." Most protagonists, having failed to achieve the impossible total fusion with the Other, see no alternatives but to give up on life in the hope of finding in death a relief from the tension of contradictory impulses: to merge or to separate. Others, understanding the limitations and accepting compromises, try to find their ways of connecting to others. In Luft's view, like in Buber's, to be in an authentic relationship with others necessitates becoming a true and authentic self. In

addition, besides establishing genuine relationship with the world, the inner self is, in Luft's view, the only source of transcendence which always comes from within, never from without.

The deliberate uncertainty of Luft's narrative, and particularly of her closures results in varying interpretations of her work: what exactly is the fate of the female protagonist when she ventures into the jungle (*The Red House*), descends the hill together with her dead grandmother (*The Partners in the Game*), or faces a worm to which she just gave birth, who threatens to swallow her (*The Left Wing of the Angel*)? Is Renata in *The Island of the* Dead going to survive and find her freedom from "mortal reflections" or will she follow Camilo into the embrace of death?

Clearly, one can interpret death in the examples above as a metaphor for a new beginning. Yet, viewed in the context of each novel, this conclusion appears to be inadequate. Moreover, in her book of essays *The River Within,*, Luft focuses on the issue of the greater fragility or vulnerability of some people, causing them to succumb more readily to misfortune and opt for death.

> There are people who seem to be born badly equipped for living. […] They constantly feel that something is pulling them down, some forces impossible to define, and, therefore, impossible to combat. (*The River Within*, 106)

In another statement, Luft contrasts the failures of many of her protagonists to the eventual success of Nora who is capable of regeneration:

> Little by little, more light was being created: I portrayed a woman who made herself whole, a man whose ambivalence

> was finally respected, love that had a chance, after the protagonists became more mature. The world was born from a woman's song, fear was vanquished by a breath of a human word. (*The River Within, 132)*

Whether death, in Luft's work, is described as real or metaphorical, an absolute end or a new beginning is the question that can be best approached when taking into consideration the author's conception of life and death, the issue that is at the core of her metaphysics. For Luft, the idea of an absolute end is impossible, because she places life and death on a continuum, forever transforming into each other. Nature is portrayed as a recurring cycle of life and death: a recently cut tree immediately starts sprouting new branches; a dead man's head becomes the ground from which new life grows. Exposed roots are compared to a mother's open belly. Mother and nature become one, as both create and devour life. Creation and destruction alternate. Chtonic forces manifest themselves in images of violence and death. Yet the new life is incessantly being created out of the rotting and decaying matter. Similarly, the old self, dying, gives birth to the new one; women are often presented as giving a metaphorical birth to the self.

Not only are death and rebirth a continuum, becoming each other in a never ending cycle, but they also exist simultaneously, embodied in a recurring image of life and death as partners in a game of chess. Neither life nor death is malevolent or benevolent, both are merely playing a game, taking their human pawns off the board.

Alongside this rather pessimistic existential view, Luft also sees death as a passage to a transcendent world. Not religious in a conventional way, Luft clearly

believes in some kind of immortality. In her book of essays, *The River Between,* Luft notes that "if life is a powerful river, death is the eye of a dark mirror where everything is reflected transfigured. In it, our transcendence sleeps" (122). She goes on to explain why she thinks it is important to reflect on the subject of death. To question death is to acknowledge its presence, a step that leads people to reevaluate their goals and their priorities: "the knowledge that one is going to die has an advantage: life appears before us in all its splendors and makes us feel the urgency – not to devour life but to live it to the fullest" (*The River* 122-3). Not an original idea but important for Luft's general outlook. The awareness of death, of its mystery is important but so is the need to live and celebrate life. This outlook is similar to Rilke's, Luft's favorite poet whose poetry she translated and whose profound influence she mentions in her interview with Linda Paine.[58] Both writers believe that life and death are intrinsically related, one giving birth to the other.

In Rilke's first book of poems, *The Book of Hours* (*Das Stundenbuch*, 1899), "the monk compares himself to a tree murmuring over a grave."[59] The following passage, from Victor Hell's book on Rilke, is a good illustration of the point I am making.

> Rilke n'accepte ni l'attente de l'au-dela qui incite les homes `a detacher leur regards de la terre et a projeter hors du champ de l'histoire la realization de leurs désirs et de leurs r`eves, ni la profanation de la mort dont se rendent coupable l'epicureisme et l'hedonisme et, aussi, la conception purement technique de l'action de l'homme dans le monde.

> Rilke accepts neither waiting for life after death, which incites men to detach their gaze from the earth and to realize their dreams and aspirations outside of history, nor the profanation of death, of which Epicureanism and Hedonism, as well as a purely mechanical conception of man's actions in the world, are guilty. (my translation)

Like Rilke, Luft believes in the person's active engagement in the world, in the need for greater freedom of choice and increased possibilities for both men and women. At the same time, she acknowledges the mystery that remains at the core of life, as well as the tragic nature of existence.

Notes for Chapter 3

[1] Maria Osana de Medeiros Costa compares Luft's use of language to that of Clarice Lispector defining it as "the generating principle, the raw matter of literary creation." *A mulher, o lúdoco e o grotesco em Lya Luft* (São Paulo: Annablume, 1996).

[2] Vera Queiros says that Luft's novels "petrify the gaze of the reader not by its elaborate language but by portraying a world of thematic obsessions and fantastic images." Vera Queiros, "A paixão da morte: a personagem feminina nos romances de Lya Luft," *Feminino e Literatura* 101 (1990): 103.

[3] Lya Luft, "Masculino e Feminino: um Possível Reencontro," *Entre Resistir e Identificar-se*, ed. Peggy Sharpe (Florianopulos: Editora Mulheres, 1997) 151.

[4] In the above mentioned essay, Luft says: "this woman of the [20th] century, master of her life and her profession, less chained to archaic conventions – can be more whole and more realized, but is not always freer."

[5] Luft, *As Parceiras* [Partners in the Game] (Rio de Janeiro: : Editora Nova Fronteira, 1980) 36.

[6] Queiros 104.

[7] Cristina Ferreira-Pinto,"The Fantastic, the Gothic, and the Grotesque in Contemporary Brazilian Women's Novels." *Chasqui* 25.2 (1990): 71-80.

[8] Queiros, see note 2.

[9] Queiros 104.

[10] Luft, *The Red House*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994) 47.

[11] Eva Paulino Bueno, "Maternidade, mito e ideologia na ficçao de Lya Luft," *Revista Iberoamericana* 66.192 (2000): 601-616.

[12] Bueno 603.

[13] The most appealing male characters in Luft's novels are androgynous and possibly homosexual men.

[14]Susan Canty Quinlan, *The Female Voice in Contemporary Brazilian Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991)**.**

[15] Giora Shoham links Freudian experience of separation from the mother with its mythopoetic expression in Gnosticism and Kabbalah as abandonment by the absent God in the hostile universe.

[16] Garcia dos Santos, "Lautreamont e o desejo de não desejar, *O Desejo*, ed. Adauto Novaes (São Paulo: Compania das Letras, 1990).

[17] Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira, "A cicatriz do androgino," *Feminino e Literatura* 101 (1990) 145.

[18] Ferreira-Pinto 74.

[19] My italics.

[20] Ettore Finazzi-Agro, "Dentro una stanza chiusa: Lya Luft e la reflessione mortale." *Maschere: Le scriture delle donne nelle culture iberiche* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1994) 97-102.

[21] The term "irreducible" is used by Wendy Faris in her book *Ordinary Enchantments* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2004).

[22] Ferreira-Pinto speaks of gothic elements in Luft's novels and distinguishes the gothic within the fantastic mode in its "preoccupation with the domestic realm." Rosemary Jackson, quoted in Ferreira-Pinto's article, says that the modern gothic "will then be an enactment of the split of the subject, and an expression of the subject's desire for unity." Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981).

[23] Quoted in J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995) 379.

[24] Emphasis in the original.

[25] Judith A. Paine, "Lya Luft: Fiction and the Possible Selves," *Brasil/Brazil* 4.5 (1991): 104-114.

[26] These thoughts are expressed in several books by James Hillman, in particular in *Dream and the Underworld.*

[27] Alberto Moreiras, "Símbolo, alegoría y temporalidad en Reunião de Família, de Lya Luft," *Hispania* 70.2 (1987): 250-251. My translation from the original Spanish.

[28] Lya Luft, *O Rio do Meio*. (São Paulo: Mandarin, 1996) 131.

[29] See note 27.

[30] Moreiras 253.

[31] All original quotations are from Luft*, A asa esquerda do anjo* (São Paulo: Editora Siciliano, 1981). Translations into English are mine.

[32] Nadya Peterson called my attention to the connection between erotic desire and playing a musical instrument in Luft's novels. In *The Island of the Dead*, the protagonist, Renata, seems to have an erotic relationship with her piano.

[33] It is significant that the word "partners" is used as a feminine noun in the original. The partners, Life and Death, are conceptualized by Luft as female entities.

[34] Quotations in English are translated by me from Luft, *As parceiras.*

[35] Androgyny is an important motif in Luft's work.

[36]All quotations in Portuguese are from *O quarto fechado* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1986).

[37] All translations in English are from *The Island of the Dead*, trans. Carmen Chaves McLendon and Betty Jean Craig (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1986).

[38] See note 5.

[39] My translation.

[40] Choosing to ride a wild horse is an attempt at asserting his masculinity, but the model of imitation here is not Camilo's father but the Intruder. The twins are "almost immune to their father's hostility, their mother's bad moods" (89).

[41] See note 5.

[42] Title of Paul Zweig's book *The Heresy of Self-Love*.

[43] The setting of the house is not typical of any place in Brazil. It resembles solitary houses of Northern Europe, as depicted by Ibsen and Maeterlink, into which Death comes as both an Intruder and a welcome Guest.

[44] It is actually impossible to tell but Luft's heroine identifies the figure as a female.

[45] According to Heraclitus, quoted in Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, death is the source of life, not only spiritual life but the resurrection of the matter as well.

[46] I am inspired by James Hillman's ideas about soul-making in a situation of crisis.

[47] This sentence is translated by G. Pontiero as "Mother was a maze of enigmas." I think it is important to keep the original "forest of enigmas."

[48] Italics in the original.

[49] My translation.

[50]All original quotations are from Lya Luft, *A Sentinela* (São Paulo: Editora Siciliano, 1994).

[51] All translations from this novel are mine.

[52] From Luft's letter to P.P. de Sena Madureiro.

[53] Lya Luft, *Perdas e Ganhos* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2004) 15-16. My translation.

[54] An idea similar to Giora Shoham's "legitimate way" to sublimate the need for absolute union.

[55] *Ibid*. 106.

[56] Giora Shoham's ideas are discussed in the Introduction.

[57] Cirlot 91.

[58] See note 33.

[59] Quoted in Victor Hell, *Rainer Maria Rilke: existence humaine et poésie orphique* (Paris: 1965.

Conclusion

The search for Perfect Love aims at the attainment of this elusive, even impossible, ideal relationship. Inability to accept compromises leads many protagonists to despair and withdrawal from life. Often, they settled for flawed relationships in which people interact with each other on the level of inauthentic, false selves. Therefore, the search for the true self and the striving for genuine relationship are intrinsically linked.

The theme of longing for connection is common to all the novels under discussion, but the authors in this study show different attitudes in relation to the achievability of relationships modeled on the I-Thou. In the case of Zinaida Gippius, the attitude changes according to the genre of the text. In her essays on the subject of love, she affirms the possibility of such complete relationships and proclaims them to be a goal toward which everybody should strive. In her poetry, the author demonstrates such a striving in action, through the dialogue of the poet with his soul. Neither one wins the confrontation, but the struggle represents a spiral movement pointing in the direction of future resolution.

However, the protagonists of her artistic prose are not only unable to create positive relationships with others but shun any attempt at it; their fear of any relationships, especially erotic ones, seems to exist in them from the start as if they were born with the fear of life, absence of desire, and the longing for the quietness of non-being. Although longing for an ideal, transcendent love, the heroines in Gippius' stories turn away in fear and disgust at the idea of an earthly erotic relationship. They prefer death to any relationship involving sexual love and, for that matter, any

involvement with life in general. For Gippius herself sexual love was a struggle, well documented in her private diaries in which she speaks of sexual love as a "filthy" obsession that she must overcome, a "thorn in her flesh", to use the words of Kierkegaard. Her inner conflicts are also expressed in her poetry, embodied in two voices battling for supremacy: the spiritual one of the poet and the passionate one of his female soul. The static quality of Gippius' prose derives from her portrayal of her protagonists as deprived of inner life. Their only visible characteristics are their indifference to life and absence of desire.The comparison with Chopin's *The Awakening* shows that while Gippius' heroines seem static, rejecting life with no apparent struggle, always already turning away from existence, Chopin's Edna Pontellier goes through a dynamic process of developing an inner self and arrives at her decision after struggling with inner conflicts. The internal monologue through which Chopin reveals her heroines' inner life is absent in Gippius artistic prose. It is replaced by an authorial voice usurping the voices of the characters. Gippius informs the readers about her characters thoughts and feelings in such a way that they resemble more the author's embodied ideas than living people. The use of a frame often serves to put even more distance between the reader and the character. As a result, Gippius short stories, while presenting an intellectual interest, fail to engage the reader emotionally.

It is possible to say that Gippius' path to transcendence was modeled predominantly on a masculine quest with its corollary of asceticism and abstinence. She was not an ascetic personality in all the other aspects of her life. Like Kierkegaard, she was active in public life, was in the center of fierce debates

concerning cultural, social, and religious issues. For her personally, as for Kierkegaard, life without struggle and controversy would not be fully lived. Thus, Gippius' case represents a dichotomy: on the one hand, she is actively engaged in life and professes, in her essays, Soloviëvian faith in the future development of humanity, including the possibility of achieving a full and genuine love; and, on the other hand, she battles pessimism, fear of intimacy, and despair at the impossibility of achieving full and satisfying relationship with the two important men in her life. Gippius shows her despair of finding Perfect Love vicariously through the fates of her characters. They are what she could have been without the redeeming power of her art. Gippius' famous marriage to Dmitri Merezhkovsky, hailed by many as an example of spouses' lifelong complete devotion to each other, reveals only one side of the relationship, a close intellectual affinity. However, the reading of her intimate journals, *Les contes d'amour* [1]and, especially, *About things past* reveals a profound lack of emotional connection, the author's desire for it, and her frustration at her inability to achieve it.

Galina Shcherbakova's protagonists do not turn away from life but live an inauthentic existence. The writer links this inauthentic existence with a tragic outcome. Her characters are always on the quest for Perfect Love, but always fail to achieve it. Shcherbakova shows how the historical circumstances, such as the political environment in the Soviet Union, career considerations, envy, and greed affect the relationships among people causing resentment and hatred. Their personal failings, such as indifference, blindness to others, and internalized feelings of guilt, involve her characters in a maze of confusing emotions in the midst of which they become unable to understand who they really are. The lack of awareness of who they

are and their inability to distinguish between their false and true selves are at the root of their defeat, causing them to enter flawed, inauthentic relationships. Such flawed relationships are often fatal for the protagonists, resulting in their moral, emotional, or physical death. Masha in the *Three Loves of Masha* P*eredreeva,* Nora in *The Actress and the Policeman,* and Iraida in "The Wall" are all victims of such flawed love. Although their fates remain unknown to the reader, there are indications that they are doomed to the loss of their hopes and, possibly, their lives. Only the protagonists of the last novel, *At the Feet of Prostrated Women*, seem to be heading toward redemption by discovering their capacity for unselfish love. However, the ending of this novel is ambiguous. As a result of the women's sudden unexplainable illness, their husbands grow emotionally and psychologically and become capable of engaging in a more open and genuine relationship with each other and with their wives. Paradoxically, however, the women, because of their predicament, are denied the opportunities for growth accorded to their male counterparts. The idea of a woman's sacrifice or self-sacrifice is presented by Shcherbakova as an internalized content of both male and female psyches, grounded in the Russian historical assumptions about male and female roles in a relationship.

Following in the steps of Vladimir Soloviëv and Martin Buber, Shcherbakova expresses her belief that authentic relationships between people may possess the power to heal not only individuals but the country as well. But recently this assumption is subject to questioning, as her views on Russia's course of development become darker and less optimistic. While increasingly pessimistic about the future of the country, Shcherbakova, in her latest work, introduces female protagonists who are

more aware of their strengths and possibilities and capable of finding fulfillment in love and friendship, even if they are not perfect, as well as in creativity, and connection to others.

Shcherbakova's narrative is deceptively simple. Behind the everyday events she narrates there always lies a second level of meaning, that of transcendence from the profane into the spiritual. The realism, even naturalism, of her detailed descriptions of life is complemented by such postmodernist techniques as ambiguity and a dialectical interplay of stating, questioning, and revising. Every situation she describes bears within a germ of a reversal, a possibility of revision. Shcherbakova's books, like those of the Brasilian Lya Luft, are studies in hermeneutics offering enigmas for the characters and readers to solve. Memory, mirroring, and presenting events from different perspectives are important in this process of discovery. Shcherbakova frequently links individual stories with the history and the fate of the nation as a whole. A certain theatrical quality of Shcherbakova's narratives, especially in *At the Feet of the Prostrate Women*, as well as her frequent reversals of perspective create a style that is a mixture of the so-called new realism and postmodernism.[2]

The themes of self, love, and death also inform the work of Lya Luft. Her female protagonists are trapped in the past that controls their life and their future; to survive, they must overcome their dependency on others and their desire to give up responsibility and control. Their dependence on others, a "mortal reflection" in the words of Finazzi-Aggro, is revealed to be literal, as well as metaphorical, since the

protagonists often prefer self-annihilation to the difficult task of becoming their own true selves.

Similarly to my reading of Shcherbakova's work, I read Luft's novels as a cycle in which the main themes and motifs recur. Luft's protagonists' confusion about identity is grounded, to an important degree, in their formative years spent in families that do not promote a development of the sense of self – the lack of maternal love, the abandonment, the helplessness in the face of the rigid societal norms. The most important factor in their early lives is the absence of the mother or of maternal love. Later in life, in a crisis situation, when they come face to face with the question of survival, they try simultaneously to free themselves of the weight of the past and to attempt to recreate the image of the mother. Each story, therefore, begins by describing the protagonists' childhood and youth to underscore the conditions that shaped their personalities and fates. The first childhood memory is that of a hostile, indifferent, or absent Mother, real and mythical, who turns against her daughters like a Goddess in wrath, fallen and violated. Is there a way to redemption? What lies at the end, defeat or survival? Those are the questions each novel interrogates. The answer Luft gives is that redemption is achieved through overcoming of a fatal dependence on others, giving birth to an inner self, to the authentic being. By finding an identity, a voice, a woman can find her own place in a relationship, in a family, in society, and in the general order of the universe.

Luft acknowledges the part social and gender inequality plays in the fate of her female protagonists; her main emphasis, however, is on their existential crisis, on a painful struggle against their feelings of fault, of incompleteness and inferiority,

against the fatal dependence on the Other. Although most protagonists are women, Luft wants to show, through her female protagonists, the common human predicament in the contemporary world devoid of spiritual values. In the words of Vera Queiros, Luft's work and writing by women in general represent a "symbolic space wherein this anxiety is actualized." [3]

Luft does not reduce her inquiry to psychological and social themes. Her descriptions of everyday life, by the sheer force of their accumulated horrible events and apparent relentless persecution of the characters by fate, reveal the existence of a metaphysical and mythological dimension questioning life, death, and fate in all their complexity. To achieve this multilayered texture in her writing, Luft uses elements of magical realism. It gives her texts a spiritual dimension, presents the world as a multiplicity of views and possibilities, and offers glimpses of the transcendent within the everyday. A text "apparently grounded in sensory data," as is the case with Luft, "yet moving beyond them, but not consistently into any recognizable supernatural realm […] creates a narrative space ineffable in-between, a coexistence of realistic and magical." [4] Salman Rushdie defines such art as "the third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual worlds, something that might even be called a secular definition of transcendence."[5] Another important function of magical realism, pertinent for this study of redemption through relationship, is "investigating possibilities for transgressing boundaries and limits, including especially, the opposition between selves and others, and questioning dualistic modes of thought."[6] It may be a mark of Luft's unorthodox feminism that such privileged vision of the "ineffable in-between" is attributed to women who challenge the masculine view of

the material reality as the only reality. The earth-centered processes, such as erotic love and motherhood, become the source of the spiritual.

All writers under discussion here share a complex approach to human experience weaving together, in a rich multilayered narrative, social, psychological, and spiritual threads. This insight into the human condition reveals a profound need for spiritual growth, even when the characters are not aware of this need. The authors, whether they are religious or not, all understand the immanent nature of the quest for transcendence: it is the quest for a true self and the genuine connection to others. In their stories, the phenomenal and the noumenal – the social, the psychological, and the spiritual – are woven together in a complex portrayal of human life and struggle for redemption. 'Spirituality', 'redemption', 'transcendence' are not necessarily used here as religious terms (although sometimes they are). They can be understood, in the sense the existentialists use them, as the desire to break out of inauthentic existence limited by concerns with material needs and pursuit of status; a search for the true self and fulfillment in the authenticity of being; a longing for relationships that are based on an authentic dialogue of self with the other for the Perfect Love. Transcendence then is a horizon at the edge of everyday life.

Notes for Conclusion

[1] In French in the original.

[2] 'New realism' is a term applied by Russian literary scholars to some contemporary writing characterized by a shift, in a predominantly realistic narrative, toward the strange, magical, or fantastic.

[3] Vera Queiros, "A paixão da morte: a personagem feminine nos romances de Lya Luft," *Feminino e Literatura* 101 (1990): 106.

[4] Wendy Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and Remystification of Narrative,* (Nashviille: Vanderbilt UP, 2000).

[5] Quoted in Faris. 130.

[6] *Ibid*.

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