

**NIKOLAI ZABOLOTSKII'S *STOLBTSY*  
AND THE AESTHETICS OF OBERIU:  
AN ANALYSIS OF TEN POEMS**

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Nikolai Alekseevich Zabolotskii (1903-1958) published his first collection of poems, *Stolbtsy*, in Leningrad in 1929. This volume of twenty-two poems offers highly evocative and metaphorical descriptions of urban life in Leningrad during the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1922-1928. Even during this relatively liberal period the collection, which comprises a cycle of inter-related poems, created a sensation and was severely criticized for its satirical view of life and pessimistic tone.

The composition of *Stolbtsy* was heavily influenced by Zabolotskii's membership in the short-lived avant-garde group known as OBERIU, an acronym for "Ob"edinenie real'nogo iskusstva" ("The Association of Real Art"). Zabolotskii helped write the group's manifesto, and it is the literary aesthetic set forth in this document that forms the basis of the critical criteria used to analyze ten poems from *Stolbtsy*. The primary objective of OBERIU was its striving towards an art that exhibited *predmetnost'* ("concreteness"). This was an attempt to clear away the conventional contextual associations of words and objects, and to reveal their absolute, fundamental meanings. *Predmetnost'* was used to emphasize the objective nature of art and its distance from abstraction. This meant the dissolution or segmentation of a depicted object, and the reliance on collisions between verbal units and objects to produce new semantic effects. Zabolotskii called this the "collision of verbal meanings" (*stolknovenie slovesnykh smyslov*).

The ten poems selected for analysis are: "Krasnaia Bavaria," "Belaia noch'," "Ofort," "Leto," "Novyi byt," "Dvizhenie," "Ivanovy," "Pekarnia," "Obvodnyi kanal," and "Narodnyi Dom." These poems illustrate Zabolotskii's reaction to the social effects of NEP on the urban environment of Leningrad and on its citizens. The literary tenets of the OBERIU, especially the concept of *predmetnost'* ("concreteness"), form a basis from

which it is possible to appreciate the structural and aesthetic originality of Zabolotskii's perception of this environment.

The poems are examined from their thematic stand-point and from their structural composition in order to understand their meaning and to reveal the ways in which various devices function within a single poem and in relationship to others in the cycle. In these poems Zabolotskii loads his images with multiple associations so that they become distorted. Frequently these images are only visual and function exclusively at this level, rendering experiences more concrete; others have a metaphorical function that clearly represents a vision which has a philosophical level of understanding.

Zabolotskii's grotesque perspective in *Stolbitsy* reflects the sense of alienation that he encountered in NEP-time Leningrad. Zabolotskii considered the excesses of NEP as a betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution; what he did to combat the alienation it engendered was to chronicle the effects of NEP in highly satirical terms and, in the process, to reject its false pretences. This combination forces the reader to attend closely to the themes of the poems and challenges him to re-think his usual definition of reality. Although these poems are not considered OBERIU poems, the literary tenets of the OBERIU Declaration offer the best possible clue to a comprehensive understanding of both the structural composition and thematic make-up of Zabolotskii's highly original volume of poetry.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

NOTE.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I ZABOLOTSKII AND THE OBERIU.....	7
CHAPTER II TEN POEMS FROM <i>STOLBTSY</i> .....	20
i. "Krasnaia Bavariia" ("Red Bavaria").....	20
ii. "Belaia noch" ("White Night").....	29
iii. "Ofort" ("Etching").....	35
iv. "Leto" ("Summer").....	38
v. "Dvizhenie" ("Movement").....	40
vi. "Pekarnia" ("The Bakery").....	43
vii. "Novyi byt" ("The New Life").....	47
viii. "Ivanovy" ("The Ivanovs").....	53
ix. "Obvodnyi kanal" ("The Loop Canal").....	60
x. "Narodnyi Dom" ("People's House").....	65
CONCLUSION.....	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	84
APPENDIX.....	87

## NOTE

The transliteration of Cyrillic throughout this thesis, including the bibliography, follows the unmodified Library of Congress system without diacritical marks. This system is the one recommended as “System II” by Professor J. Thomas Shaw in his *The Transliteration of Modern Russian for English-Language Publications* (Madison, 1967).

## INTRODUCTION

Nikolai Alekseevich Zabolotskii was born in Kazan' on April 24, 1903, into a family of peasant origin. His father was an agronomist and Zabolotskii's childhood was spent in the provinces. In 1920 he moved to Moscow to enter Moscow University, but in 1921 transferred to the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad. It was while a student there, that he decided to abandon his plans for an academic career and to concentrate on becoming a poet. He graduated in 1925 and was shortly thereafter drafted into the Red Army, serving in Leningrad until his discharge in 1927.

Zabolotskii had begun to write poems in 1913, but his early verse was derivative (in his own words, imitations of Blok, Maiakovskii, and Esenin) and none of it has survived. Except for a few poems published around 1926, Zabolotskii made his literary debut with the publication of his first book of poems, *Stolbtsy (Scrolls)*, in Leningrad in 1929. It was a remarkable collection of descriptions of urban life in Leningrad during the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1922-1928. Even during this relatively liberal period it created a sensation and was severely criticized for its satirical view of life and pessimistic tone. As a result, many of the copies of the edition of 1,100 were confiscated and destroyed.

The poems in this collection were heavily influenced by Zabolotskii's membership in a group of avant-garde poets, artists, playwrights, and film-makers known as the OBERIU, an acronym for "Ob"edinenie real'nogo iskusstva" ("The Association of Real Art"). Zabolotskii helped write the group's manifesto, but their activities were short-lived and by 1930 they had disbanded.

In 1933 Zabolotskii published his long poem (*poema*) on collectivization, "Torzhestvo zemledeliia" ("The Triumph of Agriculture"), which he intended as a celebration of socialist man's conscious transformation of nature. However, socialist-

realist critics saw it as a reactionary satire and a parody of collectivization, and he was harshly attacked on account of it. Zabolotskii was even called upon to explain himself in acceptable terms in the pages of the leading literary newspaper *Literaturnyi Leningrad* in 1936. The publication of his second book of poems in 1937 did little to mollify his critics and, as the political situation steadily worsened, he was finally arrested in 1938 and sentenced to seven years in an NKVD labour camp. He served out his sentence in Central Asia where he worked as a labourer. In 1946 he was released and allowed to return to Moscow; he settled in near-by Tarusa and remained there till the end of his life.

In addition to his original works, Zabolotskii wrote poetry for children and produced significant translations of foreign verse during the 1930s. The latter included translations from Georgian poetry (a typical occupation for poets unable to publish their own works) and his masterful translation into modern Russian of the medieval epic *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (*The Lay of Igor*). After his release from the camps, Zabolotskii resumed his literary activity and produced some very significant lyrical verse, with nature as the primary theme. In 1951 he was officially rehabilitated, but it was not until the death of Stalin in 1953 that there was any appreciation of his verse, and with it, the recognition of his importance to Soviet poetry. As a consequence, he was permitted to travel abroad for the first time in 1957, journeying to Italy with a delegation of Soviet poets. The visit produced several fine poems on Italian themes. Zabolotskii died the following year of heart disease from which he had been suffering since 1945.

Zabolotskii considered himself second only to Pasternak as a poet, and although he never attained the latter's fame at home or abroad, he has been considered by many literary historians as the first major post-modernist Russian poet of the Soviet era. Volumes of Zabolotskii's "selected works" appeared in 1948 and again in 1957, but neither of them contained any of the notorious poems from *Stolbtsy*. It was not until 1965 that these

poems became available, first in an edition published in the West,<sup>1</sup> which included the poems in their original form, and then in the prestigious Soviet “Biblioteka poeta”<sup>2</sup> series which contained a much revised version of the *Stolbtsy* poems that Zabolotskii is reported to have preferred. In 1983 the most comprehensive edition of Zabolotskii’s “collected works” was published,<sup>3</sup> and it included both the 1929 “original” version and the later revised *Stolbtsy* poems. It is with these 1929 versions that this thesis will be concerned.

When Zabolotskii published *Stolbtsy*, the critics branded him a bizarre and dangerous individualist. Few of the poems had been published prior to this collection, so their appearance came as something of a surprise if not a shock. What struck the reader of this book of twenty-two poems was the grotesque and fragmented vision of the Soviet urban scene as it existed in the Leningrad of the 1920s, and especially as it responded to the New Economic Policy. The poems treated the various aspects of urban life during NEP as it affronted the sensibilities of an impressionable youth from the provinces; and what he depicted was a world that was suspended between satire and despair.

As a result of the hostile reception which *Stolbtsy* received when it was published, Soviet criticism has tended to avoid serious discussion of these early works in favour of the more lyrical later poetry. Although they have been commented upon, critics such as Makedonov and Turkov have not subjected individual poems to anything approaching a detailed analysis, and when they have discussed them they have tended to skip over the more bizarre images and to skirt around the sensitive issues raised by them. Working under the constraints of Socialist Realism, they have sought to find, whenever possible,

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Zabolotskii: *Stikhovoreniiia*, ed. Gleb Struve and Boris Filippoff (Washington D.C. and New York, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Zabolotskii: *Stikhovoreniiia i poemy*, ed. A. Turkov (Moscow/Leningrad, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> N. A. Zabolotskii: *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, ed. E. Zabolotskaia and N. Zabolotskii (Moscow, 1983).

something positive to say about the poems, even those which have an obviously critical perspective.

On the whole, serious criticism by both Soviet and Western scholars has been hampered by a general mis-understanding of Zabolotskii's philosophical point of view and a lack of attention paid to individual poems. For example, the émigré critic, Boris Filipoff, has observed that the "aesthetic reality" of the urban satire of *Stolbtsy* is that of a world without faith.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Aleksis Rannit sees in *Stolbtsy* an excessive use of "grotesque hyperbole" that is evidence of the poet's "expressionism."<sup>5</sup> Certainly these two statements are not without their merits, but in order to have critical relevance and to appear to be more than just perceptive opinions, they need to be made within the contexts of analysis of specific poetic texts. Contemporary critics, such as Irene Masing-Delic and Fiona Björling, have done much impressive work in the area of close textual exegesis. Unfortunately, I feel their analyses have tended to rely too heavily on revealing literary subtexts and on such linguistic methodologies as Jakobson's opposition between metaphor and metonymy. A dissertation by William Jack, for instance, relies exclusively on Lotman's schema of spatial relationships, to the point of having nothing to say about the poems as works of literature with any apparent meaning.

In my analysis of Zabolotskii's *Stolbtsy*, I examine ten poems individually, first from a thematic standpoint, so as to elucidate their meaning, then on a structural basis, in order to reveal the ways in which various devices function within a poem and for what reason. This is followed by an examination of the manner in which certain features within the individual poems interact with and reinforce one another, and to a discussion of the ways in which these lead to similarities and differences among the poems collectively. In order to avoid this method of investigation becoming merely a catalogue of devices, I have

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<sup>4</sup> Boris Filipoff, "Put' poeta," in *Nikolai Zabolotskii: Stikhovorenia*, pp. xxvii-lxxi.

<sup>5</sup> Aleksis Rannit, "Zabolotskii—A Visionary at a Crossroad of Expressionism and Classicism," in *Nikolai Zabolotskii: Stikhovorenia*, pp. v-xxiii.

chosen ten poems which I feel to be representative of the collection as a whole, and which best illustrate the influences on his work of his involvement with the avant-garde literary group OBERIU. The ten poems selected illustrate Zabolotskii's reaction to the social effects of NEP on the urban environment of Leningrad and how it influenced its citizens. The literary tenets of the OBERIU, especially the concept of *predmetnost'* ("concreteness"), form a basis from which it is possible to appreciate the structural and aesthetic originality of Zabolotskii's perception of this environment.

The title of the collection, *Stolbtsy*, refers to the singular word *stolbets* meaning a "column," much like a column of print in a newspaper or book. The plural form *stolbtsy* takes on the meaning "scrolls," in the sense of a historical document composed of separate sheets of parchment glued or sewn together in a continuous roll. Aleksis Rannit appreciates this figurative connotation which to him suggests "a visual arrangement made of pasted pieces of imagery."<sup>6</sup> There is also an undeniable Biblical connotation to the word which is consistent with Zabolotskii's frequent use of religious imagery in the poems themselves. Needless to say, the very ambiguous nature of the word itself is a factor not lost on Zabolotskii, as indeed the meaning of the word *stolbtsy* can be taken to signify one or all of the above. This title eventually became a generic term to designate all of the shorter poems which Zabolotskii wrote during the period 1926-1932. These included the urban poems from the original edition of *Stolbtsy*, those on similar themes but not included except in later editions of his collected works, and the nature poetry he wrote concurrently. Throughout his life the poet referred to these poems as *stolbtsy*. The longer *poemy* from this period were not included in this designation.

My selection of the ten poems is also based on Zabolotskii's own organizing scheme. The collection itself is divided into four sections of uneven length and contains poems chosen for reasons that seem entirely arbitrary. Section One contains three poems,

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

two of which, “Krasnaia Bavariia” (“Red Bavaria”) and “Belaia noch” (“White Night”), are analyzed here. Section Two contains four poems, of which “Ofort” (“Etching”) and “Leto” (“Summer”) are the poems examined. Section Three contains twelve poems, five of which are analysed: “Novyi byt” (“The New Life”), “Dvizhenie” (“Movement”), “Ivanovy” (“The Ivanovs”), “Pekarnia” (“The Bakery”), and “Obvodnyi kanal” (“The Loop Canal”). Section Four contains three poems, the last of which (and the one examined), “Narodnyi Dom” (“People’s House”), is the longest poem in the entire collection, with 114 lines. The shortest poem is “Dvizhenie,” with only eight lines. The other poems are of varying length, with the majority averaging between forty and sixty lines.

Of the twenty-two poems, nineteen are written in iambic tetrameter; the remaining three are in *dol’nik* and ternary meter. The stanzaic structure of the poems is extremely variable, consisting of poems written in a single stanza of differing lengths, two or more stanzas of varying length, and only one poem composed of stanzas in quatrains.

Despite the great diversity in the structural make-up of the poems, the arbitrary nature of their arrangement in the collection, and even the thematic differences between the individual poems, I feel the twenty-two poems of *Stolbtsy* comprise a cycle of poems that is unified by a unique and highly original composition. The purpose of my thesis is to investigate this composition, to elucidate the poems thematically, to analyze their structural characteristics, and to draw some conclusions on the cycle as a whole. The thesis contains an introduction, two chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and an appendix of poems from *Stolbtsy* in Russian. The passages from the poems cited in the text are from my own translation and are given in strictly literal versions.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ZABOLOTSKII AND THE OBERIU

In 1921 the new Soviet state was near collapse following the devastations and deprivations of world war, revolution, and civil war. The imposition of "War Communism" had weakened the fledgling socialist economy and, as a result, only 13% of Russia's pre-war industry was operating; a corresponding decline in the agricultural sector yielded a mere 40% of the foodstuffs produced in 1913.<sup>1</sup> The country was virtually paralyzed and rife with famine; in the cities unemployment was rampant, the housing situation critical, and there was a shortage of food and firewood. In addition to the failure of the economy there was a collapse in the monetary system and a lack of basic social services. Lenin had no illusions about the severity of the situation and in March 1921 he announced the adoption of the New Economic Policy.<sup>2</sup> NEP was a tactical retreat from the principles of Communism in order to allow the country to recover, and it saw many of the aims of the Bolsheviks abandoned. This meant a return to some level of private ownership and capitalist enterprise, and the partial restoration of free trade. This included the right of the peasants to sell surplus goods and food products on the open market. Many merchants were able to re-open, and the resumption of links to the West made trade once again possible. For a time the Revolution of the Proletariat could not function without the consent of the peasantry or the bourgeois classes, and NEP merely recognized this fact. This recognition was not, however, expressed in political terms, and the non-proletarian classes were either denied political rights or granted limited rights only. As a result, large

<sup>1</sup>P. N. Medvedev and M. M. Bakhtin. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, tr. and intr. Albert J. Wehrle (Baltimore, 1978), p. xix.

<sup>2</sup>The following comments on the controversial policies of NEP are made as they apply to the circumstances experienced by the poet Zabolotskii and depicted in the poetry of *Stolbtsy*. For information concerning NEP see *Great Soviet Encyclopedia: a Translation of the Third Edition*, vol. 18, (New York, 1974), pp. 171-173.

segments of the population were disfranchised. This period was, in essence, a breathing spell and a time for the Party to reorganize and consolidate power. For loyal Bolsheviks, however, the period amounted to a betrayal. For the non-partisan population it was a hope-filled time of peaceful work and reconstruction. Those not committed to a socialist reconstruction, such as the many profiteers who arose to take advantage of the situation, knew that this was only a temporary interlude and so a feeling of “making hay while the sun shines” prevailed. This feeling soon spread to all facets of social life, and it created a period of short term prosperity and laissez-faire. The result was the rise of a social class of people termed NEP-men (*NEP-meshchanin*) who were involved in both the production and consumption of goods and services which NEP precipitated. At a time when revolutionary idealism had permeated all levels of the political and social order, the distinctly bourgeois attitudes which prevailed during the period of NEP among various segments of the population were profoundly disturbing. It was to this phenomenon that Zabolotskii responded in the poems of *Stolbtsy*. In an autobiographical sketch he referred to these poems and their genesis:

After my discharge from the army I fell into the conditions of the last years of NEP. The predatory way of life of all those wheeler-dealers and businessmen was deeply alien and hostile to me. A satiric depiction of that way of life was the theme of my poetry of 1927-28 which subsequently made up the book *Stolbtsy*.<sup>3</sup>

In this “satiric depiction” Zabolotskii focused on the festering life of man swallowed up by his urban environment and consumed with the sensual pleasures that it afforded. In *Stolbtsy*, feasting, drunken bedlam, and the joys of material possession are the attractions that hold the Leningrad populace in rapt and blissful attention. But Zabolotskii was not merely some satirist making a mockery of the October Revolution. *Stolbtsy* is an invitation to examine the wretchedness of a society gone sour, and to acknowledge the power of

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<sup>3</sup> Nikolai Zabolotskii: *Stikhovoreniiia*, ed. Struve, p. 2.

poetry to make sense of that world. Zabolotskii was reacting to what he perceived as a betrayal of the principles and aspirations of the Revolution, which had not yet succeeded in bringing forth an earthly paradise created by collective effort. In NEP Zabolotskii perceived a step back from the fraternal utopia that was promised, to a society that was more exploitative than before; what was even worse, it was sanctioned by the Communist leadership for the sake of economic recovery.

It is ironic, however, that the very economic conditions he abhorred created a cultural milieu in which he was free to express his unique viewpoint. The developments on the “economic front” had their counterpart in cultural life, with a corresponding return to free competition among artistic and literary groups, private publishing houses, and a tolerance towards innovative or “avant-garde” movements.<sup>4</sup> The new Marxist proletarian groups were understandably angered by such toleration. Literary activity during the years 1921-24 was dominated by their enemies, the so-called “fellow-travellers”<sup>5</sup> who were neither avowedly against the Revolution nor committed to it. While Zabolotskii was no “fellow-traveller,” he took advantage of the liberal cultural climate of the period to chronicle the inevitable excesses of NEP and to document them in as modernistic a form as possible.

In 1925 the Central Committee of the Communist Party resolved the debate by decreeing that in the struggle for Communism tolerance would be shown to transitional forms of artistic expression. Such a pronouncement was a stimulus to a revival of literary innovation, and it was in this atmosphere that the OBERIU movement and the poetry of Nikolai Zabolotskii germinated.

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<sup>4</sup>Medvedev and Bakhtin, p. xix.

<sup>5</sup>A term coined by Leon Trotsky in his 1923 book, *Literature and Revolution*.

The OBERIU<sup>6</sup> was a Leningrad avant-garde literary group active from 1927-1930. Its membership included Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedenskii, Nikolai Oleinikov, Igor Bakhterev, Konstantin Vaginov and, last but not least, Nikolai Zabolotskii. The OBERIU was formed as an attempt by the poets Kharms and Vvedenskii to unite, as early as 1925, the disparate avant-garde groups operating in Leningrad. Zabolotskii joined their ranks in 1927, and on January 24, 1928 the OBERIU made its debut at the House of the Press with an evening entitled “Tri levykh chasa” (“Three Left Hours”). It was made up of readings of poetry and prose in a highly theatrical setting, and included a performance of Kharms’s play *Elizaveta Bam* (the only theatrical work to come out of the OBERIU). Other evenings were planned and several were staged at a variety of venues, but none of the works from these performances was published. OBERIU evenings achieved a degree of notoriety because of the outrageous behaviour associated with their theatrical staging, a characteristic which seems to have been an important part of the group’s aesthetic. Not everyone was sympathetic to such antics, however, and there was a falling out among some of the members, not the least of which was Zabolotskii’s departure as early as 1928.

Created well after the Futurist movement and its various off-shoots had reached its zenith, and almost on the eve of the First Five Year Plan, the OBERIU was an anomaly and decidedly out of step with the times. By this time the Marxist and Proletkult writers had gained prominence, and an unsympathetic review in the RAPP<sup>7</sup> journal *Smena* in April 1930, seems to have been instrumental in the group’s demise, for it shortly thereafter ceased to exist. The OBERIU appeared, therefore, as a curious and desperate attempt to save “left art” before avant-garde ideals were extinguished. The fact that it disappeared so quickly is evidence of its desperation. But when the group’s manifesto was published it boldly asserted its claim:

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<sup>6</sup> The acronym OBERIU reproduced the initial sounds of the words, while the final “u” sound was added for mystification and as a parody of the “isms” of the time. See R. R. Milner-Gulland, “‘Left Art’ in Leningrad: the OBERIU Declaration,” *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, NS 3 (Oxford, 1970), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> RAPP was the acronym for the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, the group which held sway from 1928-1932 and which promoted its programme as the official line in literature.

OBERIU now comes forward as a new section of leftist revolutionary art.... We believe and know that only the left course in art will lead us to the highway to the new proletarian artistic culture.<sup>8</sup>

Zabolotskii was the author of the manifesto's opening section, "The Social Role of OBERIU." While the manifesto does not define what is meant by "left art," one can assume that its author is referring to that art which was advocated by Filonov,<sup>9</sup> Malevich,<sup>10</sup> and Terent'ev,<sup>11</sup> all three of whom are invoked by name in its opening paragraphs. In addition to the manifesto's opening statements, Zabolotskii also wrote the following section, "Poetry of OBERIU," which outlined the aims and characteristics of the association's poets. What is most important in understanding Zabolotskii's early poetry, particularly the poems in *Stolbtsy*, is not so much his participation in OBERIU activities, which appear to be minimal, but the effect that his part in drafting the association's manifesto had on his work.

The OBERIU Declaration, which was published in a short-lived Leningrad journal *Afishi Doma pechaty* (no. 2, January 1928),<sup>12</sup> decried the current restrictions on experimentation in the creative arts and celebrated its own strivings towards an art that exhibited *predmetnost'* ("concreteness"). *Predmetnost'* was also a reaction to the *bespredmetnost'* ("non-concreteness") of much of the avant-garde art of the period, particularly Futurism, whose aims were similar, but which sought the primacy of the word alone. Although the *Oberiuty* also wanted to transform the world by means of the word, theirs was an attempt to clear away the conventional contextual associations of words and objects, and to reveal what they regarded as their absolute, fundamental meanings.

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<sup>8</sup> The following quotes are from the translation of the OBERIU Declaration by George Gibian, in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd* (Ithica, 1971), pp. 194-195.

<sup>9</sup> Pavel Filonov (1883-1941) was a painter whose theory of "analytic art" attracted many followers during the 1920s.

<sup>10</sup> Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) originated a form of abstraction which he termed "suprematism," but is best known now for his architectural projects.

<sup>11</sup> Igor Terent'ev (dates unknown) was a minor futurist poet and theatre director at the House of the Press.

<sup>12</sup> Reprinted by Milner-Gulland, pp. 69-74.

*Predmetnost'* was used “to emphasize the objective nature of [OBERIU] art, its distance from abstraction.”<sup>13</sup> This meant the dissolution or segmentation of a depicted object, and the reliance on collisions between verbal units and objects to produce new semantic effects. Zabolotskii called this the “collision of verbal meanings” (*stolknovenie slovesnykh smyslov*). He stated:

In our work we broaden the meaning of the object and of the word.... The concrete object, once its literary and everyday skin is peeled away, becomes a property of art. In poetry, the collisions of verbal meanings express that object with the exactness of mechanical technology.<sup>14</sup>

In their poetry the *Oberiuty* sought to strike to the very “center of the word”<sup>15</sup> (at the point where it functions poetically), to exploit the power of the word to associate in stimulating and exciting new contexts. The language of poetry, the verbal designations of an object, thus effects the depiction of the perceived object. To this end, the OBERIU also endorsed the Formalist theories propounded by Viktor Shklovskii who, in his seminal 1917 essay “*Iskusstvo kak priem*” (“Art as a Device”),<sup>16</sup> introduced the concept of *ostranenie* (“defamiliarization”), the method of making a perception more vivid by displacing it from its usual context. But unlike Shklovskii, for whom the device (*priem*) was an end in itself divorced from the concept of meaning, the *Oberiuty*, both individually and as a group, sought to present the world of objects with an analytic approach to reality. In other words, to remake reality and re-order its meaning.

In true proletarian spirit the *Oberiuty* defined themselves as “honest workers in art,” and called for a new “proletarian culture.” While the object was capable of being perceived by everyone, the objective was to create an art that would enable the new Soviet citizen (a

<sup>13</sup> Darra Goldstein, “Zabolotskii and Filonov: The Science of Composition,” *Slavic Review* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1989), p. 580.

<sup>14</sup> Gibian, pp. 195-196.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> Viktor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine* (New Haven, 1981), pp. 176-178.

proletarian but not necessarily working class citizen) to live “according to [his] new perceptions...in a confusing and rapidly changing society...by changing his attitudes and perceptions of reality.”<sup>17</sup> This was an attitude towards art that was concerned with its practical function as opposed to its purely aesthetic value. Thus the OBERIU sought to do away with preconceived notions and to reconstruct man’s attitudes to reality. They were to be creators not only of a new poetic language, but founders of “a new feeling for life and its objects.”<sup>18</sup> Their emphasis on the *predmet*, or object, was to focus man’s attentions on the *realia* of everyday life, the “things” around him that are perceived by all. The manifesto decried “the rubbish of the tongues of a multitude of fools bogged down in the mire of ‘experiences’ and ‘emotions’” (a reference applicable to the despised *zaumniki*).<sup>19</sup> The *Oberiuty* sought a world “reborn in all the purity of concrete, bold forms.”<sup>20</sup> Zabolotskii concluded his statement by saying:

As people of a concrete world, object, and word—that is how we see our social significance. To cleanse the world by the movements of a hand, to cleanse the object of the rubbish of ancient, putrefied cultures—are these not the real needs of our time? It is for that reason that our association bears the name OBERIU—The Association of Real Art.<sup>22</sup>

“Real art” was thus seen as an art that strove to uncover the underlying reality of things and to perceive them afresh. In, and of itself, “real art” is concrete, as much a part of the real world as the object in reality that it is striving to depict. The medium for comprehending this new reality was to be the “word as object.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Goldstein, p. 580.

<sup>18</sup> Gibian, p. 195.

<sup>19</sup> *zaumniki*: “transrationalists,” from the neologism *zaum* meaning “transrational” or “transsense,” and referring to those poets who used a language composed entirely of syllables and sounds without any referential meaning.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>23</sup> Goldstein, p. 580.

The OBERIU Declaration outlined how this new perception of the world was to be undertaken; as an illustration, Zabolotskii explained how his own verse should be read and, ultimately, perceived:

N. Zabolotskii [is] a poet of naked concrete figures brought close to the eyes of the spectator. One must hear and read him more with ones eyes and fingers than with ones ears. The object does not crumble; on the contrary, it becomes tighter and firmer, as though to meet the feeling hand of the spectator. The development of action and the setting play a secondary role to that main task.<sup>24</sup>

This is a perspective that utilizes the word in very visual and tactile terms, and where the spatial dimension of the word is made tangible. Zabolotskii saw his poetry very much in terms of images of things, not splintered, but put together, in a manner that stressed the interrelationships of word and object. In *Stolbitsy* in particular, we see not the pieces but the links—words that relate in a creative manner one to the other.

In his remarks on his fellow *Oberiuty* we see characteristics that are equally applicable to Zabolotskii himself. As Fiona Björling asserts, these characteristics are typical of what the OBERIU admired in the “left art” of Malevich and Filonov, namely the “analytical approach to reality.”<sup>25</sup> In this approach conventional means of perception are dispensed with and the artists, in order “to make direct contact with the raw material of reality...had first to break it down into its smallest part and examine it from every angle.”<sup>26</sup> Thus the poets Vvedenskii and Bakhterev are said to “break the object down into parts...[to] break the action down into fragments...”<sup>27</sup> By doing so both object and action “spring into being again, renewed by the spirit of the new OBERIU lyricism.”<sup>28</sup> This lyricism does not, however, exist solely for its own sake but “is no more than the means of

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<sup>24</sup> Gibian, p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Fiona Björling, ‘*Stolbcy*’ by Nikolai Zabolockij: Analyses (Stockholm, 1973), p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Gibian, p. 196.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

displacing the object into the field of new artistic perception.”<sup>29</sup> Daniil Kharms, for his part, turns the action inside out, placing objects on a collision course in order to observe their interrelationships.<sup>30</sup> The result is equivalent to the Futurist concept of *sdvig*, a term which implies a shift or radical change into something else. George Gibian explains *sdvig*:

It is frequently used by the *Oberiuty* because it expresses for them a violent, decisive metamorphosis, a shifting from one plane of being or perception or representation to another—a wrenching or a yanking from one level of semantics or existence to another, a shift from one category of conventional thinking or living to another.<sup>31</sup>

In poetry this happens at the semantic level, where words are dissected and rearranged within a phrase or sentence to create new associations with new meanings. In *Stolbsy*, for instance, two or more words may be linked grammatically but are not contiguous semantically. The results, as the following analyses will illustrate, are startling juxtapositions of images which produce distorted and fractured representations. In Zabolotskii’s poetry this sharpness of perception often results in a grotesque depiction of an object, person, or event. While these features operate primarily at the semantic level, they are affected by displacement at the syntactic, rhythmic, and euphonic levels as well. This heightens the associative power of the word by means of manipulation and accounts for the importance of tone in the poetry.<sup>32</sup> Identifying the nature of this tone, which is frequently elusive and shifting, is a fundamental task in determining the degrees of irony at work in the poem. These combined features of tone and syntax, as they impact on the semantic level of the poem, contribute to the obscurity of meaning which the reader so often confronts in *Stolbsy*.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>32</sup> Björling, p. 15.

But once again the OBERIU Declaration reveals the intentions of the artist. In the section “On the Road to a New Cinema,” the author (not Zabolotskii this time) states that in the cinema, “the time for subjects (themes) is past...[for] when the subjects (the action, the plot) are self-sufficient, they subordinate the material.”<sup>33</sup> The real material of the film is its language, so plot is not important because it gets in the way of the real subject. The author continues:

Important to us is the ‘atmosphere’ of the material, of the subject chosen by us. Separate elements of the film can be completely unconnected as far as plot and meaning are concerned.... The whole essence is in the atmosphere peculiar to the given material—the subject. Our main concern is to bring to light that atmosphere.<sup>34</sup>

Although one is not so much concerned with plot structures in poetry, this is nonetheless a revealing statement, because in *Stoltsy* tone functions very much as the “atmosphere” of OBERIU cinema. While each of the poems in *Stoltsy* has a subject, at least so it seems, what Zabolotskii is really trying to achieve is an “atmosphere” associated with a particular subject from the *byt* (“daily-life”) of NEP-time Leningrad. This assertion follows from Zabolotskii’s argument in the manifesto against the charge that OBERIU subjects are “unreal” and “illogical.” In his defence he states: “But who said the logic of life is compulsory in art? Art has a logic of its own, and it does not destroy the object but helps us to know it.”<sup>35</sup> Coming to know the object is, after all, the very essence and function of art, certainly it is in Zabolotskii’s conception of it.

This function is taken a step further in the section on OBERIU theatre. The writer of this section of the manifesto clearly admits that the spectator of an OBERIU theatrical performance should forget everything about the theatre that he is accustomed to, because the dramatic plot will suddenly be “interrupted by seemingly extraneous and clearly

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<sup>33</sup> Gibian, p. 199.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

ridiculous elements.”<sup>36</sup> The reason for this is that once an object and a phenomenon have been “transported from life to the stage [they] lose their life-like sequence of connections and acquire another—a theatrical one.”<sup>37</sup> OBERIU theatre saw as its task “to render the world of concrete objects on the stage in their interrelationships and collisions.”<sup>38</sup> The purpose of this was to emphasize the theatricality of a work by illustrating how separate elements of the spectacle are equally valuable in and of themselves; that they possess an autonomous existence and are not subordinate to the traditions of plot structure; and finally, that by this very independence of will such elements advance the plot of the play.<sup>39</sup> Only in this way can a work of theatre be truly theatrical.<sup>40</sup> The author declares that “the plots of theatrical performances are theatrical, just as the plots of musical works are musical.”<sup>41</sup> By analogy, therefore, the plots of poetical works are poetical. In conclusion, he asserts: “All represent one thing—a world of appearances—but depending on the material, they render it differently, after their own fashion.”<sup>42</sup>

In his poetry Zabolotskii advanced this theory when he explained that the development of the poem’s action and setting are secondary; the “collision of verbal meanings” constitutes an action in which the object “assumes new concrete traits full of real meaning.”<sup>43</sup> Poetry should not be static, but be full of the collisions of objects which, far from causing the work to crumble, actually cause it to become “tighter” and “firmer.”<sup>44</sup>

When Zabolotskii’s work is examined closely his emphasis on the linkages between words and objects—the creative interrelationships between things—becomes very apparent. The result is that his perception of the world is one in which the object is

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> The staging of Daniil Kharms’s play *Elizaveta Bam* was a production that proved this point.

<sup>41</sup> Gibian, p. 201.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

polysemantic—a thing becomes a symbol of another level of reality (a tavern is transformed into a mythic realm of spiritual catharsis or a streetcar ride becomes an epic journey). Zabolotskii achieves this by basing his poetry on highly visual representations of life in NEP-time Leningrad that are very physical and sensuous. These concrete perceptions collide and merge into a single image, and the result is a poetry that is multi-faceted as well as multi-levelled. The OBERIU Declaration makes it clear that this approach causes the object to become so distorted or fragmented that we are forced to perceive it not only in its original form but in an entirely new way. As we shall see from an analysis of the individual poems, Zabolotskii achieves this sense of distortion in a variety of ways and by means of a number of devices.

While various attempts to analyze and explain the poems of *Stoltsy* have been made using diverse methodologies, not enough attention has been paid to the tenets of the OBERIU Declaration in trying to come to grips with them. Part of the problem may lie in the fact that the OBERIU programme, while serious and well thought out, was incomplete and came too late in the history of modernism to have an impact. As for the manifesto itself, it has, as Milner-Gulland asserts, its “verbose and even naive passages”<sup>45</sup> and not a few generalizations (but no more than any number of similar manifestoes). It also failed, in his opinion, to emphasize “the importance...of anarchic humour, pastiche, and self-parody...[in addition to] the child’s and the madman’s perception of the world as a weapon in their fight against *literaturshchina* [meaning “literariness” in a derogatory sense].”<sup>46</sup> To its credit the manifesto did buttress its arguments with specific examples, and this saves it from charges of obscurity and abstraction. An exception to this would be the important section on film which seems to have had little impact (the OBERIU production *Film No. 1* has been lost). The poetry of OBERIU writers published in recent years illustrates the

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<sup>45</sup> Milner-Gulland, p. 68.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

importance of the manifesto to an understanding of their works. Similarly, it is necessary to consider Zabolotskii's contribution to the manifesto when analyzing the poems of *Stolbtsy* which, while ostensibly not OBERIU poetry, were written during the period when he was active in the movement. As for Milner-Gulland's appreciation of humour, pastiche, and parody, they are, unquestionably, features common to the poems of *Stolbtsy*, and ones which contribute significantly to the overall tone.

It is this very tone that has been so difficult for critics and scholars to categorize; in an attempt to come to grips with Zabolotskii's unique vision he has been subjected to all manner of comparisons. Not knowing what to make of him, commentators on Zabolotskii's early work have tended to look elsewhere for clues to understanding his complex images and obscure meaning. Such clues have been sought from the works of Rabelais and the paintings of Bosch, to the French surrealists and German expressionists. Part of the problem may lie in the fact that the OBERIU, as an association with a defined aesthetic, was virtually forgotten until the 1960s. Another reason may be that the OBERIU did not espouse any new theoretical ideas that had not already been expounded elsewhere. Because the association's views on art were not compatible with the ascendent school of Socialist Realism, when it disbanded, leaving little published evidence of its existence, its manifesto faded from sight.

Nonetheless, the OBERIU did involve a number of extremely original creative artists, not the least of them being Zabolotskii himself. As for the Declaration itself, now that it has been rediscovered and published, it is still the best explanation for the early work, especially the poems of *Stolbtsy*, of a poet whose genius was to have several manifestations beyond the highly charged brilliance of this slim volume, and yet whose creative output was forever influenced by it.

## CHAPTER TWO

TEN POEMS FROM *STOLBTSY*

i. “Krasnaia Bavaria” (“Red Bavaria”) is the first poem of the first section of *Stolbtsy*, and hence is the premier poem of the cycle of twenty-two. Because of its initial position, it sets the mood and tone of the other poems, and can be seen as a foreshadowing of what is to follow. As such, it offers a good representation of both thematic and stylistic features common to the other poems. From the analysis that follows, therefore, certain generalizations can be made about the cycle as a whole. The poem itself is 64 lines long, which is about average length for the collection.

The title of the poem refers to a NEP period tavern on the Nevskii Prospekt, the chief thoroughfare of Leningrad. The six stanzas of unequal length each record a different aspect of life in the Red Bavaria; as the poet moves from one stanza to the next the angle of vision changes so as to focus on the variety of activities encountered there. This technique will be repeated in a majority of the poems, especially the more complex longer ones, which by their very nature reveal a cinematic structure with stanzas set up much like scenes in a film. In the first such “scene” we enter the tavern, which is described as a “bottle paradise” (“butylochnyi rai”). A dried up palm tree is brought to our attention and we observe the smoke, the electric light, the whirring fan blades, and the foam sliding down the sides of a glass of beer:

в бокале плавало окно;  
оно на лопастях блестело,  
потом садилось, тяжелело;  
над ним пивной дымок вился...

(“in a goblet a window floated; / it glittered on the fan blades, / then it settled, it grew heavy; / overhead beery smoke hovered...”)

From a semantic standpoint this, of course, makes no sense at all, even though the words match each other grammatically. The concrete reality of this image is that in as few words as possible, the poet provides us with a much larger and more complex description. First of all, the reflection of a window is seen in the beer glass; the electric light and the revolving ceiling fan cast a shadow on the glass which causes this reflection to glitter. It also glitters because there is white foam streaming down the sides of the glass and settling. But what is really settling is the dark colour of the beer filling up the glass as the foam disperses to liquid. This is a prime example of the “collision of verbal meanings” (otherwise known as semantic displacement) which is spoken of in the OBERIU Declaration. Here, the object “window” (“okno”) is semantically displaced from its customary context as it “float[s] in a goblet” (“v bokale plavalo”). This has the effect of dis-orienting the reader, but at the same time it re-oriens him to the reality encountered in the Red Bavaria. What Zabolotskii is describing is not a window but the beer in a glass, and yet the word “beer” (“pivo”) does not appear until the next line when it is used as an adjective to describe the smoke.

It is clear from these opening lines that we have entered a separate realm—a “paradise of bottles” (“butylochnyi rai”) and a “remote place” or “thicket” (“glush”—alienated from real life; here the palm trees have dried up, the air is heavy with smoke and the fumes of alcohol, and the only sun is an electric light. The irony of the opening phrase is echoed throughout the poem as the displacement of images piles up. In a whimsical note at the conclusion of the stanza, the poet admits that the whole scene “is impossible to describe” (“no eto opisat' nel'zia”). Nevertheless, he presses onwards.

The emphasis on beer is evident from the name of the tavern, Red Bavaria, a Soviet version of the German province renowned for its *Oktoberfest* (the pun on the month of the Revolution is obviously intended). The preponderance of labial consonants *b* and *p* encountered throughout the poem enforces this “oral” preoccupation: i.e., “butylochnyi” (“bottle”), “bokal” (“goblet”), “pivnyi” (“beery”), “butylka” (“bottle”), “bedlam”

(“bedlam”), and “bar” (“bar”). These sounds are also linked to other words which, while not connected to drinking, nevertheless reflect the objects and things important to a bourgeois *byt*:<sup>1</sup> i.e., “buterbrod” (“sandwich”), “avtomobili” (“automobile”), and “benzin” (“gasoline”).

The second stanza introduces us to the hostesses of this “paradise,” the barmaids whom Zabolotskii identifies with the sirens of Greek mythology. These “sirens” (“sireny”) are also awaiting their victims, the bar’s patrons, whom they will ply with drink and, in the stanza that follows, entice with song. There is both a sense of foreboding and boredom in Zabolotskii’s description:

И в том бутылочном раю  
сирены дрогли на краю  
кривой эстрады.....  
Они простерли к небесам  
эмалированные руки  
и ели бутерброд от скуки.

(“And in this bottle paradise / sirens shivered at the edge / of a crooked stage... / They extended to the heavens / [their] enamelled hands / and ate a sandwich from boredom.”)

Later, in the next stanza, one of them will take up her guitar (a suitably vulgar symbol of bourgeois taste) and sing a *zhestokii romans* (“cruel romance”) about the death (by smashed bottle) of her lover. The *zhestokii romans*, as G. S. Smith has defined it, is “a ballad-type song, usually with a strong narrative element telling a melodramatic story of unrequited love or infidelity...often revenge leads to a violent outcome.”<sup>2</sup> Such songs, which were unabashedly sentimental and usually included an appeal for sympathy from the listener, were quite popular during the NEP period due, in large part, to a boom in night-

<sup>1</sup> *byt* is defined by the *Slovar' russkogo literaturnogo iazyka* as “a general way of life, the aggregate of customs and mores characteristic of a particular people, class or social milieu, etc.” In 20th-century literature the term has taken on a derogatory connotation synonymous with the mundane and materialistic aspects of everyday life. Maiakovskii raised *byt* to the level of a metaphysical category, seeing it as the routine enslavement of man to his physical, biological and social needs, even to time itself. Like Maiakovskii, Zabolotskii fought against *byt* and its banal, stultifying influence on modern Soviet man.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Stanton Smith, *Songs to Seven Strings: Russian Guitar Poetry and Soviet “Mass Song”* (Bloomington, 1984), p. 64.

life as a consequence of the resumption of private enterprise.<sup>3</sup> The songs were tinged with self-parody and irony, two features which undoubtedly made them attractive to Zabolotskii; it is noteworthy that his frequent use of them in *Stolbtsy* relies quite heavily on these characteristics.

In the instance cited here, the song consolidates the bond between the sirens of mythology and the barmaids (modern symbols of temptation) who are ready to entice the unwary NEP-men and lead astray those who would succumb to their enchantments. One of them is described as “pale” (“blednaia”), and this description is consistent with the other sirens who are extending their white-gloved hands towards the descending patrons. In Zabolotskii’s lexicon “pale” and “white” are words synonymous with death. Here, the exact epithet is lexically displaced by the use of the word “emalirovannyе” (“enamelled”), a suitably cold and menacing image. In this bottle paradise (becoming increasingly obvious as an anti-paradise more reminiscent of Hades than heaven) there is surely danger and death, as the barmaid only too blatantly relates in her song. Although the words of the song are themselves not given in the poem, the recitation of its narrative sequence is very much song-like. Beginning at stanza 3:9 with the repetition of the verb “poet, poet” (“she sings”), the alliteration introduces the events of the song which are themselves introduced by the repetition of the word “kak” (“as”); this approximates a refrain when the climax of the song is underscored by the repetition of the spirants *s* and *z* (3:13-16):

КАК ПО СТАКАНАМ ВИСЛА ВИСКИ,  
КАК, ИЗ РАЗБИТОГО ВИСКА  
ИЗМУЧЕННУЮ ГРУДЬ ОБРЫЗГАВ,  
ОН ВДРУГ УПАЛ.....

(“how whisky coated the glasses, / how, from a battered temple / which splattered [her] tormented breast, / he suddenly fell down.”)

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

This sound patterning is an echo of a similar one that begins the poem (1:7-8): “pivnoi dymok vilsia / no eto opisat’ nel’zia” (“beery smoke hovered / but it’s impossible to describe”). In fact, the euphony of these spirants is a consistent unifying feature throughout the poem.

At the end of the song the connection with the patrons themselves is re-established by the repetition of the word “bokal” (“goblet”) in the phrase, “i vse o chem ona ni pela / v bokale otlivalos’ melom” (“and everything she sang about / was in the goblet tinged like chalk”) (3:17-18). The simile “melom” (“like chalk”) is a visual reference to the beer foam sliding down the sides of the glass in the first stanza, in addition to being an image linked with death.

By the fourth stanza bedlam has broken out and the carousing is in full swing. Zabolotskii depicts this scene with another example of semantic displacement: “oni kachali bedlam s tsvetami popolam” (“they swayed the bedlam together with flowers”) (4:3-4). The masses that tumbled down the stairs into the tavern are now dancing atop the tables (swaying to and fro like flowers in a breeze) and shouting out blasphemies:

другой кричит: я—иисусик,  
молитесь мне—я на кресте,  
под мышкой гвозди и везде...

(“another one cried out: I’m the little Jesus, / pray to me—I’m on the cross, / with nails under my armpits and elsewhere...”)

This mockery of the Crucifixion is only the first of many parodic references to the Christian religion found in *Stolbitsy*. Zabolotskii emphasizes the elements of paradise (“rai”) by the consistent and ironical use of religious symbolism. From the repeated use of the word “bokal” (“goblet” or “chalice”) as opposed to the more usual “stakan” (“glass”), to the blasphemous pranks in the crucifixion parody, pain, suffering, and death, first expressed in the *zhestokii romans*, are juxtaposed with the images and symbols of Christianity:

“iisusik” (“the little Jesus”), “krest” (“cross”), “molites” (“pray”), “gvozdi” (“nails”). In all these instances, the associations with “bokal” and “rai” link this celebration of the banal with the exalted and sanctified. Even the sound patterning in stanzas 3 and 4 enforces this association, with consistent use of the velar consonant *k* in combinations with the vowels *o* and *a*, i.e.:

бокалов бешеный конклав  
зажёгся как паникадило.

(“a furious conclave of goblets / kindled like a church chandelier.”)

This image is a reference to the red-robed cardinals of the Catholic Church (symbolically dressed in the colours of the eucharistic elements blood and wine) meeting in conclave to choose a new Pope. While this “collision of verbal meaning” certainly elevates the banal to the sublime, the chandelier that bursts with light, in this instance, is certainly not in any church. Despite the blasphemous implications the poem contains, Zabolotskii is re-iterating the fact that this tavern, which stands as a Leningrad microcosm, is not a paradise and there is no redeeming Christ to be found here.

This religious imagery is also linked to a sexual image (another recurring characteristic of *Stoltsy*) in the preceding lines (9:9-10), when a barmaid sits on the lap of a patron: “*k nemu sirena podkhodila...koleno osedlav*” (“towards him the siren drew near...straddling his knee”). The incident is followed in the penultimate stanza by the eyes of the barmaids (earlier given to them in pledge) falling like weights. The night of revelry at the Red Bavaria ends when the omnipresent goblet is smashed. The customers begin to drift away; outside, a car heads towards the Picadilly Theatre and the tavern closes down:

Глаза упали точно гири,  
бокал разбили—вышла ночь,  
и жирные автомобили,  
схватив под мышки Пикадилли,  
легко откатывали прочь.

("Eyes fell down like weights, / a goblet shattered—night descended, / and fat automobiles, / grasping Picadilly under the arms, / rolled away at ease.")

The image of Picadilly being seized by the armpits is a semantic displacement that personalizes an object and links it to the crucifixion scene (4:7-9). Its negative implication is reinforced in the preceding line by the adjective “zhirnyi” (“fat” or “greasy”) used of automobiles but really implying the occupants within. This epithet will appear frequently in other negative connotations throughout *Stoltsy*. The night which descends on the tavern is likened to a ripening tomato which grows in the coolness. This is a parallel with the artificial sun of the opening stanza—the electric light which was reflected in the beer glass:

Росли томаты из прохлады,  
и вот опущенные вниз—  
краснобаварские закаты  
в пивные днища улеглись,

("Tomatoes grew from the coolness, / and having sunk down / the Red Bavarian sunsets / settled on the beery depths,")

The final scene shifts to the Nevskii Prospekt which has “changed its skin in the night” (“v nochi peremenivshii kozhu”) (6:2), and which exists in another dimension of time altogether: “v glushi vremen” (“in time’s thicket”) (5:10). Here, we enter the workaday world of Leningrad, with its bustle of activity: hooting horns and factory whistles, swirling fog, smell of gasoline, and crowds of people. We are aware that this is another sort of bedlam, reminiscent of the Red Bavaria with its swirling beer smoke, shouting patrons, and wailing barmaids. Zabolotskii is implying that we have only changed one reality for another, the real world is just another tavern—a microcosm of life. And above it all, the globe of the Singer Sewing Machine Company,<sup>4</sup> a symbol of capitalist enterprise, rises over the city like the sun:

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<sup>4</sup> The globe atop the company’s Russian headquarters had the name written across it and was held up by two caryatids. The edifice still exists today but houses the bookstore “Dom knigi” (“House of the Book”).

и под свистками Германдады,<sup>5</sup>  
через туман, толпу, бензин,  
над башней рвался шар крылатый  
и имя «Зингер» возносил.

(“and to the Hermandad’s whistles, / through fog, crowds, [and] gasoline, / a winged sphere proclaimed atop a tower / and hoisted up the name ‘Singer’.”)

The “winged sphere” is a semantic displacement merging two objects: the globe and the caryatids on which it rests; around the figure is a banner with the name “Zinger.” There is, here, also a religious subtext at work, with an angelic image and a subtle allusion to the Ascension.

In this poem Zabolotskii has depicted two distinct realms, two anti-paradies. With the juxtaposition of images, the interlacing of sounds, and the ironic tone throughout, he comments satirically on a very present reality (the *byt* of NEP period Leningrad) while at the same time creating a more wondrous, if vulgar, existence centred around the activities in the Red Bavaria.

“Krasnaia Bavariia” is composed of six stanzas, none of which, save for the first and last stanza, is of usual or conventional length. They are: one and six, 8 lines; two, 7 lines; three, 15 lines; four, 12 lines; and five, 11 lines. From this pattern we can see that the stanzas at the centre of the poem are the longest (15 and 12 lines), and these are framed by the first and last stanzas which are of eight lines each. This is evidence of a structural pattern which emphasizes the thematic arrangement of the stanzas into “scenes.” Such a pattern is consistent with other poems in the collection which also appear to be inconsistent in the numerical arrangement of stanza lines, but which follow this thematic layout.

Iambic tetrameter, the most common classical meter of Russian poetry, is the preferred meter for 19 of the 22 poems in *Stoltsy*, including “Krasnaia Bavariia.” The rhythmic variations in this poem are typical for iambic tetrameter and correspond to those

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<sup>5</sup> The *Germandady* were a popular force formed to resist the old nobility and which later had police functions. See *Stikhotvoreniia* (Washington, 1965), p. xxv.

outlined by Barry Scherr in his textbook on rhythm and meter in Russian verse.<sup>6</sup> Variation no. IV is the most common and is characterized by an omitted stress on the third ictus. This variation is consistent with Taranovskii's law of regressive accentual dissimilation, whereby the third ictus (that next to last) is the weakest. In "Krasnaia Bavaria" this variation occurs in 37 out of 64 lines, or 58% of the time. Other variations do occur in the poem, though considerably less frequently, and include those with stress omitted on the second ictus, and also on the first and third ictuses; these account for no more than 11%. Fully stressed lines occur seven times in the poem for 11%, and stress is omitted on the first ictus for only 6%.<sup>7</sup>

Kondratow's statistical procedure towards Zabolotskii's four-foot iambic verse does confirm the obvious feature of his metrics during this early period, i.e., their polyrhythmic structure; in addition, it also adds weight to his contention that Zabolotskii was influenced by Velimir Khlebnikov.<sup>8</sup> This is borne out by his later verse which returns to more regular rhythms (less and less disruptions) and even to approximations of eighteenth century classical meters.

The rhyme scheme of the poem is very irregular but tightly structured. The remarks on rhyme for this poem can be taken as typical of the majority of the poems in *Stolbtsy*; thus discussion of rhyme will not feature prominently in subsequent analyses. In keeping with the variable length of the stanzas, the rhyme sets are usually extended and composed of variations of alternating and adjacent rhyme. Frequently, lines do not rhyme but they are usually interspersed between lines that do. Zabolotskii's use of feminine and masculine rhyme is about evenly split. Stanzas frequently end on a rhyming couplet, and depending on the tone of the particular stanza, this usually results in a sense of closure being strived

<sup>6</sup> see Tables 3 and 4 in Barry Scherr, *Russian Poetry: Meter, Rhythm, and Rhyme* (Los Angeles, 1986), pp. 45-46.

<sup>7</sup> Statistical data for this and other iambic tetrameter poems have been corroborated with those established by Aleksandr Kondratow, "Czterostopowy jamb N. Zabolockiego i niektore zagadnienia statystyki wiersza," in *Poetyka i Matematika* (Warsaw, 1965), pp. 97-111.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

for. An example of these characteristics is the rhyme of the first stanza: AbAbCCdd. Here we find an alternating and adjacent pattern, with the stanza ending in a rhyming couplet; the clausula is composed of two sets of masculine and feminine rhyme.

Throughout the poem the rhymes themselves are predominantly exact. The feminine rhymes are frequently inexact, however, and the final vowels are often different, i.e., “tsepochkakh” / “sorochkoi” (3:1-3); “podkhodila” / “panikadilo” (4:9-12). Consonant truncation is the most frequently used device to achieve approximate rhyme, i.e., “glaza” / “nebesam” (2:4-5); “milom” / “kormila” (3:9-10). Consonant substitution is also employed, most notably, “otkusit” / “iisusik” (4:3-4); “giri” / “avtomobili” (5:1-3); “proklady” / “zakaty” (5:6-8). In stanza 3:13-15, both truncation and substitution of consonant groups *sk* and *zg* appear: “viski” / “obryzgav,” in addition to a final unstressed vowel *i* and *a*.

It would be unfair to say that Zabolotskii is not particularly innovative in his use of rhyme, but for all the importance that rhyme plays in accentuating the tone of the poems (and it is a very significant role), his rhymes are for the most part conventional and defined according to linguistic norms. In fact, when it suits the poet, rhyme is frequently skipped altogether.

ii. “Belaia noch” (“White Night”) is the second poem in the cycle. Whereas the opening poem of *Stoltsy* took place almost exclusively indoors, this poem is situated in the environs of the city during the mysterious evening glow of the “white nights,” that natural phenomenon of the northern latitudes when the sun does not set completely and the nights aren’t totally dark. The atmosphere evoked in this poem can also be considered a separate realm, peculiar to northern cities like Leningrad and Helsinki, and is a familiar feature of the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevskii, and Belyi.

The poem opens with an exclamation that the ensuing description is indeed reality: “gliadi: ne bal, ne maskarad” (“look, it’s no ball, no masquerade”). But day and night are

not on schedule, everything is topsy-turvy, for during the period of the “white nights” night pretends to be day: “zdes' noch i khodiat nevpopad” (“here the nights pass irrelevantly”). Associated with this unnatural phenomenon is a frenzy of activity that is decidedly furtive and sexual: “begut liubovniki tolpoi” (“lovers are running in a crowd”); and the peoples’ behaviour is raucous: “zdes', ot vina neuznavaem, / letaet khokhot popugaem” (“here wild laughter, wine besotted, / flies up like a parrot”).

Zabolotskii describes the ensuing festive events, complete with fireworks, that are associated with the “white nights”:

ракеты, в полукруг сомкнувшись,  
вставали в очередь. Потом  
летели огненные груши,  
вертя бенгальским животом.

(“rockets, converging in an arc, / stood in line. Then / blazing pears flew, / spinning their Bengal belly.”)

This last image is a special one, as Zabolotskii, by means of a semantic and grammatical displacement, describes not only the firework known as “bengal'skii ogon” (“Bengal fire”), but transposes these two words into adjectives which describe the fireworks according to their combustive nature and their explosive transformation into pear and stomach-like shapes. As befits the strange transformations that occur during the “white nights,” these fireworks are seen in a new perspective.

On the Neva there is also frantic activity, as a pilot of a steamer threatens to cripple some smaller boats if they come too close to his own vessel, “k nemu navstrechu lodki khodiat /...on im krichit: ia iskalechu!” (“and boats went out to meet it /...he calls to them: “I'll cripple you!””).

All of this activity has a restless, hectic tone, and seems not to be directed in any positive direction. This is emphasized by the image, “razdvinulis' mosty i kruchi” (“the bridges and hills come apart”), a semantic displacement that refers to the lowering and

raising of the bridges across the Neva, and which features them as composites of the landscape. There is also implied in the verb “razdvinulis” a fragmentation of another sort, as if all this activity is associated with nature coming apart as a result of the “white night” phenomenon.

But it is not until the last stanza of the poem that all the frenzy and sexual imagery becomes meaningful. The stanza begins: “i vsiudu sumasshedshii bred” (“and all around there’s mad delirium”), whereupon it is revealed:

а ночь уже на ладан дышит,  
качается как на весах.  
Так недоносок или ангел,  
открыв молочные глаза,  
качается в спиртовой банке  
и просится на небеса.

(“but night already breathes its last, / swaying as if on scales. / Thus a deformed foetus or angel, / opening its milky eyes, / sways in a jar of alcohol / and cries out to the heavens.”)

The furtive sexual activity of the first and fourth stanzas become connected to the central metaphor of the poem: night as an aborted foetus. The synonymy between “white” and death has already been established, and here too, the “Petersburg myth” is also called upon as a subtext, as it is in so many of the *Stolbtsy* poems. In this poem the activities of people have become metaphorically associated with the death of night; love-making, which should result in the birth of a living organism, is here distorted into a metaphor for death. The natural phenomenon of the “white night” celebrated in this poem, and so often associated in Russian literature with aberrant human behaviour, is here the victim of human activity. Night’s struggle with the daylight, which is likened to a sexual encounter, is futile, as is so much of human activity in *Stolbtsy*. Thus the aborted foetus of the last stanza, also referred to ironically as an angel, is the product of the love-making in the first:

бегут любовники толпой,  
один—горяч, другой—измучен,  
а третий—книзу головой...  
Любовь стенаст под листами,  
она меняется местами,

(“lovers are running in a crowd, / one ardent, the other jaded, / a third one hangs his head... / Love groans beneath the leaves, / it changes places,”)

It would appear that impotency is alluded to, especially in the case of the third lover whose “head” is drooping less from shame than impotence. The concrete image of the lover is fragmented into three in order to show that love often has three facets. This fragmentation is underlined by the use of dashes in lines 7-8, which actually stand in place of the absent verb, but which also visually and aurally signify the image. The use of ellipsis at the end of line 8 is connected to the ellipsis of line 11, “to podoidet, to otoidet...” (“now it approaches, now it recedes...”); night and day, like lovers, change places and come and go, but in the context of this poem have yet to resolve anything.

The rhythm of these lines is quite jaunty and lends itself to the risqué tone of the proceedings. The alliteration of consonants *l* and *m*; the repetition of *st* sounds; the adjacent feminine rhyme on *-ami* (“listami” / “mestami”); and the frequency of vowels in line 11, all characterize the rhythmic features of this passage.

There is a parallel between the conjunctions “to... to...” of stanza 1:11 with the negated conjunction “ne to... ne to...” of stanza 3:4. At this point in the poem the lovers are replaced by “sireny” (“sirens”) and “devki” (“girls”) (Zabolotskian designations for prostitutes) rising out of the Nevka (a smaller tributary of the Neva) to offer their pale and frigid allurements:

А на Невке  
не то сирены, не то девки—  
но нет, сирены—шли наверх,  
все в синеватом серебре,  
холодноватые—но звали  
прижаться к палевым губам  
и неподвижным как медали.

(“But on the Nevka / sirens or girls— / but no, sirens—reached up, / all in a bluish silver, / somewhat chilly—yet they called / to offer pallid lips / motionless like medallions.”)

The poet’s reaction to this scene is to walk on by (“ia shel podal’she”) (4:1), but the sexual imagery is inescapable, as “night lay lengthwise in the grass, white as chalk” (“noch’ legla vdol’ po trave, kak mel bela”). Night here is concrete and capable of physical activity, and the oxymoron “kak mel bela” is a link to the central metaphor of the poem. Elagin Island, in the delta of the Neva, is also personified (by the use of its proper name alone) and capable of action, as it both shelters and then exposes two lovers who have presumably consummated their love:

на корточках привстал Елагин,  
ополоснулся и затих:  
ОН В ЭТОТ раз накрыл двоих.

(“Elagin rose to a crouch, / he rinsed and fell silent: / this time he’d flushed out two.”)

The reference to “angel” (“angel”) in stanza 5:1, links the imagery of lovers in the bushes (“kusty”) (4:3) to the product of their love, the “foetus” (“nedonosok”) of the concluding stanza (7:5). From the previous stanza—the incident with the boats—we receive an ominous foreshadowing of what is to come: the cry of the pilot, “I’ll cripple you!” (“ia iskalechu!”). As the last stanza opens, we are reminded that all that has been described is really mad delirium (“sumashedshii bred”). Again the night (air) is described as white (“belyi vosdukh”), but this time it is dying. The recurring reflexive verb “kachaetsia” (“it sways”), which has linked key images throughout the poem and acted like a leitmotif (see 2:1 and 3:1), now binds the night, by means of a semantic leap introduced by the conjunction “tak” (“thus”), to the foetus, with its white eyes, swaying in a jar of alcohol: “tak nedonosok...kachaetsia v spirtovoi banke” (“thus a deformed foetus...sways in a jar of alcohol”).

Throughout the poem the “white night” phenomenon is made concrete by the tangibility of the poet’s imagery as evidenced by such words as “maskarad” (“masquerade”), “liubovniki” (“lovers”), “mel” (“chalk”), “angel,” and finally “nedonosok” (“foetus”). Such words connect the unreality of a natural phenomenon with concepts that are decidedly physical. On the other hand, operating on a different lexical level, such words as “liubov” (“love”), “muzy” (“muses”), “obman” (“illusion”), “zhalost” (“pity”), and “bred” (“delirium”) convey abstract concepts that are emotional, and which lend to the poem a perception that is surreal and ominous.

The fact that night cannot escape the day and make a full transition to a new day, bodes ill for the citizenry of a city caught in the grip of transition. The associations with revolutionary events and the period of NEP are unmistakable. Like so many of the poems of *Stoltsy* which work on several levels, Zabolotskii is implying that Russia, like the night during this seasonal northern phenomenon, has been diverted from full transformation into a new society and, in fact, has been aborted. Coming as it does at the beginning of *Stoltsy*, the poem’s imagery and tone (at times both playful and menacing) sets a mood that pervades the whole cycle.

Rhythmically, the poem proceeds at a steady pace, and is disrupted only when the imagery becomes complex or elusive (as it frequently does). The poem is written in iambic tetrameter, and the range of variations that constitute the meter is greater than many others in the cycle. This is evident from the fact that 38% of the third ictuses go unstressed (only four of the 19 poems in iambic tetrameter drop below 50% of unstressed third ictuses), while 19% of the lines are fully stressed; 14% omit stress on the second ictus, and 22% leave the first and third ictuses unmarked. Thus the poem reveals a wide assortment of rhythmic fluctuations, perfectly in keeping with its mood of restless activity and futile endeavour.

iii. “Ofort” (“Etching”) is the second poem of Section Two, which is comprised of four poems. “Ofort” ostensibly describes the procession of a deceased man, lying in an open coffin, through the streets to his burial. At the cemetery, a priest performs the burial rite and the coffin is then placed in the grave. None of this activity is described, however, in a straightforward manner, but is deduced instead through the various semantic layers that constitute the poem. As one commentator has pointed out, the poem contains themes that are both apocalyptic and consistent with the city myth of Petersburg.<sup>9</sup> The opening image is immediately significant: the noisy flight of the corpse from the church has a distinctly Gogolian flavour:

И грянул на весь оглушительный зал:  
—Покойник из царского дома бежал!

(“And it rang all through the deafening hall: / ‘A corpse has fled from the royal house!’”)

The words “zal” (“hall”) and “tsarskogo doma” (“royal house”) are obviously connected to the architecture of the seat of imperial power. Even the epithet “oglushitel’nyi” (“deafening”) conveys a feeling of cold immensity, until one realizes that Zabolotskii is describing, by means of displaced semantics, a funeral procession emerging from a cathedral. This flight is extended to the carriage procession, where the corpse is then said to be led through the streets by its reins, accompanied by much praying and supplication:

Покойник по улицам гордо идёт,  
его постояльцы ведут под уздцы;  
он голосом трубным молитву поёт  
и руки ломает наверх.

(“The corpse goes proudly through the streets, / lodgers lead him by the reins; / he chants a prayer in a trumpeting voice / and wrings his hands upwards.”)

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Ljunggren, “Oblich’ia smerti: k interpretatsii stikhovoreniia N. Zabolotskogo ‘Ofort’,” *Scando-Slavica* 27, 1981, pp. 171-77.

The deceased appears to be actively engaged in his own funeral procession, but, of course, is doing none of this by himself; he is accompanied by his fellow citizens who are described as “lodgers” (“postoial’tsy”) (an apt term for people whose lives on earth are transitory). The displacement here exists at the grammatical level, where the verbal number is in the singular and the accompanying pronoun refers to the corpse; it is, in fact, the lodgers who are doing the mourning. The corpse itself is lying inert in “copper specs”: “on v mednykh ochkakh, pereponchatykh ramakh” (“in copper spectacles, membrane frames”).

This comic image refers to the ancient custom of placing copper coins over the eyes of the deceased in order to close them; symbolically, the coins were used to pay the fare across the Lethe into the next world. The “membrane frames” constitute the pallid skin around the so-called “spectacles.” To the observer, the deceased appears to be lying “up to his neck in subterranean water” (“perepolnen do gorla podzemnoi vodoi”). This displaced image has two functions: in the first instance it refers to the silk lining of the inside of the coffin which makes the corpse appear to be submerged; and in the second, it reinforces the Petersburg theme by referring to the swampy origins of the city and imagining the grave filling up with water.

When the upper lid is placed on the coffin, the action is described as one of “wooden birds...clos[ing]...their wings” (“dereviannyе ptitsy...smykaiut...kryla”). But this is really deduced from Zabolotskii’s semantic shift, which equates the wings of a bird (a probable decoration on the coffin lid) with the two halves of a shutter. In this instance the Petersburg subtext reappears, as the bird is both symbolic of the Imperial two-headed eagle and a carrion bird with mythological undertones. The whole image is set by the displaced epithet “dereviannyе” (“wooden”) which refers to the coffin but actually describes the birds. This juxtaposition is, in turn, linked by the phrase “smykaiut na stvorkakh kryla” (“close their wings on shutters”), and which, by means of a semantic leap, creates the image of a closing coffin lid. The image of the deceased man in his coffin with the lid closing over him is now complete:

Он—в медных очках, перепончатых рамках,  
переполнен до горла подземной водой,  
над ним деревянные птицы со стуком  
смыкают на створках крыла.

(“He’s in copper spectacles, membrane frames, / up to his neck in subterranean water, / above him wooden birds with a clatter / close their wings on shutters.”)

Images from the city return as the point of view shifts to the grotesque perspective of the deceased. Over him the heads and top-hats of the mourners look like industrial smoke-stacks belching clouds into the sky: “gromoboi tsilindrov briatsan’e / i kurchavoe nebo” (“a thunder-battle of top-hats, a jingling / and a curly sky”). The trope “gromoboi” is a compound neologism consisting of the nouns “grom” (“thunder”) and “boi” (“battle”). This is the new image of Petersburg/Leningrad, a factory complex of the new Soviet industrial state far removed from the “oglushitel’nyi zal” (“deafening hall”) and “tsarskogo doma” (“royal house”) of the opening lines. Zabolotskii does not comment as to whether this is a positive or negative image, but coming as he did from the countryside he could hardly find it favourable.

The final image of the “gorodskaiia korobka” (“urban box”) links the theme of death, and its celebration in this poem, to the living inhabitants of the city of Leningrad, the aforementioned “lodgers.” This metaphor for the humble lodgings of the city-dwellers is touchingly, if ironically, underscored by the appearance in the “little window” (“za steklyshkom”) of a flower, “rosmarin” (“rosemary”). In the *novyi byt* (“new life”) which the poems of *Stoltsy* satirize, the “gorodskaiia korobka” here refers to the coffin of the deceased—the “house” of the NEP-man’s final resting place.

The semantic complexity of this poem is further underlined by the apparent complexity of the meter. An initial encounter with the poem identifies what appear to be four foot amphibrachs and anapaests. But the predominance of two syllable intervals between the stressed ictuses and the instances of one and two syllable anacrusis make it

apparent that the meter is *dol'nik*. This is an uncommon meter for Zabolotskii, but its use in this poem is typical for *dol'nik* verse written during the modern period. The opening two lines, which form a rhyming couplet on a masculine rhyme, are set off from the other twelve lines of the poem (a form common to three other poems in *Stolbtsy*). This initial rhyming couplet imparts a strong rhythmic beginning to the poem, but the rhyme soon dissipates, however, and it has little significance in the remainder of the poem. It is obvious from the irregular syllabic structure that the poem is moving from the poetic to the prosaic, which is also in keeping with the poem's increasing lexical complexity.

iv. “Leto” (“Summer”) is another short poem from Section Two and it is unique for being one of the few that is not set solely in the city. It is a brief pastoral still-life poem and, unlike the previous poems, is one of the few in the cycle in which frenzied activity does not play a major part. In fact, the whole scene is pervaded by a sense of stasis and oppression. The scene opens on a summer day, presumably in the city, where the heat is so oppressive that the sun appears to be low in the sky: “puntsovoe solntse viselo v dlinu” (“the crimson sun hung lengthwise”). The heat is intensified by Zabolotskii’s displaced metaphors which describe people in terms of vegetation, and vegetation in terms of objects:

людские тела наливались, как груши,  
и зрели головки, качаясь, на них.  
Обмякли деревья. Они ожирели  
как сальные свечи.

(“people’s bodies were swelling up like pears, / and heads ripened, swaying on them. / The trees were wilting. They’d grown fat / like tallow candles.”)

Into this scene the poet injects a note of irony when he states: “i veselo bylo ne mne odnomu” (“and it wasn’t just for me to enjoy”). Zabolotskii uses a concrete image to fix a visual impression of the trees wilting by comparing them to candles melting in the sun.

The wax that runs along the ground is similarly given concrete form when it is described as a stream of saliva trickling by:

Казалось нам—  
под ними не пыльный ручей пробегает,  
а тянется толстый обрывок слюны.

(“It seemed to us / that beneath them not a dusty stream runs by, / but a thick strip of saliva stretches.”)

This sinister image is intensified by the alliteration of the consonant *t* and the repetition of *p* and *n* sounds in the previous lines. The negative connotations present in the use of words such as: “ozhireli” (“grown fat”), “sal’nye” (“tallow”), and “sliuny” (“saliva”) are obvious and consistent with other poems.

When night descends, it seems so close to the earth that the stars “swayed amongst the flowers” (“zvezdy kachalis’ v tsvetakh”) and a shepherd (a standard feature of pastoral scenes) is able to trace the moon’s reflection in the dirt:

пехотный пастух, заседая в овражке,  
чертит диаграмму луны,

(“an infantry shepherd, sitting in a gully, / drew a diagram of the moon.”)

This nocturnal shift to an obviously pastoral setting does not, however, offer much relief:

На этих лугах  
колючие звёзды качались в цветах,  
шарами легли меховые овечки,  
потухли деревьев кудрявые свечки.

(“In these meadows / prickly stars swayed amongst the flowers, / furry sheep lay like spheres, / the curly candled trees went out.”)

There is in this description of nature a grotesque dislocation, as if the presence of people in the natural world causes it to deform (a feature typical of “Belaia noch” as well). There is

also evidence of a military subtext to the poem in the use of such words as: “chertil” (“drew”), “diagramma” (“diagram”), “pekhotnye” (“infantry”), and in the concluding lines:

и грызлись собаки за свой перекрёсток—  
кому на часах постоять....

(“and dogs fought with each other at their cross-road— / which one was to stand guard...”)

While the opening of the poem suggested an unpleasant, scorching day in the city, the poem ends on a note of foreboding and anticipation, as if some epic struggle is about to unfold (as it so often does in *Stolbtsy*) with the arrival of dawn.

Unlike the previous poem, “Ofort,” the meter of this poem is regular amphibrachic tetrameter without catalexis. Again, rhyme is sparse, except for three sets of rhyming couplets at lines 1-2, 9-10, and 11-12. Only towards the end of the poem is there a break in the meter, when the penultimate line is a tetrameter preceded, and then followed, by a trimeter. This variation provides a minimal sense of poetic closure.

v. “Dvizhenie” (“Motion”) is the tenth poem in the cycle and is found in Section Three; it is the shortest poem in *Stolbtsy*, composed of only eight short lines. But despite its brevity, it is brilliantly evocative and is a highly charged visual picture of a drayman and his horse speeding through the streets. It represents, as Darra Goldstein asserts, Zabolotskii’s “poetic attempt to fix movement on the page, just as the futurist painters sought to capture motion on canvas.”<sup>10</sup> Zabolotskii’s concern with the depiction of frenzied motion is in keeping with other modernist attempts to synthesize objects in space and time, and is a feature common to the majority of poems in *Stolbtsy*.<sup>11</sup> This fascination was first promulgated in the OBERIU Declaration and in the *Oberiuty*’s interest in Pavel Filonov’s

<sup>10</sup> Goldstein, p. 583.

<sup>11</sup> Goldstein’s paper is an attempt to show the influence of the Russian modernist painter Pavel Filonov on the early poetry of Zabolotskii; the poem in question here, she proposes, was inspired by two works of Filonov. See p. 583.

“analytic art.” This poem, with its drayman sitting on his seat like a king on a throne, quite literally elevates the ordinary to the majestic and sublime:

Сидит извозчик как на троне,  
из ваты сделана броня,  
и борода, как на иконе,  
лежит, монетами звеня.

(“The drayman sits as on a throne, / [his] armour made of cotton, / and [his] beard, like in an icon, / lies [there] clinking like money.”)

The displacement of the images “cotton armour” for a padded coat, and the “beard of coins” reminiscent of frost on a man’s hair, is highlighted by the euphony of the iambic rhythm and the alternating feminine rhyme. The sound patterning of this quatrain emphasizes the poem’s euphony by the repetition of the consonants *n*, *k*, and *b*.

In the second quatrain this same sound pattern is maintained but without the sonority of rhyme. The concrete image becomes dominant in this half of the poem, and the frozen, elongated image of the horse’s legs in full gallop is emphasized by the increased length of the line:

А бедный конь руками машет,  
то вытянется, как налим,

(“But the poor horse waves its arms, / and stretches out like an eel.”)

The displaced semantics of this description emphasizes the grotesque nature of the image, as the horse is stripped of all features of “horseness.” The poor animal is further distorted as the number of its legs is doubled in the freeze-frame of depicted motion. This is an excellent example of *predmetnost'*, and is illustrative of the way in which Zabolotskii segments an object (in this instance the image of movement) into its component parts:

ТО СНОВА ВОСЕМЬ НОГ СВЕРКАЮТ  
В ЕГО БЛЕСТАЯЩЕМ ЖИВОТЕ.

("and again eight legs are flashing / inside its shiny belly.")

The poem can even be said to have a Petersburg subtext, particularly in its juxtaposition with Falconet's equestrian statue and with the many literary works, especially of Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevskii, in which speeding *droshki* are featured. Both the frantic movement depicted here, and the epic magnification of the drayman, are features common to other poems in the cycle; but while their appearance in this poem strives primarily for visual effect, other poems in the cycle will take advantage of them for satirical purposes.

From a metrical standpoint, the eight lines of "Dvizhenie" are in iambic tetrameter, 50% of which follow variation no. IV. Of the remaining lines, two (50%) carry full stress, and the remaining two lines omit stress on the first and third, and the second and third ictuses respectively. The rhyme scheme, like previous shorter poems, is unusual—the first quatrain being AbAb, while the second is entirely without rhyme.

These shorter poems of *Stolbtsy* are interesting because they present Zabolotskii at his most "scenic." While they do not offer the scope and breadth of vision typical for the longer poems in *Stolbtsy*, they are characteristic of those poems which encompass a narrower focus. They describe an event that is unusual in itself, all the more so for being so visually compressed. As mentioned in the analysis of "Krasnaia Bavaria," Zabolotskii constructs his poems not from stanzas of predetermined length, but from isolated scenes of the life of the NEP period that are visually and spatially determined. Movement and action are the most important elements present in "Ofort" and "Dvizhneie" (the obvious exception being "Leto"), and from this standpoint it is fascinating to see poetic segments stand alone, revealing their dynamic characteristics. But stylistically the poems are less successful, as if

the smaller picture restricted the poet's inventive imagination. For all the power of their imagery, Zabolotskii's shorter works are not as successful as his longer poems because, as Alekxis Rannit points out, they did not permit him "the same opportunity to develop a strongly marked structure from an extended series of allegoric planes."<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, in the poems that follow, it will become evident just how such "allegoric planes" are dependent on these dynamic sequences of metaphor for the full impact of Zabolotskii's "visionary" interpretation of reality to come to fruition.<sup>13</sup>

vi. The theme of epic magnification encountered briefly in "Dvizhenie," takes on greater prominence and significance in "Pekarnia" ("The Bakery"), but this time it is carried to grandiloquent extreme. It is in this poem that Zabolotskii metaphorically portrays the birth of the new Soviet man conceived in the womb of Revolution. In A. Makedonov's discussion of *Stoltsy* it is this poem above all others that is viewed with some degree of sympathy. This is so, primarily, because it is more amusing and less pessimistic than the others, and also because, from his Marxist perspective, it appears to glorify productive labour and is less concerned with human cupidity.<sup>14</sup>

But as Zabolotskii might reply, "this is mere illusion." In this ironical glorification of the baking of a loaf of bread by a team of wondrous bakers, there is a sinister subtext at work. As in so many of the poems, the action unfolds at night, an indication that rational thought is soon to be abandoned and a skewed perspective about to unfold. The first stanza describes this "peaceful evening" ("pokornyi vecher") descending on the city in a barrage of menacing metaphors:

Зари причудливые ранки  
дымились, упадая ниц;  
на крышах чашки черепиц

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<sup>12</sup> Rannit, p. xiv.

<sup>13</sup> It is significant that Rannit considers Zabolotskii a "visionary" as well as a "visual" expressionist.

<sup>14</sup> Makedonov, pp. 79-80.

встречали их подобьем лиц,  
слегка оскаленных от злости.

(“Sunset’s capricious wounds / smoked and fell prostrate; / on the rooftops little cups of tiles / greeted them like faces, / with slightly bared teeth out of malice.”)

A cat innocently observes the scene with its tail thrust into a drain-pipe (“i kot v trubu zasunul khvostik”). Down below, beneath a crooked sign in the shape of a pretzel (“krendel”), the bakers are getting ready to work, and they watch as “the sunset floats along / the moulded dough like butter” (“plavaet zaria / kak maslo vdol’ po khlebnym formam”). What happens next can only be described as a mixture of grotesque parody and sinister satire. The bakery is transformed into another Leningrad microcosm, a separate realm, but this time one that is symbolic of the whole of Russia as it undergoes the birth pangs of revolution. The stove that will bake the bread is described as “pregnant” (“beremennaia”) (2:10), and after the supreme effort of having received the dough and transforming it into a “bread-child” (“mladenets-khleb”) (4:7), it is then depicted as an innocent virgin (“deva”) (5:3):

А печь, наследника родив  
и стройное поправив чрево,  
стоит стыдливая, как дева  
с ночною розой на груди.

(“And the stove, having given birth to an heir / and regained its shapely belly, / stands modestly, like a maiden / with a night rose on its breast.”)

The “night rose” in this instance is a metaphor for the oven fire, first described in stanza 2:9 as a “fiery flow” (“ognennaia tech”) from an oven that is “wheezing and rumbling like Sormov” (“khrapit...i gromykaet slovno Sormov”) (2:10-11). The religious symbolism of these lines is unmistakable, as the words “deva” and “mladenets” are taken from the Church Slavonic lexicon signifying the Virgin and the Christ-child. These are in turn linked with images from the opening stanza: “pokornyi” (“humble”), “ranki” (“wounds”),

and “upadaia nits” (“prostrating”) which further emphasize the religious connotation. But Zabolotskii is not writing a parody of Christ’s birth in terms of the baking of a loaf of bread. What is at work here is an implied distortion of the Revolution as a holy experience made manifest by the corrupting influence of NEP. The “deva” is not merely the Virgin miraculously transformed to her former maidenly self, but a symbol of an ideal that has turned its back on itself. The “mladenets-khleb” is the dough (“testo”) of stanza three, which before its transformation in the “cave of all metamorphoses” (“peshchere vsekh metamorfoz”) was rising and metaphorically tearing at the walls like a wild beast:

Тут тесто, вырвав квашен днище,  
как лютый зверь в пекарне рыщет,  
ползёт, клубится, глотку давит,  
огромным рылом стену трёт;

(“Here the dough, ripped from its pan, / roams the bakery like a wild beast, / crawling, writhing, gagging at the throat, / it rubs its enormous snout against the wall;”)

This is an image born of violence and resistance; the rhythm is appropriately abrupt, produced as a result of a four line sequence with all the stresses fulfilled, and highlighted by the repetition of such hard consonant sounds as *t* and *k*. This bread-dough will not go willingly into the oven, much as Russia herself resisted the changes wrought by revolution and war. But like the wall up against which the dough “rubs its snout,” resistance is broken and the dough is eventually subdued by the bakers, those “idols in tiaras” (“idoly v tiarakh”) (3:12) with their magical implements: “kak izukrashennye stiagi, / lopaty khodiat tiazhelo” (“like lavishly embellished banners, / the wooden paddles heave”). This whole scene of bakers (heroes of the Revolution) accompanied by crashing cymbals, can-can dancing, and the triumphant blast of a trumpet is purposely exaggerated to emphasize the epic dimensions of this monumental struggle. There is satirical intent in these lines as well, for Zabolotskii perverts the ideals of revolution by accompanying them with elements common to a bourgeois *byt*. The transformation of the dough into bread and the image of

the stove itself are described in terms more appropriate to a furnace where steel is forged. In all its heroic excess this mock-epic depiction builds to a climax:

И в этой красной от натуги  
пещере всех метаморфоз  
младенец-хлеб приподнял руки  
и слово стройно произнёс.

("And in this cave of all metamorphoses / red from all the strain, / the bread-child lifted up its arms / and uttered a word well-wrought.")

This birth imagery is further linked to the Christian belief in the Incarnation of Christ by the uttering of a “word” during the birth process. The metaphor is semantically displaced by the use of the epithet “stroino” (“well-wrought” or “structured”) as an adverb modifying the verb “proiznes” (“uttered”) rather than “slovo” (“word”). Whereas Word was made flesh by the Incarnation of Christ, in this instance the purpose behind the metaphors of stove/womb and dough/child, and the uttering of a “word,” is to depict the birth of a “mladenets-khleb” who is destined to become the “new man” of the Soviet era. While the theme has yet to reach its apotheosis (we are reminded of the babes in “Figury sna” (“Dream Shadows”), “Novyi byt” (“The New Life”) and “Nezrelost” (“Immaturity”)), this “mladenets-khleb” is a metaphor for that perversion of the hero of the Revolution, the NEP-man, and the mentality of *byt* for which he stands. Zabolotskii’s distaste for the outcome is epitomized by the cat in the final stanza (a symbol of *byt* in the poems of *Stolbtsy*) who acts as a kind of Greek chorus offering its commentary on the proceedings. While it appeared innocent enough in the first stanza (albeit with its tail in the drain-pipe), by the final stanza it has become a symbol of corruption, whose tail is stinking and who has befouled the floor:

И кот, в почётном сидя месте,  
усталой лапкой рыльце крестит,  
зловонным хвостиком вертит,  
потом кувшинчиком сидит.

..... Одно болотце  
осталось в глиняном полу.

("And the cat, sitting in a place of honour, / crosses its snout with a weary paw, / twirls its stinking tail, / then like a pitcher sits. / ..... / Just a puddle / is left behind on the clay floor.")

Zabolotskii's vision of this "metamorphosis" is here given its ironic twist, as the all-knowing cat turns its backside to the miraculous birth of the "mladenets-khleb" and any implication it may have held for a "real" new life. The nocturnal events of the bakery are nullified anyway, as morning appears "swimming into a corner" ("I utro vyplylo v uglu").

Throughout this poem Zabolotskii has used metaphorical devices to achieve distortion and to elevate a seemingly basic everyday task—the baking of bread—to a level of epic proportion. The semantic associations between bread-dough and child, bakers and idols, stove and womb, cat and authorial commentary, is carefully interwoven throughout the poem. This is underlined by a rhyme scheme that is basically irregular but systematically structured and composed of alternating and adjacent rhymes. The rhymes are primarily feminine, and this, combined with the iambic tetrameter meter, of which 59% of the lines customarily omit stress on the third ictus, contributes to the poem's flowing rhythm and humorous tone.

vii. The poem, "Novyi byt" ("The New Life"), can be considered crucial to the cycle because in it Zabolotskii introduces the reader to the principal theme of *Stolbtsy* and to its central figure: the new Soviet man (in his incarnation as the NEP-man) partaking of the "new life" (*novyi byt*) ushered in by the Revolution. In keeping with the theme of "newness," Zabolotskii introduces into this section a secondary theme, that of the "infantness" of the central figure. As we saw in the previous poem, "Pekarnia" ("The Bakery"), the birth of the "new man" was metaphorically represented by the baking of a loaf of bread—a "mladenets-khleb" ("bread-child"). In "Novyi byt" this concept is

repeated and the “new man” is referred to as “mladenets” (“infant”) throughout the poem. The only exception comes at two crucial points in the poem, first when his status is elevated and he calls himself a “guardsman of the new life” (“novoy zhizni opolchenets”) (1:39), and later when he is referred to as a groom (“zhenikh”) (2:7). It will become evident that there is very little innocence associated with the figure’s “infantness,” and that Zabolotskii’s real intention is rather to point to the “new man’s” infantility as a satirical device.

The poem describes the growth of the “mladenets” from his baptism, through infancy, adolescence and on into manhood and marriage. It is significant that this poem takes place in Moscow, because this was the seat of Soviet power and the depiction of the life of the “new man” could be presented without the influence of the Petersburg myth so much a part of the other poems. This idea is reinforced in the opening line, with the sun “rising above” the city of Moscow like the dawning of a new age: “vykhodit solntse nad Moskovoy.”

From these first lines we are aware that a change has occurred, for there is indicated here, in the old crones running about with nostalgia for the old regime (“starukhi begaiut s toskoy”) (1:2), a “time-generation complex.”<sup>15</sup> It appears again in 1:26 with a reference to the father of the “mladenets” growing old (“stareet papen’ka-otets”) and, more obviously in the previous line, to “time drying up and turning yellow” (“a vremia sokhnet i zhelteet”). This latter image is a good example of *predmetnost'*, whereby time is concretized as a tree wilting and shedding its leaves. The metaphor is heightened when, later in the stanza, the priest (another victim of time) is banished from the apartment of the “new man”; he exits into a grove of trees where he weeps over the lost soul of the “mladenets” and the loss of his own authority (1:41-43).

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<sup>15</sup> Masing-Delic, p. 18.

Time (synonymous with the concept of the “new life”) undergoes such concretization repeatedly and, at one point, is actually personified as a central figure in the poem: “uzh novyi byt stuchitsia v dver’!” (“already the new life is knocking at the door”) (1:4). Here, in the opening stanza, it has made its appearance like an uninvited guest (especially for those members of the older generation); when the second stanza opens it enters like a group of friends dropping in: “no vot znakomye skatilis” (“but now acquaintances have rolled in”) (2:1). As the factory whistle hoots its encouragement, the “new life” caters a feast to the “new man” and to his successful marriage:

завод пропел: ура! ура!—  
 и новый быт, даря милость,  
 в тарелке держит осетра.  
 Варенье, ложечкой носимо,  
 успело сделаться свежо,

(“the factory hooted: ‘hooray! hooray!’ / and the new life, showing off its kindness, / holds up a sturgeon on a plate. / Preserves, lifted on a spoon, / have managed to become fresh,”)

This feast, complete with all the delicacies of a bourgeois life, is the occasion for a congratulatory speech (“krasnyi spich”) (2:13) on the merits of the happy newlyweds. The epithet “krasnyi” (meaning both “beautiful” and “red”) carries with it a subconscious association to political speechmaking; thus the “chairman” (“predsedatel”) (2:9) can be said to be singing the praises of the “new life” as well. It is here, too, that the “new man” is identified in his respectable role as a “groom” in the company of his bride:

жених проворен нестерпимо,  
 к невесте лепится ужом,

(“and the extremely nimble groom / clings to his bride like a grass-snake,”)

There is, however, something insidious in this reference to the groom's deftness and his snake-like attachment to his bride; it is as if his wife is not a marriage partner but a well-chosen possession which he must guard carefully (see also 1:32).

From the poem's very beginning we have been led to believe that this "mladenets" is no ordinary child, as he immediately assumed a kind of epic magnification in keeping with his importance. To Zabolotskii this importance is, of course, ironic; like those aforementioned draymen sitting on their carts like padishahs on a throne ("Dvizhenie"), this "mladenets," the embodiment of all the heroes of the Revolution, sits naked in the baptismal font like a sultan:

Младенец нагладко обструган,  
сидит в купели как султан,  
прекрасный поп поёт как бубен,  
паникадилом осиян;

("The infant, whittled smooth, / sits in the font like a sultan, / the splendid priest sings like a tambourine / lit up by a church chandelier;")

The lexical displacement, "nagladko obstrugan" ("whittled smooth"), which signifies nakedness, conjures up visual images of chubby cherubs or, perhaps, the Christ-child as depicted in Baroque paintings and sculpture. The presence of religious accoutrements—in addition to the priest who performs the baptismal rite—functions as a means to bestow upon the "mladenets" a sanctity he does not deserve. It is also an indication that the old ways have not yet been completely dispensed with. In fact, tension in the poem is created by the presence in the "new life" of symbols of Russia's Orthodox past and the contest of wills between the "new man" and the priest who later comes to the newlywed's home (1:33-36). Such symbols would include (in addition to the above) the candle held by the old grandmother during the baptism ("svechka") (1:9), the relics ("moshchi") (1:34), a cross ("krestik") (1:6), a goblet ("bokal") (2:11), the Easter cake ("kulich") (2:14) sitting on the table listening to the speech, and the votive candle ("svechka-piaterik") which is

extinguished in the last line. Each one of these items appears as a challenge to the supremacy of the “new life”; but they are also presented in ironic settings as a kind of mockery of the whole scene. This point of tension reaches a climax when the priest comes to bless the apartment of the newlyweds:

Приходит поп, тряся ногами,  
в ладошке моши бережёт,  
благословить желает стенки,  
невесте—крестик подарить...

(“A priest arrives on trembling legs, / in his hand he shields some relics, / he wants to give the walls his blessing, / to give the bride a crucifix...”)

It is at this point that the “mladenets” declares himself a new Soviet man, a “guardsman of the new life” (“novoy zhizni opolchenets”) (1:39), and sends the “curly-headed priest” (“kudriavyi pop”) (a term of derision) out the door, accompanied by a curse: “tebe zh—odin ostalsia grob!” (“all that awaits you is the grave!”) (1:40). The priest has good reason to lament the corruption of the infant’s soul, for as the stanza ends the “new man” shows his true colours and whispers a sexual proposition to his wife: “shutikha, / skorei by chas liubvi nastal!” (“my little tricky one, / the hour of love has almost come!”). The bride’s role, then, is to satisfy the NEP-man’s sexual appetites which, from the evidence of other poems in *Stoltsy*, are in abundance, i.e., “Belaia noch” (“White Night”), “Ivanovy” (“The Ivanovs”), and “Fokstrot” (“Foxtrot”).

Throughout the long first stanza (46 lines) we have witnessed the “galloping” (“vskach”) (1:11) of the “new life” and the “long stride” (“shagaia”) (1:23) of the “new man” from infancy to manhood. Time has been compressed in this sequence, as it is throughout the poem, by the juxtaposition of rapid scene changes, depicting various stages in his life, with references to symbols of the past and to religion. Grammatically, these rapid stages take place within a complete sentence or even within a clause, where several stages appear in quick succession. The effect achieved is one in which the links in the

chain of the “new man’s” life are emphasized, despite the fact that the presentation is fragmented. The repeated naming of the “new man,” even after he is married, as “mladenets” (six occurrences in all), links these rapid changes in his life by a common point of reference. The word metaphorically refers to the immaturity and spiritual poverty of this “hero” who spends his life labouring for the State and carousing during his own time. Along the way he acquires the trappings of bourgeois respectability, a wife and a large apartment. But the presence of the priest emphasizes the soullessness of it all, for Zabolotskii is not here defending religion (he satirizes it here as viciously as he does in other poems), but underlining the spiritual vacuum in which this “new man” lives. Nevertheless, there is more than a hint in this poem of a dimension of Russia’s lost Orthodoxy that the “new man” could well do to preserve. As the poem illustrates, the consumption of drink and fine edibles, and the pleasures of sexual fulfillment are what really matters to the Soviet hero trapped in the *byt* of NEP-time Moscow.

Movement in this poem, both physical and temporal (and there is a preponderance of verbs of motion), has really covered very little ground, and has, in fact, been quite futile. The “mladenets” has figuratively “stepped” from the baptismal font into the Komsomol (the Communist youth movement), into a job and marriage, and into domestic life (witness the scene of the couple combing their hair in 3:4). The “new life” which has been the principal cause of all the poem’s activity and which has itself been an active participant, has been surrounded by symbols of *byt* and has not, in fact, ushered in real change at all. The rhythmic pace of the poem is quite jaunty and rapid, and there are relatively few disruptions. The meter is again iambic tetrameter, with a high percentage (27%) of fully stressed lines and an above average number of stresses omitted on the third ictus (65%).

Each poem in *Stolbtsy* appears to contain certain individual stylistic features, and the one which distinguishes this poem is the refrain like quality of its repetitions. The repetition of “mladenets” (already commented upon) and “novyi byt” link certain sections

of the poem together. The most notable occurrence is the refrain achieved by the repetition of “kuda” (“where to”) in line 3; the verbal imperatives “gliadi” (“look”) and “uidi” (“go away”) in lines 21 and 38; and the parallel constructions in 2:2 and 3:1, “zavod propel: ura! ura!” (“the factory hooted: ‘hooray’! ‘hooray’!”) and, “ura! ura!—zavody voiut” (“‘hooray’! ‘hooray’! the factories howl”). This latter example functions as a chorus of approval of the “new life” on behalf of the industrial labour to which the “new man” is enslaved. All of these repetitions come at relatively evenly spaced intervals within the poem, with the last two beginning the shorter second and third stanzas. Their occurrence not only adds semantic emphasis, but contributes to the rhythm and the overall mocking and ironic tone of the poem.

viii. In the poem “Ivanovy” (“The Ivanovs”), the themes of working life and sexual gratification, first touched on in “Novyi byt,” are expanded upon. Indeed, the two poems are very much a pair, and what was only hinted at in the first is realized more fully in the second. On a broader thematic scale, the poet establishes two distinct orders, that of stasis and movement. The poem opens with a description of the urban landscape that is distinctly static and oppressive:

Стоят чиновные деревья,  
почти влезая в каждый дом;  
давно их кончено кочевье—  
они в решётках, под замком.  
Шумит бульваров теснота,  
домами плотно заперта.

(“The civil servant trees are standing, / almost reaching into every house; / long ago their nomadic life ended— / they are [enclosed] by grating, under lock and key. / The crush of the boulevards bustles, / densely shut in by houses.”)

These compacted images of crowding are underlined by the absurdity of trees standing like a row of clerks at their desks. Yet the metaphor is in keeping with Zabolotskii’s tendency

to describe concretely one object in terms of another. Here, trees are anthropomorphized in a metonymical construction: the word “derev’ia” (“trees”) stands as a noun modified by the adjective “chinovnye” (“official”), which signifies a person who holds a ranked civil post. The trees, usually symbolic of freedom, are enclosed by a metal grating for their protection, and are said to be locked up. They stand along the boulevards, which are bustling and tightly packed with houses, seemingly growing into those same houses. Zabolotskii is using here a concrete image to fix a visual impression of urban density. When the contrast is made to a nomadic existence—another human state—it soon becomes apparent that the poet is presenting a double image: one of the natural world subverted by the order of man, and of man imprisoned in his own ordered existence. Thus it is not only the trees who are restricted, but man himself who has lost his freedom, shackled to a job and padlocked in his dwelling place.

This theme is expanded upon in the second stanza when all the doors of the houses are flung open and the Ivanovs go off to work (“na sluzhbu vyshli Ivanovy”). The name Ivanov is a designation that signifies commoness and collectivity, for it is one of the most familiar in Russian. Once again Zabolotskii indulges in irony, elevating the ordinary by calling the Ivanovs “heroes” (“geroi”) (2:7), as if their tedious streetcar trip to work were some journey with epic significance. This is not the case, of course, for even though there is plenty of movement in this stanza, signified also by references to trousers and boots (“shtanakh i bashmakakh”), there is something mechanical about it, as the streetcar image implies: “pustye gladkie tramvai / im podaiut svoi skameiki” (“sleek and empty / they offer them their seats”). The Ivanovs climb aboard, buy tickets and sit impassively, not in any way enthused by the speed of the streetcar. And no wonder, for it is a trip towards a destination with no positive end and no personal fulfillment:

герои входят, покупают  
билетов хрупкие дощечки,  
сидят и держат их перед собой,  
не увлекаясь быстрой ездой.

(“the heroes enter, they buy / stiff little boards of tickets, / they sit and hold them in front of them, / not enthused by the fast ride.”)

The movement of the work-bound Ivanov boys is juxtaposed in the following stanza with the sirens and village-girls who walk the streets:

сирены мечутся простые  
в клубках оранжевых волос.  
Иные—дуньками одеты,  
сидеть не могут взаперти:

(“the plain sirens rush about / in tangles of orange hair. / Others dressed like village-girls, / can’t sit under lock and key:”)

These “working-girls”—prostitutes in “orange hair” (“oranzhevykh volos”) and girls in village-dress (“dun’kami odety”)<sup>16</sup>—also metaphorically “burst forth” from their houses. While the trees in the first stanza had no choice but to remain “under lock and key,” these girls won’t sit at home so constrained. In a syntactical displacement reminiscent of the depiction of movement by an eight-legged horse in “Dvizhenie,” we glimpse the “sirens” rushing about (“mechutsia”) through the spokes or “blades” of the streetcar wheels: “i cherez lopasti koles” (“and through the blades of wheels”) (3:4). A few lines later, by analogy, we glimpse through these same wheels the village-girls “making a ballet with their legs” (“nogami delaia balety”) (3:9) as they walk the streets. The imagery here is typically fragmented and the reader is invited to re-create the scene by connecting the links.

But what is the purpose of all this motion and where are these “girls” going (“kuda idti”) (3:10)? As the poet implies, in terms unquestionably ironic, their journey is even more aimless and pathetic than the earlier one made by the Ivanovs, for they are going forth in search of “love”:

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<sup>16</sup> “dun’ka” is a diminutive derived from the proper name Dunia and is an appellation used of village-girls.

кому нести кровавый ротик,  
 кому сказать сегодня «котик»,  
 у чьей постели бросить ботик  
 и дёрнуть кнопку на груди?

(“to whom can I bring [my] little blood-red mouth, / to whom can I say ‘dearie’ today, / by whose bed can I throw off [my] little boot / and unbutton the fastener at [my] breast?”)

The banality of this emotion is highlighted by the use of the diminutive suffix *-ik* as the basic element in the rhyme of these lines. Even the words themselves have a sub-literary context and a pejorative meaning, i.e., “rotik” (“little mouth”), “botik” (“little boot”), and “kotik” (a diminutive, as well as an endearment, associated with a male cat, “kot”). The phrase “knopku na grudi” (another diminutive in *-ka*), is a lexical displacement which uses clothes and body parts synecdochically (“grudi” meaning “breast”) to signify “a fastener on a blouse.” The arrangement of the four lines is organized as a parallelism, beginning with the relative pronouns “komu” (“to whom”) and “u ch'ei” (“by whose”), which employ verbs in the infinitive (a means to stress the impersonal), and which are then followed by words utilising the above-mentioned pejorative diminutives. The obvious refrain-like quality of these lines (no doubt meant to echo a *zhestokii romans*) is emphasized by the parallelism of the beginning phrase, “kuda idti” (“where to go”), and the final phrase, “neuzhno nekuda itdi?!” (“is there really nowhere to go?!”). The whole section is further interconnected by the sound patterning of the recurring velar consonants *k* and *g*.

It is clear from all these references to trousers, legs, and footwear, that there is a decidedly sexual connotation at work in “Ivanovy.” In fact, the sexuality that is linked, in this instance, to movement becomes a force placed in opposition to the static order represented by the crowding of the houses. In order to reinforce this imagery, the third stanza opens with a reiteration of the oppression and constriction of the urban environment, but which Zabolotskii now extends as a metaphor for the whole world:

А мир, зажатый плоскими домами,  
стоит, как море, перед нами,  
грохочут волны мостовые,

(“And the world, hemmed in by flat houses, / stands, like the sea, before us, / the pavement waves rumble,”)

The city streets become like waves on the sea which, far from symbolizing boundless expanse, act as a means of spreading the confines of the urban landscape, complete with its stultifying mentality and suppressed sexual appetites.

In stanza four, Zabolotskii invokes this world, referring to it as his “leaden idol” (“svintsovyyi idol moi”), a significantly heavy and burdensome image that furthers the oppression of these NEP-men and women. The waves of the urban sea lash out at the poor inhabitants, and the “devki” (“girls”) are given their repose at a busy intersection, figuratively with their legs in the air:

хлещи широкими волнами  
и этих девок упокой  
на перекрёстке вверх ногами!

(“lash with your wide waves / and give these girls rest / upended at the crossroads!”)

The imagery of these lines signifies the false idolatry and debauchery of a world literally turned upside down (“vverkh nogami”). There is also a suggestion that what we are experiencing is not really “real,” as if this particular displacement is just another aspect of the “unreality” of life during NEP. The device certainly is unsettling, because not only does it inject a note of humour into the poem, it signifies a shift in tone; Zabolotskii’s irony is taking on a bitter quality. The stanza ends, nevertheless, on a note of hope (ironic at best), as the poet implies that “peace and calm” (“spokoistvie i mir”) (4:6) from this terrible (“groznyi”) world can be found within the very houses which crowd the scene.

This note of hope is made rhetorical in the following stanza, which poses a series of questions introduced by the obsolete interrogative particle “uzheli” (“is it possible?”). Here, the poet’s self (the lyrical “I”) intrudes into the poem on one of the rare occasions when it is allowed to do so in the *Stolbsy* poems. What follows is a metonymical construction, a “stringing together [of] various details...which transform[s] a catalogue of isolated fragments into a meaningful chain of associations”<sup>17</sup> Each fragment is introduced by the adverb “gde” (“where”), which also produces a rhythmic repetition. What is being catalogued amounts, as we have seen before, to the material trappings of a comfortable bourgeois *byt*: a parlour with table and chairs, a cupboard, a boiling samovar, and even a waiting “bride” (“nevesta”). Zabolotskii is quite whimsical in his descriptions: the snow-capped peak of Mount Ararat becomes a cupboard “trimmed with paper lace” (“povityi kruzhevsem bumazhnym”); and the samovar is clad in “iron armour” (“v zheleznykh latakh”) which stands like a “three-storied” building (“trekhetazhnyi”) “rumbling like a household general” (“shumit domashnim generalom”). This samovar is given anthropomorphic qualities as it stands like some ancient guardian protecting domestic tranquillity from outside influences.

The continuity of this imagery is held together by the regular iambic rhythm and the euphony of the recurring sibilants *zh* and *sh*. But despite these concrete expressions of *byt*, is this a hoped for domestic scene (such as was depicted in “Novyi byt”), or is it the room of one of the girls from the street in which Ivanov is taking his pleasure? For the moment the question is left unanswered, as Zabolotskii returns to the rhetorical in the sixth and concluding stanza.

As Fiona Björling has pointed out in a footnote to the poem,<sup>18</sup> this particular stanza has been problematical for many Soviet critics who see in it an attempt by Zabolotskii to call for reform, or who firmly believe that he was completely overwhelmed by the “sordid

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<sup>17</sup> Björling, pp. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

and grotesque world of bourgeois debauchery.”<sup>19</sup> Desperately seeking to find something positive to say about the *Stoltsy* poems, Makedonov, for instance, in his typically abstruse manner, cites this stanza as an example of Zabolotskii’s concerned but disengaged lyrical voice, with its “oratorical-pathetic intonation”<sup>20</sup> typical of his later verse. This may be an interesting remark, but it completely sidesteps the issue. Certainly there is pathos in this invocation to the world, but the poet is not appealing to it to change, rather to literally “roll up” (“svernis”) into one compact sphere. This is more bathetic than pathetic, and it is also a satirical displacement; surely the world cannot do as the poet wishes, but its sordidness can certainly be expressed by the mundane experience found in these designated microcosms:

О, мир, свернись одним кварталом,  
одной разбитой мостовой,  
одним проплыванным амбаром,  
одной мышиною норой,

(“O world, shrink to one apartment block, / to one broken roadway, / to one bespattered barn, / to one mouse-hole,”)

The refrain-like repetition of “odnoi”/“odnym” (“one”) echoes the “gde” (“where”) of the previous stanza, to which it is linked by the rhyming of “generalom” (“general”) (5:8) and “kvartalom” (“apartment block”) (6:1). This is an unusual device for Zabolotskii, but one that is very effective here. The alternating rhyme scheme of this stanza, with the rhyming couplet to conclude the stanza and the poem, is very rhythmical and emphasizes the satire.

Thematically, the static order of the interior is matched by the compactness of the microcosm, especially the link between an apartment building and a mouse-hole. The question posed in stanza five can now be answered: Ivanov is kissing a girl (“devka”). The suppressed sexuality of Ivanov and his girl threatens the order of the city’s boulevards and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Makedonov, p. 71.

the domestic parlour; but the stultifying influence exerted by this order is the reason for the perversity of the city's inhabitants. Zabolotskii, consequently, feels obliged to issue a warning:

но будь к оружию готов:  
целует девку—Иванов!

(“but be prepared to take up arms: / It's Ivanov who's kissing the girl!”)

The imagery throughout the poem is bizarre and unsettling, and the tone fluctuates between the extremes of irony and pathos. But the lack of love, beauty, and responsibility evident in this poem is just one more manifestation of the alienating nature of city life and the corrupting influence of NEP on the citizens of Leningrad. It is also symptomatic of the level to which the NEP mentality has brought Russia itself and which, by invocation, Zabolotskii extends to the whole world. It is this fact which the poet finds deplorable, and it is because the poet addresses this issue that this poem can be raised to the level of a philosophical statement.

Like previous poems, “Ivanovy” is written in iambic tetrameter. The rhythm is highly regular, with stress omitted on the third ictus 77% of the time. This is the most significant variation, with full stress occurring only 19% (9 lines) and an omitted stress on the first ictus occurring twice. No other variations occur in the poem.

ix. Departing from the moral tone implicit in “Novyi byt” and “Ivanovy,” and the focus on a definable human type (the new Soviet man), the penultimate poem in the third section returns to the venue of crowded public activity, first encountered in “Krasnaia Bavariia.” “Obvodnyi kanal” (“The Loop Canal”), unlike those poems which describe interior settings, is set in an open air flea-market and presents a separate realm circumscribed by the “loop” of the canal which bears that name: “Obvodnyi.” This particular market is set apart

from the mainstream of life, and the activities that take place there are described as if isolated from reality. Yet this is the very poem that “celebrates” the joys of material possession, but which Zabolotskii obviously finds so distasteful to the *poetic* nature of man. The Loop Canal runs through the working-class neighbourhoods of Leningrad and, from the opening lines, it is the view of the canal from an apartment building in the area that sets the tone of the verse that is to follow:

В моём окне—на весь квартал  
Обводный царствует канал.

(“Out my window the Loop Canal / reigns over the entire neighbourhood.”)

It is the verb “tsarstvuet” that signifies that not only does the canal “dominate” the view from the window, but it actually “reigns over” the whole block of buildings lining it. The very fact that this rhyming couplet is set off from the body of the poem only intensifies the separateness of the scene. This is the poet’s introduction to a world where ordinary laws and forces do not apply, for as the following lines attest, certain everyday events are blown out of all proportion and assume epic dimensions:

Ломовики, как падишахи,  
.....  
идут закутаны в рубахи,  
с нелепой важностью нерях.

(“Draymen, like padishahs, / ..... / go about wrapped up in shirts, / with the absurd pomposity of slovens.”)

The entire poem functions at this level, with the juxtaposition of contrary elements whereby the ordinary is shifted into unexpected contexts. Once again Zabolotskii elevates the mundane to the level of the exalted by means of epic magnification and, as a result, comments ironically on the proceedings. It is significant that the poet begins the poem with such a grandiose distortion, because it sets the tone of unreality that will dominate the

poem's imagery. Thus the draymen's horses, tethered outside the tavern, stare through the windows, at first in a "crowd" ("tolpa"), then in an "assembly" ("sobor"), a word that similarly elevates the image to a higher level.

Zabolotskii uses the device of parallelism in these lines (2:7-10) to heighten the effect of crowding or compactness. This, in fact, is the central theme of the poem: the close-ordered movement of people. Extending beyond the assembly of horses there is a crowd of people flowing for half a mile ("za mord soboram, / techet tolpa na polversty"). The verb "techet" links the crowd of market-goers with the canal itself, for as lines 3:3-4 state: "no pered somknutym narodom / inaia dvizhetsia reka" ("but before the packed people / another river moves"). This other river is, of course, the parade of goods for sale. Zabolotskii intensifies his theme of movement by depicting not only the crowd moving "in closed ranks" ("somknutym"), but seeming to have the very stalls of the merchants flowing before it. The director of all this activity is the "maklak" ("peddler") who hawks his wares by flinging them into the air before the crowd and shouting:

Маклак штаны на воздух мечет,  
ладонью бьёт, поёт как кречет:

("The peddler flings the trousers into the air, / he claps his hands, [and] sings like a hawk.")

This activity is repeated in the following stanza (3:1-2) by means of another parallelism, and one that introduces into the poem a mock-epic tone by changing the present tense of the verbs into imperatives:

Кричи, маклак, свисти уродом,  
мечи штаны под облака!

("Shriek, peddler, whistle like a freak, / fling the trousers to the clouds!")

The “maklak,” however, is more than a hawker of goods, he is in fact the central figure of the poem who is depicted in heroic terms as the “sovereign of all trousers” (“vladyka vsekh shtanov”). It is he who controls both movement and time itself, as humanity sweeps along through the flea-market held in thrall by his activity:

ему подвластен ход миров,  
ему подвластно толп движенье,  
толпу томит штанов круженье,

(“to him is subject the course of planets, / to him is subject the movement of the crowd, / the whirling of trousers torments the crowd,”)

The parallelism of these lines, complete with alliteration and repetition of similar sounds, is echoed in the following stanza where other merchants get their chance to entice the crowds. One of them carries a boot on a platter like the head of John the Baptist (3:5), an image in keeping with Zabolotskii’s recurring religious subtext; another “sings a poodle-dog” (“poet sobachku-pudel”) (3:6), a semantic displacement which presents a concrete image; and yet a third beats a saucepan like a drum, echoing the “maklak” who claps his hands (3:8). The device of introducing each merchant by the signifiers “odin,” “drugoi,” and “tretii” (“one,” “another,” “a third”) (3:5-7) is a favourite of Zabolotskii’s, and one which is used in this instance to produce a hypnotic effect on the crowd; their mesmerized numbers, on the other hand, are emphasized by the repetition of the word “tolpa” (“crowd”) in stanza 3:10-11 (see below).

In the face of this wondrous activity people have lost complete control: “i netu sil derzhat’siabole” (“and there is no resistance left”) (3:9). Whereas in the second stanza the crowd did not have the strength to divert its eyes (“ne v silakh glaz otvest”) (2:23), standing fascinated and exhausted (“prelest’ i iznemozhen’e”) (2:24), by the third stanza they are completely captive and subdued:

толпа в плену, толпа в неволе,  
толпа лунатиком идёт,  
ладони вытянув вперёд.

(“the crowd is captive, the crowd is compelled, / the crowd moves like a sleepwalker, / its palms outstretched before it.”)

The repetition of the word “tolpa” (“crowd”), with its iambic rhythm, stresses the segmentation of movement and the relentless flow of the people, hands outstretched, towards the goods. These components link the market-goers with the crowd of horses (2:7), the chorus (“khor”) of blind men (2:13), the colonnade of mustangs’ legs (“mustangi na kolonnade pyshnykh nog”) (4:3-4), and finally with the canal itself (in all “tolpa” is repeated seven times in the poem). Irony is present in references to both the horses, now referred to as sleek mustangs whose legs look like columns, and to the blind men whose cry for alms can hardly be considered music. But what is most significant about the movement depicted here is its utter futility, which is evident from the crowd’s comparison to an amorphous sleepwalker. This futility is further emphasized by the military subtext to the poem; the crowd marches forward in close-ordered ranks (“somknutym”) to the clapping of hands and the beating of a saucepan (“v kastriuliu b'et kak v baraban”) (3:8). Like a collective unit, stripped of individual will, the people move like soldiers under command or like a group of prisoners held captive by the peddler and, ultimately, by movement itself. This is mass activity conducted by an “assembly” (“sobor”), a “chorus” (“khor”), and the ubiquitous “crowd” (“tolpa”); and it is underlined by symbolic references to “boots” (“sapogi”), “trousers” (“shtany”), “legs” (“nogi”), and “wagons” (“telegi”).

Only once does the poet depart from this compressed action, and that is in the final stanza when he momentarily shifts his focus away from the activity at ground-level to the factories (ironically referred to as castles) ringing the canal and a single whistle reaching into the sky high overhead:

А вокруг—черны заводов замки,  
высок под облаком гудок,

(“And round about—black castles of factories, / [and] a whistle high beneath the clouds,”)

Even the emptiness of the sky is not free from the activity of man. In a final scene of human desperation the poet departs the realm of the flea-market with its flotsam of life washed up on the shores of manic activity:

и над каналом спят калеки,  
к пустым бутылкам прислоняясь.

(“and near the canal sleep cripples, / leaning against empty bottles.”)

The cripples left abandoned to their drunkenness along the course of the canal are symbolic of the crippled state in which Zabolotskii perceives his fellow countrymen as a result of the excesses of NEP. These excesses are underscored by the commodities for sale in the flea-market and the crowds evident fascination with them. This humorous, if depressing, picture of human avarice and mindless congestion is intensified by the complex interweaving of images in parallel constructions; by the regular appearance of adjacent and alternating rhyme throughout the poem; and the consistency of the iambic tetrameter meter. Of the poems 45 lines, 22 of them carry full stress (50%) and 17 (38%) omit the usual stress on the third ictus. Other variations account for only six lines in all. This meter, then, can be said to flow in a manner that is as onward as both the canal and the crowd of people moving along its banks through the market.

x. “Narodnyi Dom” (“People’s House”) is the last poem of Section Four and, hence, is the final work in the cycle. The poem itself is divided into three sections (the only poem to be so divided) and is composed of 114 lines in total, making it the longest poem in *Stolbtsy*. While special significance is accorded “Krasnaia Bavariia” in the cycle because of its

stylistic and thematic features, “Narodnyi Dom” also merits attention because it gathers together in one rather long and elaborate composition devices and attributes common to the other poems. In this way it is a poem that, while independent in itself, functions well as a summation of the cycle as a whole. In a clever and ironic twist, the patrons of the tavern in the third section of the poem are the same drunken revellers from the Red Bavaria. This obviously connects the two poems thematically, but it also functions as a point of reference, ending the cycle of poems in the same location as they began; it is a unique ring device not uncommon in literary works, but which here imparts a special sense of closure and finality to this collection of bizarre experiences of NEP-time Soviet Russia.

The title “Narodnyi Dom” refers to a Leningrad theatrical building (completed in 1901) and its adjoining park which functioned as a place of amusement; its attractions were similar to those found at a fair or carnival. In Turkov’s introductory remarks to *Stolbtsy*, he quotes a newspaper report about this place:

In the park around the People’s House, one of the most spacious summer gardens of Leningrad, one finds the hurly-burly atmosphere of petty provincial life.... There is no way to get past the drunks.... A few concert numbers with hour long intermissions, the ‘American mountains’ and trick mirrors—that is all the People’s House can offer our working public.<sup>21</sup>

This then is the setting for the poem; but like other poems in *Stolbtsy* which describe a specific place, it is not so much the activities that go on there that interest the poet, as an evocation of the place itself. The People’s House is another microcosm of life, another separate realm complete with its own values. Those values, of course, correspond to the bourgeois values associated with NEP, and which Zabolotskii has been at pains to satirize in *Stolbtsy*. In “Narodnyi Dom” the separate realm is an amusement park, a wondrous place set off from the mores and routine of everyday life (*byt*), yet redolent of all its

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<sup>21</sup> S. Dreiden, *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 5 June 1926; quoted in Turkov’s introduction to N. A. Zabolotskii, *Stikhovoreniiia i poemy* (Moscow, 1965), p. 463.

baseness and vulgarity. What the separate realm achieves as a device, however, is a magnification of this vulgarity which is usually associated with human lust and crapulence. The depiction of basic human drives and their fulfillment becomes an event of epic dimensions; in “Narodnyi Dom” it is drunkenness and sex that are the major preoccupations.

The three sections of the poem may be said to represent a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is symmetry in this arrangement because the two outer sections describe the streetcar ride to and from the amusement park, while the middle section depicts the phantasmagoria of the place itself. In the very first line Zabolotskii establishes a universality to the poem when he says: “ves' mir oboiami okleen” (“the whole world is pasted with wallpaper”). What follows is a description that establishes a domestic mood, with little windows covered by curtains and photographs spread out on a table; but it is so non-specific that we are not at all sure what is being described. Nevertheless, the scene is evocative, for there is a guitar playing:

«О, ночки, ночки невозвратные!»—  
поёт гитара во весь дух.  
Гитара медная поёт,  
рыдает брюхо деревянное,

(“‘O nights, nights irretrievable!’ / the guitar sings with all its might. / The copper guitar sings, / the wooden belly sobs,”)

It is obvious from the rest of the stanza that these are girls singing, and what they are singing about is the night when they surrendered their virginity. This event, however, is subjected to considerable displacement, for it is shrouded in allusion and innuendo. Even the girls themselves are variously described as “devochki” (“maidens”), “devki” (“girls”), “damochki” (“little ladies”), and “salopnitsa” (“slattern”).<sup>22</sup> The epithet “medovaia

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<sup>22</sup> a word not previously used by Zabolotskii but used here in a pejorative sense meaning a woman of the 19th century merchant class whose demeanour is impoverished and unkempt.

“salopnitsa” (“honeyed slattern”) (I:1:11 and III:1:12) is used with ironic intentions. Throughout the poem the girls are described and linked to each other by these designations, depending on the shifting tone of the narrative. The stanza further describes the “girls” physical features:

тут девки сели на отлёт—  
упали ручки вертикальные,  
на солнце кожа шелушится,  
облуплен нос и плоски лица  
подержанные.

(“Here the girls were sitting off to one side— / [their] vertical arms have fallen, / [their] skin is peeling in the sun, / [the] nose is chipped and [their] flat faces are used.”)

They perform their routine personal and domestic tasks (with obvious sexual overtones) as they await the arrival of the men:

.....Девки сели,  
плетут в мочалу волоса,  
взбивают жирные постели

(“The girls were sitting, / tying up their hair, / [and] fluffing up the greasy beds”)

They take up the song mentioned earlier and sing of how they sit like bridesmaids awaiting their reward, described as “a pleasant enchantress” (“volshebnitsa priyatnaia”) (I:1:21), and of how they will entice the men when they arrive:

Мы их за ручки всё хватаем,  
с различным видом всё хохочем,  
потом чулочки одеваем—  
какие ноги у нас длинные—  
повыше видимых коленок!—

(“We’ll grab them by their arms, / laugh with differing expressions, / then pull on our stockings / —what long legs we have— / a little higher above our visible knees!”)

The men in the poem are also variously described as “zhenikhi” (“bridegrooms”), “mal’chik” (“lad”), “krasnoarmeiskie” (“red-army [men]”), and “kavalery” (“cavaliers”); in the opening stanza they are also linked to the 19th century as they take off their “kaftany” (“caftans”) when they meet the girls. The stanza ends with the innocent girls “chattering noisily amongst themselves, / while playing merrily with fate...” (“boltali shumno mezh soboui, / igraia veselo s sud’boiu...”).

Zabolotskii has associated the male and female protagonists in this first stanza with traditional roles loosely connected by archaic and marital references. The desires of the men themselves are metonymically referred to as “impressions” (“vpechatleniia”) which they ironically “expound from the soul” (“izlozhat ot dushi”) (I:1:23-24). In the second stanza these “impressions” take on an ominous characteristic when they are linked with “hot-bloodedness” and fate:

Но что за дело до судьбы,  
когда в крови волненье,  
когда, как мыльные клубы,  
несутся впечатленья?

(“But what does it matter to fate, / when agitation [is] in the blood, / when, like soap bubbles, / impressions are gushing?”)

A scene from an earlier poem comes readily to mind as the streetcar full of “holidayers” races towards its destination:

В трамвае движется компания,  
проходит Кронверкский в окошке,  
и лица лоснятся, как плошки,  
.....  
и руки кажутся прекрасными—  
они всё дальше-далше тянутся,  
и вот—сверкает кверху дном  
Народный Дом.

(“In the streetcar the gang is moving, / the Kronverk factory is passing by the window, / and faces shine, like saucers / ..... / and [their] arms appear beautiful— / they stretch out even further, / and there, glittering upside down [is] / the People’s House.”)

These travellers are moving very much like that stream of market-goers along the canal in the poem “Obvodnyi kanal,” with their faces aglow with wonder and their arms stretched out like sleepwalkers. Unlike the streetcar ride in the poem “Ivanovy,” however, here the People’s House is a destination that is “glittering upside down” like some magical sunken city of Kitezh. Later, when they walk through the exhibits, they will be referred to as a “thoughtful stream” (“zadumchivym ruch’em”) (II:2:7), another image reminiscent of “Obvodnyi kanal,” and seeming to imply that here, as in a flea-market, any kind of pleasure or amusement can be purchased for the right price.

The second section of the poem takes us inside the People’s House itself:

Народный Дом—курятник радости,  
амбар волшебного житья,  
корыто праздничное страсти,  
густое пекло бытия!

(“The People’s House—chicken-coop of joy, / barn of enchanting life, / trough of festive passions, / dense oven of existence!”)

In this metaphorical description we are immersed in the separate realm of the People’s House as a microcosm of life. Here, joy and pleasure are made concrete, but they are made to appear as negative qualities; the People’s House itself is imbued with all the attributes of a farm-yard, as if to emphasize the vulgarity of its attractions. Indeed, the happiness found here is a false one, for it has nothing to offer but sensual gratification; and so all pervasive is it, that it isn’t so much sought after as actively seeking out the visitors on its own:

тут радость пальчиком водила,  
она к народу шла потехою:

(“here joy was led by a finger, / it went to the people for amusement:”)

The holidaymakers easily succumb to the park’s enticements and they become firmly placed in its commonplace milieu, as the men are transformed into “kolpaki krasnoarmeiskie” (“red-

army caps”), “mal’chiki” (“lads”), and “kàvalery” (“cavaliers”) escorting their “damochki zhiteiskie” (“worldly ladies”) around the attractions. Among the attractions they enjoy is the roller-coaster or “American mountains” (“amerikanskie gory”) as it is called, but which Zabolotskii lexically displaces as “American ranges of mountains” (“gor amerikanskie khrebyt”). The play on the word “khrebyt,” which also means “spine,” associates the curvature of a spinal column with the backbone of the roller-coaster and its rib-like supporting struts. What emerges from this displacement is a highly visual image. But there is another image at work here too, and that is a decidedly sexual one; there are “maidens” (“devochki”), called “goddesses of beauty” (“bogini krasoty”), riding in “little cars” (“povozki”) atop the structure. Not only is this image linked with the sexual innuendos in the section associated with the streetcar journey, but these girls are literally speeding headlong into the arms of the young “cavaliers” (“kavalery”), and towards a fall of a different kind—a fall from innocence. It is no coincidence that the poet refers to them a second time, three lines later, as “tender beauties” (“krasotki nezhnye”) who have “burst into tears” (“rasplakalis”):

Тут гор американские хребты,  
над ними девочки—богини красоты—  
в повозки быстрые запрятались,  
повозки катятся вперёд,  
красотки нежные расплакались,  
упав совсем на кавалеров.

(“Here are the American ranges of mountains, / atop them maidens—goddesses of beauty— / were concealed in speeding cars, / the cars are rolling forward, / the tender beauties burst into tears, / having fallen right onto the cavaliers.”)

This description is noteworthy for its abundance of velar consonants *g*, *k*, *kh*, and spirants *s* and *z*, which imitate the clacking sound of the cars running over the tracks.

Zabolotskii ends the stanza with a familiar device, an authorial aside: “i mnogo bylo tut drugikh primerov” (“and there were many other instances here”). The poet distances

himself from the action of the poem when he pauses to explain something or to interject some comment. This acts to remind us that the poet is playing with our perceptions; the separate realm is a game of perspectives by which the poet engages the reader in the action of the poem. Here the poet is not describing an ordinary series of events but a more wondrous reality. Such comments were also evident in “Krasnaia Bavaria” and “Belaia noch’,” and performed much the same function. In the instance above, he steps away from the depicted reality of the amusement arcade in order to tell us that this is just one of the many instances where the gay abandon associated with pleasure can lead to serious consequences. The frequency of such grammatical interjections as “tut” (“here”), “vot” (“then”), and “no vot” (“but then”), is another device by which the poet directs our attention to something significant.

The transformation of the “maiden” (“devochka”) into a “girl” (“devka”) of beguiling abilities is revealed in the next four short stanzas. The incident with the orange-vendor (“apel’sinshchik”), with his plate full of “little suns” (“malen’kie solnyshki”) pleading to be chosen by her, confirms this role: “i pal’chikam lepechut: lez’te, lez’te!” (“and to [her] fingers they prattle: pick us up!”). Not only does she call him by the familiar personal pronoun “ty” (“you”), but she is eating one of the fruits like a latter-day Eve, all the while searching for someone more handsome to entice:

И девка, кушая плоды,  
благодарит рублём прохожего,  
она зовёт его на «ты»,  
но ей другого хочется—хорошего.  
Она хорошего глазами ищет,

(“And the girl, munching fruit, / thanks the passer-by with a ruble, / she calls him ‘you’, / but it’s another one she wants—a handsome one. / She searches for the handsome one with her eyes.”)

The vision that she encounters in the swing, the “girl-soul” (“devochka-dusha”) (II:5:1) beckoning with her hand, is a reminder of the innocent girl in the first stanza awaiting her

“reward” (“nagrady”) (I:1:20). The reward is the “enchantress” (“volshebnitsa”) (I:1:21) she has become as a result of her fall from innocence.

Among the other attractions at the People’s House is the trick mirror whose convexity distorts the image of the viewer and makes him appear as if flattened:

Другой же, видев преломленное  
своё лицо в горбатом зеркале,  
стоял молодчиком оплётанным,  
хотел смеяться, но не мог;  
желая знать причину искривления,  
он как бы делался ребёнком  
и шёл назад на четвереньках—  
под сорок лет—четвероног.

(“Another one, having seen his refracted / face in the crooked mirror, / stood like a spat upon rogue, / he wanted to laugh, but couldn’t; / wishing to know the cause of [this] distortion, / he had become like a child / and had gone back on all fours— / almost forty years old—[and] four-legged.”)

This is potentially the most important image in the whole poem, as it states metaphorically both Zabolotskii’s critical conviction and his artistic credo. The deformed image in the mirror is symbolic of the corrupted condition in which the new Soviet state found itself as a result of NEP. The forty year old NEP-man, who expects to see himself reflected back as he perceives himself, discovers his true image distorted and compressed—physically pulled sideways and flattened into a one dimensional figure. This is, in essence, exactly what Zabolotskii has been doing throughout the poems of *Stoltsy*; he has been holding up a mirror to the new revolutionary society and reflecting back its distorted image, its one dimensional reality. The reaction of the man upon viewing his reflection is to get down on his hands and knees and crawl backwards to see what happens as he attempts to escape. In effect he is acting as if he has regressed—he reverts to an infant-like condition crawling around on all fours. His status is immediately degraded, and although he wants to laugh at the effect, both his physical and psychological “stature” have been reduced and he finds himself unable to do so. This scene is reminiscent of the “mladenets” (“infant”) in “Novyi

byt" crawling on his hands and knees during a stage in his development; both images represent the degradation, humiliation, and infantility of the NEP-man, a characteristic which has been evident in so many of the poems of *Stolbtsy*.

The effect of the mirror also metaphorically represents the process of art, which in Zabolotskii's conception of it is used to distort and to alter our perception and apprehension of the world. Like the trick mirror, Zabolotskii's poetic imagination is structured to make the familiar appear unfamiliar. By doing so he creates a reality that is more vivid; at the same time he satirizes the world around him by showing its ugliness and pretension.

The syntax and vocabulary of this stanza are essential to achieving the desired effect and tone. The mirror is not described literally as convex, but as "gorbatom" which carries in its meaning the sense of distortion, of something crooked or hunched over. The poet does not tell us what the man sees in the mirror, but rather what he feels as a result of seeing himself. Zabolotskii uses the pejorative noun "molodchik" (a "rogue" or "henchman" willing to do someone else's amoral bidding) and the epithet "oplevannyi" ("spat upon"), in order to describe a man who is humiliated. He naturally wants to laugh off this illusion but, like so many of the figures in *Stolbtsy*, completely lacks the will to do so. The choice of the word "rebenok" ("baby") is more benign than the often used "mladenets" ("infant") (i.e., "Novyi byt") or "mal'chik" ("lad"), but it does not detract from the sense of helplessness and lack of maturity that is implied. The word "chetveronog" ("four-legged"), on the other hand, imparts not only a comical tone to the stanza, but is a grotesque word in itself, and has the added feature of being a strong sound on which to bring both the image and the stanza to a close.

The effects used to describe the patrons in the bar in the third poem of the triptych are another example of this distorted perception. As this section opens we are made aware that the people have apparently succumbed to the "festive zeal" ("prazdnichnym ugarom") of the People's House even though they seem not to be content with it:

Но перед этим праздничным угаром  
иные будто спасовали—  
они довольны не амбаром радости,  
они тут в молодости побывали;

(“But before this festive zeal / others seem to have given in— / they are not satisfied with [this] barn of joy, / they have been here in their youth;”)

In the bar the patrons behave much as they did in the Red Bavaria, whispering to their bottles, which are their only real companions, and bidding farewell to their youth:

и вот теперь, шепча с бутылкою,  
прощаясь с молодостью пылкою,

(“but now, whispering with the bottle, / bidding farewell to [their] passionate youth,”)

They perceive the world through the perspective of their drinking glasses which are, of course, distorted by the refraction. Thus glass imagery again acts as a device to displace reality, even to the extend that the sun appears to rise in a glass:

Они глядят в стекло.  
В стекле восходит утро.

(“They peer through the glass. / In the glass morning ascends.”)

But like the man before the mirror, this patron, who is now associated with those from the Red Bavaria, cannot escape the inherent infantility of his existence. Not only is he sucking on the glass as if it were a baby’s bottle, he is also cutting his teeth on it:

они скребут стакан зубами,  
они губой его высасывают,

(“They scrape the glass with their teeth, / they suck it dry with their lips,”)

Zabolotskii candidly admits that the bottle is a surrogate mother and directly opposes it to the girls who are so prominent throughout the poem:

ведь им бутылка—словно матушка,  
души медовая салопница,  
целует слаше всякой девки,  
а холодит—сильнее Невки...

(“to them the bottle is like a mother, / a honeyed slattern of the soul, / she kisses sweeter than any girl, / and cools [you] better than the Nevka...”)

The repetition of “medovaia salopnitsa” (“honeyed slattern”) links it with the one mentioned in the first stanza (line 11). This then is the reason for the invocation initiated by the sobbing guitar: while the girls became pregnant as a result of their wanton behaviour, the real mother-image in this poem is the bottle.

In the final stanza of the poem the image of the streetcar which brought the people to the People’s House reappears, this time on its return journey:

И по трамваям рай качается—  
тут каждый мальчик улыбается,

(“And paradise rocks through the streetcar— / here every lad is smiling.”)

Here the characteristics of Zabolotskii’s satirical “paradise” are made concrete in this image of an abstract concept becoming the subject of an intransitive verb. Throughout the poem swaying and rocking motion, typified by the movement of the streetcar and the roller-coaster, have been linked by association with sex and drunkenness. In this stanza, the two become synonymous with “paradise” (“rai”), as they were also in the first poem of *Stolbtsy*, “Krasnaia Bavariia.” The image of the streetcar journey (and its twin the roller-coaster) has been an effective device for signifying the lascivious pleasures to be found in the “paradise” of the separate realm, especially as they exist in the People’s House. As the

streetcar makes its return trip, the lads are grinning and the girl is now placing her hand (so often mentioned in different erotic contexts within the poem) on her swollen pregnant belly:

а девочка наоборот—  
закрыв глаза, открыла рот  
и ручку выбросила тёплую  
на приподнявшийся живот.

(“and the girl on the contrary— / after closing [her] eyes, opened [her] mouth / and threw out a warm little hand / onto her risen belly.”)

As for the streetcar itself, it continues its rocking motion; but as Zabolotskii states quite emphatically in the final line of the poem (set off by itself as a separate stanza with an ellipsis), it is barely moving and not really going anywhere: “tramvai, shataias’, chut’ idet...” (“the streetcar, rocking, is barely moving...”). Once again the imagery associated with motion in the poems of *Stolbtsy* is a negative one; it is futile and yields nothing.

“Narodnyi Dom” is a poem that acts as a coda, a summing up of previous images and ideas evident throughout the cycle. It presents certain stylistic features which are consistent with the other poems, but in doing so does not merely repeat them, but attempts to add to their overall effect. So too, the metrical composition of this triptych is typically iambic tetrameter. Of the 114 lines in the poem 81 (71%) of them omit stress on the third ictus and 20 (18%) have full stresses. Of the poems individually, poem one omits stress on the third ictus 75% of the time; poem two does so 76% of the time; and poem three an even 50%. Variations occur at other places in the three poems but they usually account for no more than 10% of the lines for any sequence. This is a highly consistent pattern for the iambic tetrameter poems of *Stolbtsy*, and it accounts for the regularity of this poem’s rhythm. Such metrical regularity does not, however, weigh heavily on the poems, because it allows other stylistic features, especially the extended imagery, to move to the forefront, supported by the rhythm.

## CONCLUSION

The bizarre occurrences and unsettling transformations depicted in the poems of *Stolbtsy* have enabled Zabolotskii to move freely between a very ordinary reality and another, more wondrous realm. In his depiction of the market-places, bars, and palaces of amusement that sprang up during the NEP period, Zabolotskii has re-ordered the reality of an otherwise mundane existence. He has isolated things and events—some disturbing, others comical—all with a view to giving form and meaning to the disorder and vulgarity which he observed around him during the transition period following the Revolution. What Zabolotskii saw in the city of Leningrad as a result of NEP was inimical to everything he believed in. In the city, people are dissociated from the natural world and alienated from its rhythms; the forces at work there shatter the order and harmony which nature imposes. Zabolotskii's grotesque perspective in *Stolbtsy* reflects the sense of alienation that he encountered in NEP-time Leningrad, with its capitalist exploiters and weary victims; what he did to combat this alienation was to chronicle the effects of NEP in grossly distorted detail and to reject its false pretences.

In these poems Zabolotskii loads his images with multiple associations so that they become distorted. Frequently these images are only visual and function exclusively at this level, rendering experiences more concrete; others have a metaphorical function that clearly represents a vision which has a philosophical level of understanding. The combination of the two, so evident in the poems of *Stolbtsy*, forces the reader to attend closely to the themes of the poet, which challenge him to re-think his usual definition of reality. And yet throughout the poems the imagery is often so ambiguous as to seem merely confusing. Despite this ambiguity, however, a major clue to the poems' comprehension lies in the way in which words are interrelated with each other. As we have seen, the linkages between words actually assist the reader in determining how a particular poem should be interpreted.

In many instances this is the only clue as to whether or not an image should be accepted at face value or if it lies within the many subtextual allusions; frequently the imagery in *Stolbtsy* works on both these levels.

It is at the subtextual level that the myth of Petersburg/Leningrad exists and which places these poems so firmly in the Russian literary tradition. So great has been the influence of Petersburg on the Russian literary imagination, that this northern city—so often evoked amidst swirling fog, surreal effects of lighting, and fleeting shadows—appears as a double lurking behind every poem or novel that has its locale there. Since Pushkin's time the image of the city has fluctuated with the political and philosophical currents of the day; in its early days it was perceived as a triumph of Reason, only to be condemned later as an accursed place and the creation of a wilful ruler who sacrificed untold numbers of lives for the sake of a delusion. Throughout Russia's literary maturity Petersburg has been depicted as a place where Chaos made periodic forays into a metaphysical landscape “whose vast granite expanses...threaten[ed] to overwhelm both human significance and sanity,”<sup>1</sup> and where there lurked an undeniable sense “of the precariousness of human existence in the face of overwhelming historical and natural forces.”<sup>2</sup> Living in this city following the years of Revolution and civil war, and experiencing firsthand the excesses of NEP, Zabolotskii could not help but feel the weight of this tradition pressing down on his perceptions of the new Soviet milieu around him. To a large extent this was a perception which Zabolotskii had inherited from his Symbolist predecessors as well. In the poetry of both Valerii Briusov and Aleksandr Blok urban themes played a significant role. Despite the Symbolists' romanticism and the importance transcendent experiences exerted on their work, they posed serious questions about social and philosophical problems, and voiced real concerns about Russia's destiny. The urban themes of Blok's poetry, especially, revealed his negative attitudes towards the modern

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Leiter, *Akhmatova's Petersburg* (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

industrial city, which he perceived as being anti-spiritual, lifeless, and infernal. After the abortive Revolution of 1905 the Symbolists' mood, and Blok's in particular, became one of despair and spiritual crisis. While Blok and Zabolotskii were both reacting to different historical phenomena, many of Blok's "city poems" were filled with grotesque creatures and ominous occurrences that would later be taken up by the younger poet. This is especially evident in Blok's famous poem "Neznakomka" ("The Unknown Woman"), in which his feminine ideal, the Beautiful Lady, is encountered in a tavern as a succuba;<sup>3</sup> it is a poem to which Zabolotskii's own "Krasnaia Bavariia" bears striking similarities. But where Zabolotskii parts company with Blok is that his disaffection with the urban environment was expressed in terms of parody and satire, instead of in the latter's metaphysical dread and foreboding.

The organizing principle behind the poems of *Stolbtsy* is such that they present themselves as a series of sketches or scenes of various facets of life in Leningrad during the NEP period. While there are a few exceptions to this perspective, most notably the poems "Kupal'shchiki" ("The Bathers") and "Nezrelost'" ("Immaturity") which seem to exist in no particular time or place, the poems of *Stolbtsy* are so firmly rooted in a location that they seem to delight in employing the very names of places throughout the city. And yet, despite this toponymical feature the poems themselves have such ambiguous imagery that a sense of familiarity and isolation exists simultaneously. Ambiguity is certainly a feature common to all the poems, chiefly attributable to the stylistic make-up of the poems: the highly concrete vocabulary, the fragmentary representations, the frequency of lexical and semantic displacements, and the dynamic rhythmic composition.<sup>4</sup> In Chapter One such stylistic features were discussed as being concomitant with the ideas put forth in the OBERIU Declaration.

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<sup>3</sup> Avril Pyman, *Alexander Blok: Selected Poems* (Oxford, 1972), p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> Björling, p. 107.

The tension which exists between the surface level of the poems, with all their ambiguity and grotesque hyperbole, and the deeper metaphorical level—the poems as microcosms of Russia during NEP—imparts to the poems of *Stolbtsy* a degree of excitement and anticipation that could only exist as a result of Zabolotskii's foray into the realm of literary modernism. The degree of his active involvement with the avant-garde in Russia during the 1920s is a subject that has not yet been fully explored, but again there is evidence of his knowledge of its tenets from his participation in drafting key sections of the OBERIU Declaration.

What soon becomes apparent from both his involvement in the OBERIU and the body of poetry that he produced as a result of that involvement, is that there is something quite serious and philosophical about the poems of *Stolbtsy* that belies ones initial contact with them. Not only is Zabolotskii offering up in these poems the excessive pursuits of the NEP-men and women of Leningrad, but he is commenting on the very nature of the human person itself. Thus it is apparent, from the example of the *Stolbtsy* poems, that the OBERIU Declaration was not merely an aesthetic programme, but a polemical document that attempted to respond to the circumstances of the time. Its content was far from rhetorical, but was in fact meant to be taken seriously as an initial step towards a new view of reality.

The aesthetic principles of OBERIU did, however, raise concerns about the relationship of the artist to society. Zabolotskii's experience in drafting sections of the manifesto was to define that role. Among the fundamental issues of artistic expression that were addressed included: what subjects and themes were suitable to the poets of the new Soviet socialist state; should the poet merge his voice with the collective "mass" or should he stand out and proclaim its achievements and denounce its excesses. From the evidence of these poems it is clear that Zabolotskii chose the latter course; and yet he did so from a unique perspective. Throughout *Stolbtsy* the poet's presence is implied rather than declared; in only a few instances does his *persona* break the surface. Rather he chooses to

efface his lyrical presence and present reality from a variety of viewpoints, usually associated with a vivid visual picture of an object. Such a perspective is the principle behind the concept of *predmetnost'* (concreteness) expressed in the OBERIU Declaration. By this application the poet distances himself from the depicted scene, presents the fragmented pieces of reality, but makes of it an object that is vivid, concrete, and ultimately perceptible.

In this regard it is obvious why Zabolotskii responded in such a satirical manner to NEP; armed with the tools of his verbal brilliance and metaphorical exuberance, he set himself the challenge of evaluating the society around him at a higher level of perception. The poems of *Stolbtsy* present allegories of the human condition at the same time that they raise moral questions about the behaviour of their protagonists within a specific historical context. Zabolotskii is inviting the reader to pass judgement on their actions and to approve or disapprove of the activities described in the poems. While none of the poems reaches an explicit moral conclusion, Zabolotskii undeniably reaches an implicit one by presenting scenes of such moral degradation and grotesque exaggeration (complete with religious imagery to underline them) that there can be no question that his stance is one of condemnation. In the process, Zabolotskii offers up a unique critical view of his society and by extension challenges us to do the same with our own. It is in this way that the poems of *Stolbtsy*, at once so unique and personal in perspective, take on universal significance.

Had Zabolotskii written nothing after *Stolbtsy*, this book alone would have remained a remarkable literary achievement. In his poetry of the 1930s and after, and in what has been seen by many as a radical departure from his themes on the grosser aspects of Soviet reality, Zabolotskii developed his view that man had to recognize his ties with the natural world. But as the poems that followed *Stolbtsy* illustrate, this natural world did not represent for the poet a placid and harmonious refuge from the rapacious mores of city life. On the contrary, in nature he detected a savage struggle for survival, a world of death and

suffering every bit as sinister and cruel as the world depicted in *Stolbtsy*. But man had his place in nature and had a distinct role to play in the natural scheme of things. What began, then, as a satirical depiction of the excesses of an economic system and the alienation that it engendered, developed into a poetry with nature as its theme and a concern with the mystical bond linking all natural phenomena. This was to become the dominant theme of much of his subsequent verse. While this poetry became increasingly lyrical and tended towards classical simplicity and refinement, it still retained flashes of his earlier modernist vigour. Along with the poems of *Stolbtsy*, it was such poetry that was to earn for Zabolotskii a place in the pantheon of Russian literature.

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## APPENDIX

## TEN POEMS FROM STOLBTSY

1

## КРАСНАЯ БАВАРИЯ

В глухи бутылочного рая,  
где пальмы высохли давно,—  
под электричеством играя,  
в бокале плавало окно;  
оно на лопастях блестело,  
потом садилось, тяжелело;  
над ним пивной дымок вился...  
Но это описать нельзя.

И в том бутылочном раю  
сирены дрогли на краю  
кривой эстрады. На поруки  
им были отданы глаза.  
Они простерли к небесам  
эмалированные руки  
и ели бутерброд от скуки.

Верятся двери на цепочках,  
спадает с лестницы народ,  
трещит картонною сорочкой,  
с бутылкой водит хоровод;  
сирена бледная за стойкой  
гостей попотчует настойкой,  
скосит глаза, уйдёт, придёт,  
потом, с гитарой наотлёт,  
она поёт, поёт о милом:  
как милого она кормила,  
как ласков к телу и жесток—  
впивался шёлковый шнурок,  
как по стаканам висла виски,  
как, из разбитого виска  
измученную грудь обрызгав,  
он вдруг упал. Была тоска,  
и всё, о чём она ни пела,—  
в бокале отливалось мелом.

Мужчины тоже все кричали,  
они качались по столам,  
по потолкам они качали  
бедлам с цветами пополам;  
один—язык себе откусит,

другой кричит: я—иисусик,  
молитесь мне—я на кресте,  
под мышкой гвозди и везде...  
К нему сирена подходила,  
и вот, колено оседлав,  
бокалов бешеный конclave  
зажёгся как паникадило.

Глаза упали точно гири,  
бокал разбили—вышла ночь,  
и жирные автомобили,  
схватив под мышки Пикадилли,  
легко откатывали прочь.  
Росли томаты из прохлады,  
и вот опущенные вниз—  
краснобаварские закаты  
в пивные днища улеглись,  
а за окном—в глухи времён  
блестал на мачте лампион.

Там Невский в блеске и тоске,  
в ночи переменивший кожу,  
гудками сонными воспет,  
над баром вывеску тревожил;  
и под свистками Германдады,  
через туман, толпу, бензин,  
над башней рвался шар крылатый  
и имя «Зингер» возносил.

Авг. 1926

### БЕЛАЯ НОЧЬ

Гляди: не бал, не маскарад,  
здесь ночи ходят невпопад,  
здесь, от вина неузнаваем,  
летает хохот попугаем;  
раздвинулись мосты и кручи,  
бегут любовники толпой,  
один—горяч, другой—измучен,  
а третий—книзу головой...  
Любовь стенаёт под листами,  
она меняется местами,  
то подойдёт, то отойдёт...  
А музы любят круглый год.

Качалась Невка у перил,  
вдруг барабан заговорил—  
ракеты, в полукруг сомкнувшись,  
вставали в очередь. Потом  
летели огненные груши,  
вертяベンガルским животом.

Качались кольца на деревьях,  
спадали с факелов отрепья  
густого дыма. А на Невке—  
не то сирены, не то девки—  
но нет, сирены—шли наверх,  
все в синеватом серебре,  
холодноватые—но звали  
прижаться к палевым губам  
и неподвижным как медали.  
Но это был один обман.

Я шёл подальше. Ночь легла  
вдоль по траве, как мел бела:  
торчком кусты над нею встали  
в ножнак из разноцветной стали,  
и куковали соловьи  
верхом на веточке. Казалось,  
они испытывали жалость,  
как неспособные к любви.

А там, надувшись, точно ангел,  
подкарауливший святых,  
на корточках привстал Елагин,  
ополоснулся и затих:  
он в этот раз накрыл двоих.

Вертя винтом, шёл пароходик  
с музыкой томной по бортам,  
к нему навстречу лодки ходят,  
гребцы не смысят ни черта;  
он их толкнёт—они бежать,  
бегут—бегут, потом опять  
идут—задорные—навстречу.  
Он им кричит: я искалечу!  
Они уверены, что нет...

И всюду сумасшедший бред,  
и белый воздух липнет к крышам,  
а ночь уже на ладан дышит,  
качается как на весах.  
Так недоносок или ангел,  
открыв молочные глаза,  
качается в спиртовой банке  
и просится на небеса.

*Июль 1926*

## ОФОРТ

И грянул на весь оглушительный зал:  
—Покойник из царского дома бежал!

Покойник по улицам гордо идёт,  
его постоляцы ведут под уздцы;  
он голосом трубным молитву поёт  
и руки ломает наверх.  
Он—в медных очках, перепончатых рамках,  
переполнен до горла подземной водой,  
над ним деревянные птицы со стуком  
смыкают на створках крыла.  
А кругом—громобой, цилиндров бряцанье  
и курчавое небо, а тут—  
городская коробка с расстёгнутой дверью  
и за стёклышком—розмарин.

Янв. 1927

## ЛЕТО

Пунцовое солнце висело в длину,  
и весело было не мне одному—  
людские тела наливались, как груши,  
и зрели головки, качаясь, на них.  
Обмякли деревья. Они ожирели  
как сальные свечи. Казалось нам—  
под ними не пыльный ручей пробегает,  
а тянется толстый обрывок слюны.  
И ночь приходила. На этих лугах  
колючие звёзды качались в цветах,  
шарами легли меховые овечки,  
потухли деревьев курчавые свечки;  
пехотный пастух, заседая в овражке,  
чертил диаграмму луны,  
и грызлись собаки за свой перекрёсток—  
кому на часах постоять....

Авг. 1927

## ДВИЖЕНИЕ

Сидит извозчик как на троне,  
из ваты сделана броня,  
и борода, как на иконе,  
лежит, монетами звеня.  
А бедный конь руками машет,  
то вытянется, как налим,  
то снова восемь ног свёркают  
в его блестящем животе.

Дек. 1927

## ПЕКАРНЯ

Спадая в маленький квартал,  
покорный вечер умирал,  
как лампочка в стеклянной банке.  
Зари причудливые ранки  
дымились, упадая ниц;  
на крышах чашки черепиц  
встречали их подобъем лиц,  
слегка оскаленных от злости.  
И кот в трубу засунул хвостик.

Но крендель, вывихнув дугу,  
застрял в цепи на всём скаку  
и закачался над пекарней,  
мгновенно делаясь центральной  
фигурой. Снизу пекаря  
видали: плавает заря  
как масло вдоль по хлебным формам,  
но этим формам негде лечь—  
повсюду огненная течь,  
храпит беременная печь  
и громыхает словно Сормов.

Тут тесто, вырвав квашен днище,  
как лютый зверь в пекарне рыщет,  
ползёт, клубится, глотку давит,  
огромным рылом стену трёт;  
стена трещит: она не вправе  
остановить победный ход.  
Уж воют вздёрнутые брёвна,  
но вот—через туман и дождь,  
подняв фонарь шестиугольный,  
ударил в сковороду вождь,—

и хлебопеки сквозь туман,  
как будто идолы в тиарах,  
летят, играя на цимбалах  
кастрюль неведомый канкан.

Как изукрашенные стяги,  
лопаты ходят тяжело,  
и теста ровные корчаги  
плывут в квадратное жерло.  
И в этой красной от натуги  
пещере всех метаморфоз  
младенец-хлеб приподнял руки  
и слово стройно произнёс.  
И пекарь огненной трубой  
трубил о нём во мрак ночной.

А печь, наследника родив  
и стройное поправив чрево,  
стоит стыдливая, как дева  
с ночною розой на груди.  
И кот, в почётном сидя месте,  
усталой лапкой рыльце крестит,  
зловонным хвостиком вертит,  
потом кувшинчиком сидит.  
Сидит-сидит и улыбнётся,  
и вдруг исчез. Одно болотце  
осталось в глиняном полу.  
И утро выплыло в углу.

*Apr. 1928*

### НОВЫЙ БЫТ

Выходит солнце над Москвой,  
старухи бегают с тоской:  
куда, куда идти теперь?  
Уж новый быт стучится в дверь!  
Младенец нагладко обструган,  
сидит в купели как султан,  
прекрасный поп поёт как бубен,  
паникадилом осиян;  
прабабка свечку выжимает,  
младенец будто бы мужает,  
но новый быт несётся вскачь—  
младенец лезет окарачь.  
Ему не больно, не досадно,  
ему назад не близок путь,  
и звёзд коричневые пятна  
ему наклеены на грудь.  
Уж он и смотрит свысока,  
(в его глазах—два оселка),  
потом пирует до отказу

в размахе жизни трудовой,  
гляди! гляди! он выпил квасу,  
он девок трогает рукой  
и вдруг, шагая через стол,  
садится прямо в комсомол.  
А время сохнет и желтеет,  
стареет папенька-отец,  
и за окошками в аллее  
играет сваха в бубенец.  
Ступни младенца стали шире,  
от стали ширится рука,  
уж он сидит в большой квартире,  
невесту держит за рукав.  
Приходит поп, тряся ногами,  
в ладошке моши бережёт,  
благословить желает стенки,  
невесте—крестик подарить...  
—Увы!—сказал ему младенец,—  
уйди, уйди, кудрявый поп,  
я—новой жизни ополченец,  
тебе ж—один остался гроб!—  
Уж поп тихонько плакать хочет,  
стоит на лестнице, бормочет,  
уходит в рощу, плачет лихо;  
младенец в хохот ударял—  
с невестой шепчется: «Шутиха,  
скорей бы час любви настал!»

Но вот знакомые скатились,  
 завод пропел: ура! ура!—  
 и новый быт, даря милость,  
 в тарелке держит осетра.  
 Варенье, ложечкой носимо,  
 успело сделаться свежо,  
 жених проворен нестерпимо,  
 к невесте лепится ужом,  
 и председатель на отвале,  
 чете играя похвалу,  
 приносит в выборгском бокале  
 вино солдатское, халву,  
 и, принимая красный спич,  
 сидит на столике кулич.

Ура! ура!— заводы воют,  
 картошкой дым под небеса,  
 и вот супруги на покое  
 сидят и чешут волоса.  
 И стало всё благоприятно:  
 приходит ночь, ушла обратно,  
 и за окошком через миг  
 погасла свечка-пятёрик.

## ИВАНОВЫ

Стоят чиновные деревья,  
почти влезая в каждый дом;  
давно их кончено кочевье—  
они в решётках, под замком.  
Шумит бульваров теснота,  
домами плотно заперта.

Но вот—все двери растворились,  
повсюду шепот пробежал:  
на службу вышли Ивановы  
в своих штанах и башмаках.  
Пустые гладкие трамваи  
им подают свои скамейки;  
герои входят, покупают  
билетов хрупкие дощечки,  
сидят и держат их перед собой,  
не увлекаясь быстрою ездой.

А мир, зажатый плоскими домами,  
стоит, как море, перед нами,  
грохочут волны мостовые,  
и через лопасти колёс—  
сирены мечутся простые  
в клубках оранжевых волос.  
Иные—дуньками одеты,  
сидеть не могут взаперти:  
ногами делая балеты,  
они идут. Куда идти,  
кому нести кровавый ротик,  
кому сказать сегодня «котик»,  
у чьей постели бросить ботик  
и дёрнуть кнопку на груди?  
Неужто некуда идти?!

О, мир, свинцовый идол мой,  
хлещи широкими волнами  
и этих девок упокой  
на перекрёстке вверх ногами!  
Он спит сегодня—грозный мир,  
в домах—спокойствие и мир.

Ужели там найти мне место,  
где ждёт меня моя невеста,  
где стулья выстроилися в ряд,  
где горка—словно Аракат,  
повитый кружевцем бумажным,  
где стол стоит и трёхэтажный  
в железных латах самовар  
шумит домашним генералом?

О, мир, свернись одним кварталом,  
одной разбитой мостовой,  
одним проплёваным амбаром,  
одной мышиною норой,  
но будь к оружию готов:  
целует девку—Иванов!

Янв. 1928

### ОБВОДНЫЙ КАНАЛ

В моём окне—на весь квартал  
Обводный царствует канал.

Ломовики, как падишахи,  
коня запутав медью блях,  
идут закутаны в рубахи,  
с нелепой важностью нерях.  
Вокруг—пивные встали в ряд,  
ломовики в пивных сидят  
и в окна конских морд толпа  
глядит, мотаясь у столба,  
и в окна конских морд собор  
глядит, поставленный в упор.  
А там за ним, за морд собором,  
течёт толпа на полверсты,  
кричат слепцы блестящим хором,  
стальные вытянув персты.  
Маклак штаны на воздух мечет,  
ладонью бьёт, поёт как кречет:  
маклак—владыка всех штанов,  
ему подвластен ход миров,  
ему подвластно толп движенье,  
толпу томит штанов круженье,  
и вот—она, забывши честь,  
стоит, не в силах глаз отвесть,  
вся—прелесть и изнеможенье!

Кричи, маклак, свисти уродом,  
мечи штаны под облака!  
Но перед сомкнутым народом  
иная движется река:  
один—салог несёт на блюде,  
другой—поёт собачку-пудель,  
а третий, грозен и румян,  
в кастрюлю бьёт как в барабан.  
И нету сил держаться боле:  
толпа в плена, толпа в неволе,  
толпа лунатиком идёт,  
ладони вытянув вперёд.

А вокруг—черны заводов замки,  
высок под облаком гудок,  
и вот опять идут мустанги  
на колоннаде пышных ног.  
И воют жалобно телеги,  
и плещет взорванная грязь,  
и над каналом спят калеки,  
к пустым бутылкам прислоняясь.

*Июнь 1928*

4

НАРОДНЫЙ ДОМ

1

Весь мир обоями оклеен—  
пещерка малая любви,  
окошки в образе расселин  
и занавески в виде роз;  
знакомых карточки приятные  
прибиты клиньями вокруг  
стола. «О, очки, очки невозвратные!» —  
поёт гитара во весь дух.  
Гитара медная поёт,  
рыдает брюхо деревянное,  
спеши, медовая салопница—  
тут девки сели на отлёт—  
упали ручки вертикальные,  
на солнце кожа шелушится,  
облуплен нос и плоски лица  
подержанные. Девки сели,  
плетут в мочалу волоса,  
взбивают жирные постели  
и говорят:—Мы очень рады,  
сидим кружками, ждём награды,  
она придёт—волшебница приятная,  
приедут на колёсах женихи,  
кафтаны снимут, впечатления  
свои изложат от души.  
Мы их за ручки всё хватаем,  
с различным видом всё хохочем,  
потом чулочки одеваем—  
какие ноги у нас длинные—  
повыше видимых коленок!—  
Так эти девочки невинные  
болтали шумно меж собою,  
играя весело с судьбою...

Но что за дело до судьбы,  
когда в крови волненье,  
когда, как мыльные клубы,  
несутся впечатленья?

В трамвае движется компания,  
проходит Кронверкский в окошке,  
и лица лоснятся, как плошки,  
и платья с красными тюльпанами,  
в поту желая быть красивыми,  
играют ситцевыми сливами,  
и руки кажутся прекрасными—  
они всё дальше-далше тянутся,  
и вот—сверкает кверху дном  
Народный Дом.

## 2

Народный Дом—курятник радости,  
амбар волшебного житья,  
корыто праздничное страсти,  
густое пекло бытия!  
Тут колпаки красноармейские,  
а с ними дамочки житейские  
неслись задумчивым ручьём—  
им шум столичный нипочём;  
тут радость пальчиком водила,  
она к народу шла потехою:  
тут каждый мальчик забавлялся,  
кто дамочку кормил орехами,  
а кто над пивом забывался.  
Тут гор американские хребты,  
над ними девочки—богини красоты—  
в повозки быстрые запрятались,  
повозки катятся вперёд,  
красотки нежные расплакались,  
упав совсем на кавалеров.  
И много было тут других примеров.

Тут девка водит на аркане  
свою пречистую собачку,  
сама вспотела вся до нитки  
и грудки выехали вверх,—  
а та собачка пречестная,  
весенним соком налитая,  
грибными ножками неловко  
вдоль по дорожке шелестит.

Подходит к девке именитой  
мужик роскошный, апельсинщик,  
он держит тазик разноцветный,  
в нём апельсины аккуратные лежат,  
Как будто циркулем очерченные круги,  
они волнисты и упруги,

как будто маленькие солнышки, они  
легко катаются по жести  
и пальчикам лепечут: лезьте, лезьте!

И девка, кушая плоды,  
благодарит рублём прохожего,  
она зовёт его на «ты»,  
но ей другого хочется—хорошего.  
Она хорошего глазами ищет,  
но перед ней качели свищут.

В качелях девочка-душа  
висела, ножкою шурша,  
она по воздуху летела  
и тёплой ножкою вертела,  
и тёплой ручкою звала.

Другой же, видев преломленное  
своё лицо в горбатом зеркале,  
стоял молодчиком оплёванным,  
хотел смеяться, но не мог;  
желая знать причину искривления,  
он как бы делался ребёнком  
и шёл назад на четвереньках—  
под сорок лет—четвероног.

Едва волненье улеглось,  
опять круженье продолжается;  
припухли люди от дыхания,  
тут жмутся девочки друг к дружке;  
ходить не так уже удобно,  
спускаясь к речке, растекаются  
они рассеянными парочками,  
в коленки нежные садясь.

## 3

Но перед этим праздничным угаром  
иные будто спасовали—  
они довольны не амбаром радости,  
они тут в молодости побывали;  
и вот теперь, шепча с бутылкою,  
прощаясь с молодостью пылкою,  
они скребут стакан зубами,  
они губой его высасывают,  
они в Баварии рассказывают  
свои веселия шальные;  
ведь им бутылка—словно матушка,  
души медовая салопница,  
целует слаше всякой девки,  
а холодит—сильнее Невки...

Они глядят в стекло.  
В стекле восходит утро.  
Фонарь бескровный, как глиста,  
стрелой болтается в кустах.  
И по трамваям рай качается—  
тут каждый мальчик улыбается,  
а девочка наоборот—  
закрыв глаза, открыла рот  
и ручку выбросила тёплую  
на приподнявшийся живот.

Трамвай, шатаясь, чуть идёт...

*1927-1928*