

Andrei Bitov's "Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu": The Creative Process in Life and Literature

Henry David Thoreau, in "Walden," wrote about people leading "lives of quiet desperation." Russian literature is filled with examples of people who cannot break out of the paralysis of self-imprisonment and who are deadened to life by their addiction to habit. In "Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu" ["Life in Windy Weather"] Andrei Bitov explores the process, in life and literature, of escape from those ossified forms of existence and art. He plots the path toward creative living and creative writing. For him, one cannot divide the creative process in life from the creative process in literature.

In barest outline, "Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu" concerns a writer, Sergei,¹ who, with his wife and infant son, has arrived at the family dacha. He has escaped the bustle and frenetic busyness of the city and expects to settle down to work in the peaceful atmosphere of the country. He finds that he is restless and craves the empty errands of the city that so clutter his life. He goes back to the city for a day, knowing even as he is there, that he is wasting his time and compounding his feelings of emptiness. By the end of the story, Sergei has found, in the "dachnaia mestnost'" tranquillity, satisfaction in work, and purposefulness in life. He has discovered spiritual harmony. He has discerned the meaning and value of his life. This process has come about in a series of epiphanies in which Sergei discovers his bond with nature, with his son, with his father, with his wife, with his work, and with the universe.

In coming to grips with "Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu," we must turn to the interpretations of the four scholars who have written most on the story. Wolf Schmid, declaring that it is one of Bitov's best works, considers the work a travelogue of sorts, a journey of discovery of the self.² Bitov, according to Schmid, describes the processes by which Sergei, his consciousness freed from habit-bound living, comes to a new perception of the world. At the dacha, Sergei is freed from the day-to-day routines that determine his vision of life. Schmid points out that the wind and Sergei's change in consciousness are synonymous. The wind cleanses the air and allows for clear perception just as Sergei's consciousness, cleansed of the clutter of busywork, begins to apprehend the world in a new, clear way.³ In the calm of the country Sergei can learn to look at the world through the eyes of a child, his son. With his new eyes and perception cleansed of habit, Sergei's newly discovered consciousness and inner harmony find harmony in the world of nature, family, and friends.⁴ Schmid emphasizes Bitov's plotting of Sergei's journey toward the development of new perception and powers of consciousness that enable Sergei to see the harmony around him. Near the end of his essay, the German scholar speaks of the links between Sergei's heightened powers of observation, fresh perception, and maturing in life. Schmid also speaks of the ethical effect of Sergei's defamiliarized world, of his fresh aesthetic perception of life. Without the fetters of habit, Sergei, with his new vision, can respond to life in ways that are

1. Sergei is the protagonist's name in Andrei Bitov, *Dachnaia mestnost'. Povesti* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1967), 187–222. His name is changed to Aleksei in the Ardis translation. (He is also Aleksei in the Ardis volume, *Contemporary Russian Prose*, in which the English translation included in the 1986 Ardis Bitov volume originally appeared: "Life in Windy Weather," trans. Carol Luplow and Richard Luplow, ed. Priscilla Meyer, in *Contemporary Russian Prose*, ed. Carl Proffer and Ellendea Proffer [Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1982], 305–333.) He is Sergei when the story appears in Andrei Bitov, *Obraz zhizni. Povesti* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1972), 71–105 and in Andrei Bitov, *Voskresnyi den'. Rasskazy, povesti, puteshestviia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1980), 75–109.

Bitov changed the character's name to Aleksei in the Ardis volume of his works so that many of the short stories become explicitly linked by their focus on the same major protagonist at various points in his life.

2. Wolf Schmid, "Verfremdung bei Andrej Bitov," *Wiener slawistischer Almanach*, 5 (1980), 40.

3. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

4. *Ibid.*, 46.

not mechanized reflexes.⁵ For Schmid, then, the emphasis of Bitov's "Zhizn'" is on the protagonist's powers of perception to create the world anew. His emphasis is on the newly discovered capacities of consciousness. The journey of life traced by Bitov ultimately leads from an aesthetic vision (that forces the character to see life from a fresh "defamiliarized perspective") to an ethical one.

Priscilla Meyer's interpretation of "Zhizn'" and of "Zapiski iz-za ugla" focuses on literary creativity. For her, Bitov is primarily concerned with the nature of literary truth.⁶ She sees the process of literary creativity as central to the story. The image of the wind, for her, represents creative inspiration.⁷ The episodes in which the wind is described "map a progression containing the crucial components of creativity: the artist; his images; the joy of intensified vision; his battles, internal and external; synthesis in epiphany; and the creative distance to explicate this synthesis."⁸ Meyer sees as key to the story as a whole Sergei's brief discourse on new forms in literature. To write creatively, he says, one must free oneself from formalism (forms, preconceived arbitrary conventions) and through formlessness, through the newness of open spaces, the writer will "come closer to the living truth"⁹ and, therefore, will be able to create something new. Meyer links Sergei's discussion of literary open spaces and creativity to the new epiphanic vision Sergei experiences when he is in the open spaces of a field with his son.¹⁰ For Meyer, "Zhizn'" plots the process of achieving the aesthetic ideal, from the disconnected, fragmentary images of raw experience through the refracted lens of the artist who is true to his own aesthetic vision and experience.

"Zapiski," according to Meyer, shows the so-called journal notes of the author, thus providing a different reading of the same raw materials of life. The truth of the experiences is, according to Meyer, very different from the fictionalized versions that appear in "Zhizn'." In the fictionalized version, a rainstorm results in Sergei's heightened awareness of individual leaves and the leaf imagery is connected to artistic inspiration and to his renewed tender feelings toward his wife.¹¹ In the real-life version of "Zapiski," raindrops on the leaves cause the author to respond automatically with a reflex action and are therefore part of the movement toward death that he is describing.¹² At the end of her analysis, Meyer writes that the two sections of "Dachnaia mestnost'" present a "cycle of life and death, of artistic and divine creation, and their complementary truths merge in religious love."¹³ Meyer emphasizes Bitov's plotting of the process of literary creativity and she alludes, in the passage just quoted, to the connection Bitov makes between creativity and the religious impulse.

Ronald Meyer speaks of the theme of the continuity of generations in the story (Sergei's father, Sergei, and Sergei's son). His essay, like Priscilla Meyer's, mainly focuses on the creative process of the writer, as described by Bitov in "Zhizn'" and in "Zapiski."¹⁴ Ronald Meyer, like Priscilla Meyer, links the metaphor of the wind to artistic creativity. For him, each episode in which the wind is mentioned pushes the writer further along in his development toward the heightened process of perception that Sergei deems necessary for beginning to write.¹⁵

5. Ibid., 46–47.

6. Priscilla Meyer, "Autobiography and Truth: Bitov's *A Country Place*," in Andrei Bitov, *Life in Windy Weather. Short Stories*, ed. Priscilla Meyer (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1986), 365, and "Notes from the Corner," 180. This story appeared for the first time in any language in this collection, 145–185. It has since appeared in the Soviet Union: Andrei Bitov, "Zapiski iz-za ugla," *Novyi mir*, no. 2, 1990, 142–165.

My "The Ecology of Inspiration: The Shapes of Andrei Bitov's Prose," a study of Bitov's works, is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

7. Meyer, ed. *Life in Windy Weather*, 366.

8. Ibid., 367.

9. Ibid., 368.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 369.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 371.

14. Ronald Meyer, "Andrej Bitov's *Puškinskij Dom*" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1986), 28–43.

15. Ibid., 32–33.

While Priscilla Meyer and Wolf Schmid briefly touch upon the religious, spiritual dimension of “Zhizn’,” British scholar Stephen Hagen makes it the centerpiece of his discussion of the story, which he declares is the most significant of Bitov’s stories of the mid-1960s. Specifically, he is struck by the parallels between Sergei’s steps toward “cosmic consciousness” and particular features of Zen Buddhism. Hagen declares that he is the first critic to have discerned the similarity between the perspective of Bitov’s writings and that of Zen Buddhist thought.¹⁶

In Hagen’s reading, the wind, seen as a force of life, shakes Sergei loose from his mechanized response to life and enables him to come to a deeper understanding of himself and of his place in the world and in the universe. The act of being liberated from routine is connected to Sergei’s ideas about being free from conventional forms in literature in order to be closer to life and to truth.¹⁷ For Hagen, one of the central messages of the story is the importance of being truly alive rather than of living a deadened life of mechanized reflex.¹⁸ And Hagen demonstrates that Sergei’s journey, in “Life in Windy Weather,” toward vitality closely parallels important ideas of Zen Buddhism. Hagen does not claim that Bitov adheres to Buddhism. He acknowledges that, although Bitov was aware of Buddhist ideas and, therefore, perhaps unconsciously, infused the story with them, the author was concerned with the process of “self-realization” [“samoosoznanie”], with self-realization through self-perception.¹⁹ At the same time, Hagen takes basic ideas of Zen Buddhism and shows the way in which they duplicate Sergei’s discoveries about life. Sergei comes to his discoveries about himself and his life not through his intellect but through intuition. His most powerful sense of discovery comes when he transcends a sense of time and space and attains a new state of consciousness. This, according to Hagen, is like the Zen concept of *satori* in which time and space dissolve in order to reveal another higher state of consciousness. For Bitov people usually exist in the state of not being fully awake to life. Hagen points out that the Buddhist concept of *Avidya* [ignorance] also speaks of the limitations and fetters that hide the true nature of life and consciousness.²⁰ Sergei’s experience, for Hagen, is toward self-enlightenment, just as Buddhist doctrine traces a path away from *Avidya* toward greater knowledge of self and the universe, toward the spiritual dimensions of life.

In his mystical view of life, which Hagen likens to Buddhist expanded consciousness, Sergei experiences a oneness with the universe, other people, and nature. Hagen speaks of the connections between Sergei’s epiphany, Buddhist doctrine, and the transcendental spheres of life described by Marcel Proust.²¹ For Hagen, then, the metaphysical, spiritual dimensions of Bitov’s “zhizn’” are paramount.

How are we to reconcile the interpretations of Schmid, Priscilla Meyer, Ronald Meyer, and Hagen? Which is the correct approach to Bitov’s “Zhizn’,” one that spotlights the importance of the development of fresh, individual perception, one that underscores literary creativity or one that focuses on the primacy of spirituality?

These approaches are not mutually exclusive. After all, Schmid and Priscilla Meyer conclude their essays by affixing their interpretations to the larger moral framework constructed by Bitov, and Hagen, in the course of his comments, connects the spiritual dimension of Bitov’s story to the aesthetic process of literature described by Sergei in his search for truth.

During one of his epiphanies, as he is taking a walk with his son, Sergei feels, for one instant, an utter harmony, “simmetriia . . . sluchainaia” in which everything—his son with his

16. Stephen George Sidney Hagen, “The Stories of Andrei Bitov, 1958–1966: A Search for Individual Perception” (M.A. thesis, University of Durham [England], 1980), 127. See pages 127–146 for his discussion of “Life in Windy Weather,” and 139 for Bitov on Zen Buddhism.

17. *Ibid.*, 128, 131.

18. *Ibid.*, 128, 137–138.

19. Bitov letter as quoted by Hagen, “Stories,” 245. The letter is also reproduced in Stephen Hagen, “An Unpublished Letter by Andrei Bitov,” *Scottish Slavonic Review*, no. 5, 1985, 108–118.

20. Hagen, “Stories,” 137, 133, 132.

21. *Ibid.*, 137.

outstretched hand, a cow, a train, the meadow, a little boy on the meadow—"vse . . . kak by na odnoi osi, sovpravshei s vzgliadom i vetrom, ob"edinennoe kupolom neba".²² Hagen's, Schmid's, Priscilla Meyer's, and Ronald Meyer's interpretations can be connected and, as Bitov's protagonist does, to find harmony in the "accidental symmetry" (*simmetriia sluchainaia*) of disparate phenomena of life.

In "Zhizn'," Bitov captures the creative process of life, which includes both life and art, perception and the creative process of literature, and the process of metaphysical awakening to a higher dimension of reality. Whether one applies it to life, to art, or to religion, the process is the same. Bitov's central concern is life. He plots its constructive and destructive aspects. He shows the way in which the destructive and constructive aspects are inextricably bound with one another. Sergei's restlessness, his escape to the unproductive errands and clutter of city life, his inability to work are all part of and necessary for working. Bitov demonstrates that the entire cycle of creativity (in literature, life, and nature) must include the fallow times as well as the blossoming, the destructive elements as well as the creative. Note, for instance, that after Sergei's intense experience of harmony in the accidental symmetry scene, he speaks of the sense of *opustoshenie* that he felt.²³ Throughout the story, Bitov refers to sensations of emptiness as well as to bursts of joy.

For Bitov, a balanced, harmonic existence—which means accepting the city and the country, the wind and the calm, the rain and the sun, the role of father and that of son, the periods of lack of artistic productivity and of productivity, death and life—can come, but only if the process is not forced, only if the process is accepted in its totality. Accidental symmetry comes only by looking beyond the narrow forms of convention in life and in art. Sergei reached this state only by living beyond the confines of the city and becoming "vladel'tsem lichnogo transporta"²⁴ rather than being connected to the rhythm of other people's transportation in the city. One must become free in order to make connections with the essential ingredients of life, or, rather, one must allow oneself to be free in order to enable the connections, the accidental symmetries, to be made. Bitov has stated in another place how important the creation of the process of life is to him in his literary works.²⁵ The entire story is about the process of getting to the deepest essential truths of creativity in the domains of life, art, and spirituality. And for Bitov, it is the living, moving process that is important.

The importance of this process is demonstrated from the very beginning of the story. The title focuses on life, and it focuses on life at moments—its windy episodes—when life is in motion. The very first words of the story emphasize movement: "Nakonets oni *pereekhali*."²⁶ Furthermore, Bitov repeats verbs of motion and verbs with the prefix *trans-* [*pere-*], as if to encourage motion, moving, transition. The last words of the story also emphasize the moving, changing aspects of life: "ved' zhizn' neizvestno kak eshche mozhet povernut'sia."²⁷

The image of the wind itself can be seen as central to the story's focus on recreating the creative aspects of life. Hagen, as we recall, has spoken of the image of the wind as a life-force, and Priscilla Meyer has spoken of it as a metaphor for artistic inspiration.²⁸ In fact we can look at it as the equivalent of breath, breathing life into everything. As in the Latin, both the English and the Russian words for breath, *inspiring* ("vdokh," "vdykhat'/vdokhnut'") are etymologically related to artistic *inspiration* ("vdokhmovenie") and to the religious spirit ("dukh"). Bitov, in

22. Andrei Bitov, "Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu (Dachnaia mestnost')," in Andrei Bitov, *Dachnaia mestnost'*, 214.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 190.

25. Andrei Bitov letter to Frederick R. Croen, in Frederick R. Croen, "A Translation of *The Wheel* of Andrei Bitov" (senior thesis, Princeton University, 1974), appendix, 1.

26. Bitov, "Zhizn'," 189. Emphasis mine.

27. Ibid., 222.

28. Stephen Hagen, "Stories," 128 and Priscilla Meyer, "Autobiography and Truth," 366.

speaking of creativity, of the higher spiritual dimensions of life, writing, and spirituality, deals with the necessity of breathing (of the necessity of the wind), which overcomes stagnation in frozen, conventional forms of life, art, and spirituality. For Bitov, all aspects of being alive, all aspects of creativity—in *living*, *art*, and *spirituality*—are intertwined.

At the beginning of “Zhizn’,” Sergei sits down in his study on the second floor of his dacha.²⁹ He does not feel like working in spite of the expanses of free time available to him in the country. Suddenly a wind and rain storm begin. The wind shakes his study, and he feels as if he is on a boat, as if his second floor is flying. The rafters and columns become, for Sergei, masts, the strings of a musical instrument, a ship, an organ. The narrator also describes the *rebra* of the house. Suddenly the wind dies down. “Sergei podnial golovu i slovno by vpervye uvidel, chto potolka nad nim ne bylo—byla srazu krysha.”³⁰ The roof assumes the shape of a cathedral for him, and this merges with the idea of an organ. Gazing at some little jars that had caught the rain, Sergei feels a sense of permanency and stability. He goes outside and sees that each leaf seems more separate than before the rain and that bending and straightening out, as if coming to life, the leaf sheds an enormous drop of water, as if it were discarding a heavy burden, and it *breathes* with joy.³¹

Thus, the wind has stirred up Sergei, the study, and the leaves. It has shaken up life, just as moving from the city to the country was a stirring up of Sergei’s life patterns. After the turmoil, a sense of peace and calm descends upon Sergei and upon nature. Sergei has noticed that no ceiling separates him from the roof. The figurative ability to notice that there is no ceiling between himself and the roof later enables him to see the world through the eyes of his baby son. This impulse enables Sergei to unleash the creative images that come to him in the storm and to conjure up the “simmetriia sluchainaia” of the artistic images of cathedral, organ, ship, and strings. This impulse of removing forms and boundaries enables Sergei to see beyond the awkward form of his father’s conversation and to apprehend the substance, which is his father’s love for Sergei. Personal serenity, a sensitivity to the calm in nature, and increased powers of artistic creativity are merged in this initial scene describing the wind.

The images that come to Sergei in this scene and in the later scene of accidental symmetry have significant subtexts from literature and from the Bible. It is essential to an analysis of “Zhizn’” to acknowledge that a Boris Pasternak poem, called “Veter” (“The Wind”), appropriately enough, has left its imprint on the wind passage in “Zhizn’.” The relevant lines of the poem (one at the end of *Doktor Zhivago*) are: “I veter, zhaluias’ i placha,/ Raskachivaet les i dachu./ Ne kazhduiu sosnu otdel’no,/ A polnost’iu vse dereva/ So vseiu dal’iu bespredel’noi,/ Kak parusnikov kuzova/ Na gladi bukhty korabel’noi.”³² Images of the wind, the shaking up of the dacha and the forest, the merging of all the trees, the use of the word *ship* as part of the scene coincide in short story and poem.

The same cluster of images marks Pasternak’s poem and Bitov’s wind episode. Moreover, many of the same words are used: *veter*, *dereva* (Pasternak); *derev’ia* (Bitov); *les*; *otdel’no* (Pasternak is explaining that the wind rocks all the trees not individually, separately); *otdel’nyi* (Bitov is speaking of each leaf’s being more separate after the wind has ceased); *raskachivaet* (Pasternak); *pokachivaetsia* (Bitov); *parusnik* (Pasternak); *parusnyi korabl’* (Bitov); *korabel’noi* (Pasternak); *korabl’* (Bitov). In the Pasternak poem, the *veter* rocks the *dacha*, and curiously enough, the subtitle of Bitov’s story “Zhizn’” is “*Dachnaia mestnost’*.”³³

29. Priscilla Meyer points out that the description of the dacha matches that of Bitov’s in-laws’ dacha in Toksovo, not far from Leningrad. Priscilla Meyer, “Autobiography and Truth,” 365.

30. Bitov, “Zhizn’,” 191.

31. *Ibid.*, 192.

32. Boris Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, intro. A. D. Siniavskii (Moscow-Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1965), 432; English translation by Vladimir Markov and Merrill Sparks, *Modern Russian Poetry* (Indianapolis, Ind. Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 605.

33. Ronald Meyer quotes an unpublished section of E. Khappenenn’s “Commentary,” where Khap-

That Bitov was familiar with the Pasternak poem becomes clear when we read Bitov's later story "Vkus" ("The Taste") (1966, 1976, 1979). In that story, where Pasternak's death and a visit to the poet's grave are key ingredients of the plot, the main protagonist quotes several lines from the poem, including the lines referring to the wind, the dacha, the pine, and the trees.³⁴ The next line in "Vkus" includes the narrator's statement, "Bylo osobenno bezvetrenno i tikho."³⁵ Ronald Meyer has identified the source of the quoted poetry in "Vkus" as Pasternak's "Veter" (no mention of poet or title of the quoted lines appears in "Vkus."³⁶ Meyer explains that a consideration of Pasternak's *Doktor Zhivago*—in which the poem appears—is crucial to an understanding of "Vkus," for both contain the themes of life and death, artistic immortality, and resurrection.³⁷

Of course, the same might be said about the relevance of Pasternak's novel to "Zhizn'." After all, *Doktor Zhivago* is about a man whose surname is derived from the word *zhizn'*. The novel concentrates on Zhivago's quest for life's essential values, which he finds in the realms of life (his love for Lara), art, and religious feeling. Zhivago, like Sergei, is a writer. Zhivago, like Sergei, moves between city and country. Pasternak writes a novel and then affixes to it the poems that its hero is alleged to have fashioned out of the raw materials of life presented in the novel. Bitov writes a story and then affixes to it the alleged diary events that shape the fictional story that has just been read. Both authors deal with the triad of art, life, and spirituality. Both deal with the ongoing cycle of life and death in physical, artistic, and religious terms.

It makes sense to consider other intimations of Pasternak in our discussion of "Zhizn'." Another poem of his entitled "Veter (Chetyre otryvka o Bloke)" contains the image of the wind penetrating under the ribs and into the soul: "veter, pronikshii pod rebra/I v dushu."³⁸ (The etymological roots for *dusha* and *dukh* are the same, of course, bringing us back to the breathing-inspiration metaphor.) In the Bitov wind scene with its allusions to Pasternak's *Doktor Zhivago* wind poem we read about the *rebra* of the house.³⁹ Ribs and wind bring us back, once again, to our breathing-inspiration image. Some of the other imagery in the Pasternak wind poem about Aleksandr Blok also finds its way into Bitov's story. The wind, writes Pasternak, is everywhere—at home, in the trees, in the village, in the rain, in Blok's poetry, in death.⁴⁰ Pasternak speaks of a little river, a meadow, childhood, the forest, the sky, a storm, Blok's life, and his poetry. Much of this imagery appears in Bitov's accidental symmetry scene, which the narrator links with the wind scene in the second floor study of the day before.

Curiously, the accidental symmetry scene (in which Sergei shows his son the little river, tells him what it is, and goes through the naming of objects for his son) is reminiscent of a scene in *Doktor Zhivago* which, as in Bitov's scene, contains the imagery of a train, a carriage, a meadow. As Lara breathes the air of the meadow, the narrator writes, "Na odno mgnovenie

penenn explains that Bitov had wanted to name the entire collection in which the story appears *Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu*. Ronald Meyer says that the story came out under the title "Dachnaia mestnost'" in 1967. This is not true. The book in which the story "Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu" appeared in 1967 is called *Dachnaia mestnost'*. The story appears there as "Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu" with a subtitle "Dachnaia mestnost'." Khappenenn writes, "In general it's dangerous [to write about] the weather . . . They didn't let me call the book *Life in Windy Weather*: what kind of climate, where is the weather? where is the wind blowing from?" E. Khappenenn, ed., "Kommentarij" (unpublished manuscript), 47, as quoted by Ronald Meyer, "Andrej Bitov's *Puškinskij Dom*, 28, 42.

34. Andrei Bitov, "Vkus," *Literaturnaia gruziia*, no. 1 (1983), 80–81; Andrei Bitov, "The Taste," in Bitov, *Life in Windy Weather*, ed. Priscilla Meyer, 351.

35. Bitov, "The Taste," 351; Bitov, "Vkus," 81. Emphasis mine.

36. Ronald Meyer, "Andrej Bitov's *Puškinskij Dom*," 60.

37. *Ibid.*, 65–66.

38. Boris Pasternak, "Veter (Chetyre otryvka o Bloke)," in Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 464.

39. Bitov, "Zhizn'," 191.

40. Pasternak, "Veter (Chetyre)," in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 465.

smysl sushchestvovaniia opiat' otkryvalsia Lare. Ona tut,—postigla ona,—*dlia togo, chtoby razobrat'sia i sumassheshhei prelesti zemli i vse nazvat' po imeni*, a esli eto budet ei ne po silam, to iz liubvi k zhizni rodit' sebe preemnikov, kotorye eto sdelaiut vmesto nee."⁴¹ In the Bitov story, Sergei, the father, names things for his son, and through seeing the simplicity and joy of the world through his son's eyes, he feels that he has discovered the meaning of life.

Just as the quoted lines in Bitov's later story "Vkus" led us to the hidden references to Pasternak's poetry in "Zhizn'," so, too, an examination of a quotation that Bitov uses in another later story, "Les" (1965, 1972), leads to the discovery of another subtext that is important for "Zhizn'." The epigraph to "Les" is taken from Psalms: "Dni cheloveka, kak trava./Kak tsvet polevoi, tak on tsvetet."⁴² "Days of man," the first two words of the epigraph, also serve as the title of Bitov's whole collection of short stories in which "Les" originally appeared.⁴³

If we look at the psalm from which the quotation comes and at the psalms immediately before and after, we find that they are extremely relevant to an analysis of "Zhizn'." Psalm 101 (in the Russian version of the Bible) speaks of the sense of grief and hopelessness which David feels, of his sense that his days are disappearing like smoke, of the drying up of his heart, and, finally, of the endurance of the children of God's servants. Psalm 102 (in the Russian version, 103 in the English) contains the "dni cheloveka" quotation and deals more with hope and life than does Psalm 101. Before, David had compared himself to a lonely bird; now, he feels that his youth, like an eagle's, is being renewed. He recounts all the blessings bestowed upon man if he lives according to God's law. In the verse immediately following the "dni cheloveka" line, comes a line about the wind passing over the field: "Proidet nad nim veter, i net ego, i mesto ego uzhe ne uznaet ego."⁴⁴ In the verse immediately preceding the "dni cheloveka" line, the word *sostav* is used. Bitov uses this word, after a sentence in which he describes "vetrenye dni," in the accidental symmetry scene with his son.⁴⁵ God's love, the psalm continues, will be there for man and for his children, no matter what, when man has faith.

The next psalm, called, in the Russian, the psalm of David (103) "o sotvorenii mira," is of particular relevance. The psalm has to do with the creative process, that process at the very center of "Zhizn'." The imagery of the psalm bears a striking resemblance to that of the wind-epiphany scenes in Bitov's story. One of the first verses of that psalm speaks of God ("na kryl' iakh vetra"); the next verse says that God creates "dukhov"⁴⁶ as His angels. Here, then, we get an identification of the wind and the spiritual dimension of life. Later in the same psalm, we read about God's having created the grass for cattle and having created small animals; chamois, the verdure, the ships which sail, and God's stretching out His hand. All of these images play an important role in the episodes in which Sergei comes to stand in awe of the wonder of life. When he and his son are in the meadow, Sergei sees the verdure, a cow, a goat, and a cat. When he is in

41. Boris L. Pasternak, *Doktor Zhivago* (Paris: Société d'Édition et d'Impression Mondiale, 1959), 90. Emphasis mine.

42. Psalms, as quoted in Andrei Bitov, "Les," in Andrei Bitov, *Dni cheloveka. Povesti* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1976), 100. These lines, from Psalm 103, in the standard English version of the Bible and from Psalm 102 in the Russian version are generally rendered, "As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field."

43. Ronald Meyer explains that the novel *Dni cheloveka* appeared as a unified novel for the first time as the volume entitled *Life in Windy Weather* in English. Ronald Meyer, "Andrej Bitov's *Puškinskij Dom*," 44, 74.

44. Psalm 103; *Bibliia, ili Knigi sviashchenno pisaniiia vetkhogo i novogo zaveta, v russkom perevode* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskoi Patriarkhii, 1956), Psalm 102. I quote from this edition of the Russian Bible because the prerevolutionary Bible's rendering of the "dni cheloveka" verse does not match Bitov's quotation in "Les" or in the title of his 1976 collection of short stories. The prerevolutionary version is "Chelovek,—kak trava, dni ego," *Sviashchennye knigi vetkhogo i novogo zaveta* (Vienna: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1912).

45. Bitov, "Zhizn'," 213.

46. *Bibliia*, 573.

his study, the room is transformed into a sailing ship. When Sergei is in the meadow, his son stretches out his hand.

Near the end of the psalm, the act of singing in praise of God is mentioned. Near the end of Bitov's story, the girl friend of a friend of Sergei's is urged to sing. The song, not identified in Bitov's text, is, according to Hagen, by Soviet poet and singer Novella Matveeva.⁴⁷ The part of the song sung by the woman is: "Kakoi bol'shoi ve-ter/napal na nash os-trov/i snial s domov kryshi,/kak s moloka pe-nu . . ." ⁴⁸ At the beginning of the story, during the first episode of windy weather, Sergei noticed that there is no ceiling between him and the roof. The wind had removed a layer between him and life and had thus shaken free his creative impulses. In the song, the wind removes the roof, the layer between the sky and the house.

In all the scenes in which Bitov has described the removal of ossified structures from Sergei's perception, he demonstrates that the removal of such forms, structures, and conventions results in Sergei's being able to make connections. *Sviaz'* is a word that Bitov repeats in this context. Hagen has pointed out Sergei's emphasis, as a result of his newly experienced revelations about life, upon union with other people, with nature, and with reality.⁴⁹ Sergei, for instance, feels that an invisible but real thread connects him to the woman singing the song. At the end of "Zhizn'," Sergei feels a close connection with his wife and son.

The direction taken by Sergei, from the beginning of the story, has been from death to life, in creating a creative personal, spiritual, and artistic life. In "Zapiski," the trajectory is the same, going from the narrator's discussions of dead life and literature to his feeling of terror that his own death is imminent, and finally to his freedom from terror by means of squarely facing the abyss of terror. As a result of staring at the possibility of his own death, he can live in peace, confident that the dimensions of his life have changed. Nothing, he says, in his external life has changed as a result of his epiphany. He realizes, though, that his attitude toward life has wrought a profound change in the way he will live in the future.

In like manner, the psalms that make their presence felt in Bitov's "Zhizn'" begin with a feeling of man's deadness (feeling withered, isolated; understanding that he is dust) and end, through man's discovery of the spiritual dimension of his existence, with a song to God. We should recall the episode in which as Sergei rides into the city with his father he fantasizes that an atomic bomb drops and imagines that the car in which they are riding is "*pylinka*."⁵⁰ Earlier during the same ride, Sergei's father explained that in the event of a war, the most important military tactic will be *sviaz'* on the second day. Sergei points out that this is ridiculous since no one will be left after the first day. This conversation, of course, demonstrates the importance in the Bitov story of establishing true *sviaz'* and the consequences of not understanding what makes for real communication. In his song, David, together with God, creates a world filled with meaning.

The narrator in Pasternak's "Veter" begins by declaring that he is dead and ends by speaking of the wind's creation of a song for his lover. *Doktor Zhivago* begins with the death of Iurii Zhivago's mother and ends with Gordon and Dudorov holding a notebook of Zhivago's writings. Feeling at one with the present, the future, the past, their children, the city (holy city), and the earth, they are surrounded, describes Pasternak's narrator, by the "neslyshnoi muzykoi schast'ia"⁵¹ and are supported in their feelings by the book of poetry in their hands. The meanings of life and art and spirituality are merged into one. Connections have been made.

47. Hagen "Stories," 142. Hagen speaks of the relevance of the song to the theme of the wind and to Sergei's confused feelings after his experiences of harmonious clarity. Hagen sees the woman as a symbol of the wind (life-force), churning up man's (the island's) ordinary life. Hagen, "Stories," 142.

48. Bitov, "Zhizn'," 218.

49. Hagen, "Stories," 134, 236, 137, 141, and passim.

50. Bitov, "Zhizn'," 206.

51. Pasternak, *Doktor Zhivago*, 599.

We have seen, then, how the words and thoughts of Pasternak and of the Bible make their presence felt in Bitov's story. Of course, one could argue that Pasternak's works are also infused with biblical references. The poem, "Veter," for instance, and the novel *Doktor Zhivago* as a whole contain explicit as well as implicit references to the Bible. Where, then, are we to draw the line between what Bitov absorbed from the Bible and what he absorbed from his reading of Pasternak? How do we reconcile the fact that Bitov's "message" can be analyzed as stemming from both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Buddhist tradition; that it can be viewed as the individual discoveries about artistic creativity of one individual human being; that it can be understood as the clarification by one person of a meaningful way to live his life?

For a clue to these questions, we must turn to Bitov's own words, stated in another context. Priscilla Meyer explains that he denies all influences on his work. A scene of a horse in his story, "Bezdel'nik" has been traced to Raskol'nikov's dream about a horse in Fedor Dostoevsky's *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*. Meyer writes, "while he has of course read *Crime and Punishment*, Bitov explains the similarity by a kind of collective unconscious: the ideas, myths and symbols of a culture are in the air, and the fallen horse is part of a shared imagery."⁵² In one sense, for Bitov, the boundaries among different works of art are discarded as the writers make contacts and connections with other writers, ideas, and cultures, with one another, in the realm of the collective unconscious that exists beyond the boundaries that separate individual images into neat arbitrary categories.

In like fashion, we must acknowledge that the seemingly discordant interpretations of "Zhizn'" are harmonious when we look beyond the boundaries of individual religions; of individual aspects of artistic creativity; of individual processes of the heightened powers of perception of one individual human being. In all respects, Bitov's message is the acknowledgement of the existence of the invisible threads of commonality that extend farther and farther when human beings decide to live and act creatively. Bitov is speaking, in the broadest sense, of the creative processes of life. His method underscores his message. Ronald Meyer described the "unit" of "Zhizn'" and "Zapiski," in its attempt at creating true literature, as "plotless prose," "a lyrical-philosophical narrative with some semblances of plot . . . testing, straining at the boundaries of genre."⁵³ Bitov's boundaries of genre, then, are dissolved, just as Sergei's boundaries melted as he came closer to dealing with life more truthfully. In our search for a true interpretation of Bitov's story, we, too, must acknowledge that the boundaries of interpretation among the separate consciousnesses of Priscilla Meyer, Ronald Meyer, Hagen, Schmid, and Chances are not really boundaries at all, for together, they attain the truth about Bitov's story about truth.

During Sergei's moment of greatest harmony, when he sees the "sluchainaia simmetriia" of life, Bitov's narrator speaks of the "beskonechnoe prodolzhenie osi za vidimye predely."⁵⁴ Seeing beyond visible boundaries to the essence that ties one seemingly disparate realm of life to another is the key to Sergei's discovery of the meaning of his life, to his discovery of the harmony in life. The boundaries have been removed between him and the roof, other people, nature, the conventional forms of dead literature. Only in this way can he get to the real connections with other people, real literature, and the eternal verities of a life with meaning. Someone who is honest and not afraid of the wind will feel the wind shake the house. The wind will breathe movement into you. The wind might carry you to the edge of the abyss. In "Zapiski" the narrator feels that he will die. Someone willing to take this step, to move with the wind, to be inspired by the wind, will reach creative inspiration, epiphany, and harmony. Someone who refuses to breathe and move and, instead, stays frozen in conventional dead forms will truly die. Bitov gets to his own accidental symmetry of life, literature, and the life of the spiritual. For him, all of these realms are intertwined. All lead to a true harmony and, as Bitov writes, in daring to look beyond visible boundaries, one gets closer to the truth.

In the scene in which Sergei and his father are driving to the city, the narrator uses the word

52. Priscilla Meyer, "Introduction," Andrei Bitov, *Life in Windy Weather*, 7.

53. Ronald Meyer, "Andrej Bitov's *Puškinskij Dom*," 39, 40.

54. Bitov, "Zhizn'," 214. Emphasis mine.

"pakhoty"⁵⁵ in describing the landscape. A Pasternak poem, "Pakhota," appropriately enough, from the cycle entitled "Kogda razguliaetsia," begins with these lines: "Chto stalos' s mestnost'iu vsegdashnei?/S zemli i neba sterta gran'."⁵⁶ The dissolution of boundaries, according to Bitov, is what true living is all about.

55. Ibid., 204.

56. Boris Pasternak, "Pakhota," in Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 483.