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SEMIOTICS AND THE ARTS:
A *FESTSCHRIFT* IN HONOR OF
THOMAS G. WINNER

ELLEN CHANCES

"SUNNY SIDE UP": CREATIVITY
IN ANDREI BITOV'S 'SUN'

В окошки,
в двери,
в щель войдя,
валилась солнца масса,
в валилось; . . .

". . . Into the little windows,
into the doors,
going into the crack,
the mass of sun tumbled,
burst in; . . ."

—Vladimir Maiakovskii, "The Extraordinary Adventure which Happened to Vladimir Maiakovskii During the Summer at the Dacha."¹

Жизнь подаете,
Светлый создатель,
Солнце, тебя я пою!

"Bearer of life,
Radiant creator,
Sun, you I sing!"

—Konstantin Balmont, "Hymn to the Sun."²

From the beginning of his writing career in the late 1950s, contemporary Soviet author Andrei Bitov has addressed the com-

1. Vladimir Maiakovskii, "Neobychnoe prikluchenie, byvshee s Vladimirom Maiakovskim letom na dache," in Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1956), p. 36.

2. Konstantin Bal'mont, "Gimn solntsu," in Konstantin Bal'mont, *Stikhotvoreniia* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1969), p. 267.

plex interrelationships of life and literature.³ He declares that he has always striven to capture the ongoing process of life in his works. In a letter, he wrote that he highly esteems writers who place at the center of their imaginative worlds the "cognition of life in the very process of creation."⁴ The theme becomes a major concern of his in "Life in Windy Weather" ("Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu") (1963-64),⁵ where he plots the creative process, which, he claims, is one and the same, whether one applies it to living or to writing.⁶

For Bitov, there is no boundary between the laws that govern life and those that govern art. Sometimes, he speaks of the lack, in general, of boundaries between life and literature. He elucidates his positions in "Life in Windy Weather" and in other later works—in, for example, "Armenia Lessons" ("Uroki Armenii") (1967-69); "Choice of Location" ("Vybor natury") (1971-73); and *Pushkin House* (*Pushkinskii Dom*) (1964-71).⁷ The impulse to identify the methodology of the artist with other realms of life is one which is characteristic of Bitov from his earliest publications. It is to one of the early short stories, "The Sun" ("Solntse") (1959), published in Bitov's first collection of short stories, *The Big Balloon* (*Bol'shoi shar*),⁸ that I shall now turn in order to document the presence of this important theme in the very earliest stages of Bitov's writings.

The story has gone largely unnoticed in the critical literature about Bitov. The only scholars to praise the story have been German scholar Wolf Schmid, who spends a couple of pages of an

3. I deal more extensively with the theme in my book on Andrei Bitov's writings, "The Ecology of Inspiration: The Shapes of Andrei Bitov's Prose," forthcoming.

4. Andrei Bitov's letter to Frederick R. Croen, in Frederick R. Croen, "A Translation of *The Wheel* of Andrei Bitov," senior thesis, Princeton University, 1974, appendix, p. 1.

5. Andrei Bitov, "Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu," in Andrei Bitov, *Dachnaia mestnost'. Povesti* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1967), pp. 187-222.

6. I made this point in a paper, "Andrei Bitov's 'Life in Windy Weather': The Creative Process in Life and Literature," Annual AATSEEL Conference, New York City, December 29, 1986 and in my article, with the same title, *Slavic Review*, forthcoming.

7. Andrei Bitov, "Uroki Armenii" and "Vybor natury," in Andrei Bitov, *Sem' puteshestvii* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1976), pp. 261-398 and pp. 523-91. Andrei Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1978).

8. Andrei Bitov, "Solntse," in Andrei Bitov, *Bol'shoi shar* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1963), pp. 124-30.

article on Bitov's travel literature on a discussion of "The Sun," and British scholar Stephen Hagen. What Schmid has to say is interesting. He speaks of this story as a part of Bitov's travel literature, for the main protagonist, walking through a city on a sunny day, sees everything from his individual perspective. Schmid also ties the travel theme to Bitov's use of "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*). He compares Bitov's careful dissection of actions into their constituent parts to Iurii Olesha's meticulous documentation of the processes of an action. The "defamiliarization" effects of light and shadow in Bitov and in Olesha also interest Schmid. Hagen emphasizes the lyrical elements in the story. He speaks about the sun's symbolizing the essence of life. He alludes to the cinematic devices in the story and to Bitov's experimentation in theme and style. Like Schmid, Hagen remarks on the similarity of Bitov's "Sun" to Olesha's prose.⁹

Other analyses of "The Sun" miss the mark. One article criticizes Bitov for the lack of poetic quality of the story when compared to other works in *The Big Balloon*.¹⁰ Another evaluation features the characters' behavior and the plotlessness as key factors in the story.¹¹ Let us now proceed to a detailed investigation of the central questions illuminating "The Sun."

The plot of the story is simple. One sunny morning, Vitia Tamoikin, an institute student, gets up. He has many things to do, gets distracted by random scenes of everyday life which he observes along his way to class, thinks about what he has to do, and decides not to do those things. The narrative tone is stark, blunt, and matter-of-fact. The sentences are often short, sometimes consisting of only a noun and a verb. Some paragraphs are made up of one word. The voices of the narrator and of Vitia are indistinguishable. Recounting the plot and tone in skeletal outline does not do justice to the beautifully fashioned, delicately woven patterns of words and images that impart to the story its special significance.

9. Wolf Schmid, "Verfremdung bei Andrej Bitov," *Wiener slawistischer Almanach*, vol. 5 (1980), pp. 37-39. Stephen George Sidney Hagen, "The Stories of Andrei Bitov, 1958-1966. A Search for Individual Perception," MA Dissertation (University of Durham [England] Department of Russian), 1980, pp. 27-29.

10. V. Ermilov, "Budem tochnymi," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, April 16, 1964, p. 3.

11. E. A. Shubin, *Sovremennyi russkii razkaz. Voprosy poetiki zhanra* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1974), p. 119.

The first few paragraphs of the story are filled with descriptions of objects, often reduced to simple geometric shapes. The opening sentences set the stage for what is to follow. Bitov writes,

Четыре золотых прямоугольника протянулись от окна к кровати . . .
Солнце.

На голубом экране окна появился серы воробей и восторженно завертел головой. Высокая фабричная труба—постоянная декорация—была веселого кирпичного цвета.

Four golden rectangles extended from the window to the bed .

The sun.

On the blue screen [as in television or movie screen—E.C.]¹² of the window a gray sparrow appeared and enthusiastically began to twirl its head. A tall factory smokestack—permanent scenery—was a cheerful brick color.¹³

We then read about Vitia's body describing an arc as he sits down on the bed and lets his feet land in a golden rectangle. His toes, we read, leave "dark lines on the dusty floor" ("temnye chertochki na pyl'nom polu").¹⁴ Outside, the air jumps, workers seated in a row on a log sunning themselves are compared to sparrows on a branch. A board being lifted on a hoist is said to look down at everything from above. One paragraph reads, "A balcony." ("Balkon.")¹⁵

Often the images link inanimate objects and natural phenomena to the human world of people and feelings. The four golden rectangles of the sun are inside a person's room. A window pane and frame against the sky become a television screen on which a bird performs. A shoe wants to hide. In part of the description of a construction site, the sentence, "The hoist was standing" ("Lebėdka stoiala")¹⁶ obviously refers to a machine; however, the word *lebėdka* also means female swan. A burner licks the asphalt with a pale tongue. A board looks. Workers on a

12. In the Soviet Union, the expression "blue screen" ("goluboy ekran") refers to television.

13. Bitov, "Solntse," p. 124.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

log are sparrows on a branch. The sun beating against the glass of a bus window is compared to a big, warm bird and is said to pulsate like a heart.

Bitov's technique of frequently repeating words links parts of the story which would not otherwise be connected in the reader's mind. The repetition accomplishes the same process of bridging different realms of life as did the comparisons of human and nonhuman qualities. The hoist, three bystanders, people, a worker, and Vitia are, at different times, described as standing. Vitia's toes create a new pattern, the dark lines, on the already dusty floor; pieces of plaster from a house under repair are reduced to dust as they hit the asphalt below. The air jumps, as do Vitia's list of things to do. Man-made plaster and nature-made snow fall down. A woman has a pale face, and a burner at a construction site has a pale tongue (flame).

Intricate patterns emerge as Bitov weaves increasingly interconnected threads of images. Bird imagery is a good example of such patterns. The second paragraph of the story is one word, "The sun" ("Solntse").¹⁷ In the third sentence, the reader is introduced to a gray sparrow, seen in nature (against the sky), through the window (the boundary between the human being's home and a bird's habitat). These distinctions collapse, for the sky and window are metaphorically dubbed a television screen on which the sparrow appears. A few paragraphs later comes the scene where people (the workers sunning themselves on a log) are seen as sparrows on a branch. Still later the sun beating against the bus window is likened to a big, warm bird. The next sentence states that it (the sun) was throbbing like a heart. The very next paragraph is, "The sun" ("Solntse").¹⁸

The sun, human beings, and birds are common to all three passages. Each of these repeated clusters also brings into the picture new images, some of which forge new links to still other parts of the story. The sun was described as a warm bird. Bitov's only other use of the word "warm" had been in speaking of the warm air which jumped. And the only use of the word "jump" had been in reference to Vitia's list of things to do, which also jumped.

The sparrow was gray. "Gray" is used only one other time, to describe the lumps of snow which were flying. A form of the verb "to fly" had been used once before, to describe the sparrow's de-

17. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 128

parture. The word "lumps" is used once more, in the final sentence, to refer to "lumps of houses" ("glyby domov") which are swimming and soaring in the air because of the omnipresent sun. Everything is connected to everything. Repeated words set up associations of images, and these new associations create their own reverberations rippling through the story.

Why Bitov would resort to such intricate word patterns will become clear when we examine the significance of one of the key passages of "The Sun." One of the scenes which Vitia observes on his way to the institute is a group of people who, in turn, were looking at something. The narrator writes, "A crosswalk for pedestrians was being created. People, from among the pedestrians, were standing and looking at how it was being created." ("Sozdavalas' perekhodnaia dorozhka dlia peshekhodov. Liudi, iz peshekhodov, stoiali i smotreli na to, kak ona sozdavalas'.")¹⁹ Workers were affixing ". . . wide sparkling knobs" (" . . . shirokie blestiaschie knopki"). "In each new knob a new sun was catching fire." ("V kazhdoi novoi knopke zagoralos' novoe solntse.")²⁰

Upon reflection, we see that the grand pattern of "The Sun" shines through. The story is about life, about its creative processes, about creation, about destruction, about life in movement. The same seeing consciousness of the human being (Vitia, the narrator, Bitov) creating/destroying his life/work/ things to do is

19. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

20. *Ibid.* This sentence is strongly reminiscent of a sentence, near the beginning of Olesha's *Envy* (*Zavist'*), which uses the same descriptive method: "The blue and pink world of the room moves around in the mother-of-pearl lens of the button." ("Goluboi i rozovyi mir komnaty khodit krugom v perlamutrovom ob'ektivno-pugovitsy.") Iurii Olesha, *Zavist'*, in Iurii Olesha, *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1974), p. 14.

Wolf Schmid has spoken of the parallels between Bitov's style and Olesha's experimental prose. (See Wolf Schmid, "Verfremdung.") I. Motiashov, "Otvetsvennost' khudozhnika (Zametki kritiki)," *Voprosy literatury*, No. 12 (1968), p. 17, mentions Olesha and Bitov in another context; he sees a parallel between Bitov's "Journey to a Childhood Friend" ("Puteshestvie k drugu detstva") and *Envy*. Priscilla Meyer suggests an Olesha influence in "Life in Windy Weather," but says that Bitov rejects the possibility of such an influence. Priscilla Meyer, "Andrei Georgievich Bitov," in *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet Literature*, ed. Harry B. Weber, vol. 3 (Gulf Breeze, Fl.: Academic International Press, 1979), p. 32. I. Grinberg writes of a general similarity between Olesha and Bitov with their "acute sensation of colors, sounds and scents" ("ostrym oshchushcheniem krasok, zvukov, aromatov"). I. Grinberg, "A rasti emu—v nebo . . .," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Jan. 19, 1965, p. 3.

no different from the acts of the workers who destroy parts of the building being repaired or the workers who create knobs in which new suns shine or from the movement of the sun which creates golden rectangles or of the setting sun which is pierced by the point of a prospect going off into the distance. The sun, life, the life-giving force is everywhere. The penultimate sentence of the story reads, "The sun was in front and, at the same time, on all sides." ("Solntse bylo vpered i v to zhe vremia so vsekh storon.")²¹

The workers were creating a crosswalk for pedestrians, a "transitional road" ("perekhodnaia dorozhka") for people to cross from one side of the street to the other, and people were watching the process of the road's being created. Through the workers' work, new suns caught fire in the knobs, the products of their work. In the same way, Bitov, the writer, is a worker, the creator of a crosswalk, a "transitional road," a work of art, for people to cross from one realm of life, the everyday world, to another, the world of the imagination, of the creative impulse; and the people (we readers) watch the process of the road being created. Through Bitov's work, a new sun, "The Sun," caught fire in the product of his work, the written page.

Realms of life merge into one another as we follow the creative and destructive processes of Vitia's seeing and thinking, of people's actions, and of the sun's presence. At the beginning of the story, in the morning, Vitia mentally breaks up his day into hours and into the things he has to do. He has created a pattern. On the balcony of a house under construction, a worker with a sledge hammer destroys a pattern, as pieces of plaster fall onto the asphalt and dissipate into dust. As Vitia observes the worker on the balcony of a house under construction, he waits, hoping to see the balcony fall and wondering what the worker will do. In the same sentence in which the narrator informs us that the balcony held up, we read that Vitia's things to do ". . . crowded into a shapeless heap . . ." (" . . . stolpilis' v besformennui kuchu . . .").²² Vitia's imagination had destroyed the balcony. The balcony, in real life, retains its shape, but Vitia's things to do lose their shape. Vitia then watches another set of workers constructing the crosswalk. A few paragraphs later, Vitia "built"

21. Bitov, "Solntse," p. 129.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

("postroil")²³ his list of things to do ". . . like knobs" (" . . . kak knopki").²⁴ Vitia's being distracted by a woman who gets on the bus on which he is riding destroys the sequence of his things to do that he has built. He again begins, mentally, to put them in order. They jump, thereby destroying the order. Two pages go by before Vitia even thinks about his things to do, and then he does not even attempt to create a pattern for them. He just remembers that he has things to do. The next reference to them is only a reference. The things to do never get done. One destructive process in life, the destruction of potential, has been documented here. What has also been registered is the ongoing process, or movement of life, even if in this instance, the movement was toward destruction.

We have ample opportunity to watch the creative process at work. The sun assumes many different shapes—the four golden rectangles; new suns in the crosswalk; dry sunny asphalt winding itself around the wheels of the bus; a pulsating heart; a big, warm bird. It, of course, destroys, too, blinding the narrator's eyes; causing a worker to assume the shape of a black shadow; making a flame grow pale. Whether destructive or creative, the forces being described are those of the movement of life, which, of course, includes both forces. In the same way, the same Vitia who destroyed his things to do created the dark lines on the sunny dust, created the "crosswalk" from his consciousness to people's activities to nature's world. Some workers reduced part of a balcony to dust. Others created the crosswalk of new suns.

We the readers have traversed a path, our own crosswalk, from simple geometric shapes to repeated words to a merging of the human and nonhuman worlds. Everything merges into everything else. At the beginning of the story, the sun enters the man-made room through its own "crosswalk," the window. At the end, the setting sun is pierced by a man-made object, an avenue. Chunks of houses (which contain rooms) are flying in the air. We have witnessed one day in the life of the sun and one day in the life of Vitia's consciousness. Bitov has shown us a microcosm of the movements of life. Objects are torn down and built up, they disperse and come together, they decompose and fuse. The creative process in the artist, in the worker, and in the nonhuman world of nature produces the same patterns. Ultimately, everything is a part of everything else. Creativity contains destruction, and destruction contains creativity.

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23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*