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“Cross-Writing” and War Memory: Fridrikh Gorenshtein’s Autobiographical Story, *The House with a Turret*

This article focuses on the representation of childhood in Fridrikh Gorenshtein’s (1932–2002) autobiographical story *The House with a Turret* (1964) that epitomizes the collective experience of his generation of Soviet children growing up during WWII. Much of Gorenshtein’s fiction could be described as autofiction, a term coined by the French writer and critical theorist Serge Dubrovsky, a narrative form that undermines the generic borders between autobiography and fiction. This article examines how in his autofiction, Gorenshtein redefines the boundaries of childhood by calling attention to two narrative perspectives: the child’s perception of the surrounding uncanny world and the adult narrator’s perception of the states of abjection, trauma, and neglect to which his young hero is subjected.

Much of Fridrikh Gorenshtein’s (1932–2002) fiction could be described as autofiction, a term coined by the French writer and critical theorist Serge Dubrovsky to describe “a sub-category” of autobiography, a narrative form that undermines the generic borders between autobiography and fiction and combines fictional textuality and realist representation in which the author uses his/her real ‘self’ as a character¹. Autofiction about war, like no other

genre, embodies the technique of “cross-writing” that not only erases the borderline between ‘fiction’ and ‘reality/history’ but also blurs the boundaries between children and adult experiences. War stories address the effect of trauma on the formation of human identity and, to a great extent, expand the definition of childhood. The settings of war, regardless of the place (e.g., war zone, home front, orphanage, ghetto, or concentration camp), make authors create situations in which the opposition of child and adult, as well as the adult moral authority and values, are constantly questioned.

Gorenshtein’s early autofiction

¹ For an excellent comprehensive review of literature on autobiography and especially on autofiction, see Masha Levina-Parker 2010. See also Hughes 2002: 566–567.

presents a personalized account of psychological, moral, and emotional war trauma as it affected the formation of his identity. Throughout his creative life, his persistent urge to turn to his childhood and youth war and post-war experience seems to be motivated not only by scriptotherapeutic intentions but also, as is often the case in war trauma literature, by the desire to find “a community of listeners” to whom he could convey the ordeal of war as it ‘really’ was (Bosmajian 2009: 296)². The conflation of Gorenshtein’s fictional identity as a character with his authorial identity as a war trauma survivor intensifies for the reader the objectivity and truthfulness of the described historical events while simultaneously revealing the ethical dimension of his work. In this article, I will explore how in his autofiction, Gorenshtein redefines the boundaries of childhood by calling attention to two narrative perspectives: the child’s poeticized perception of the surrounding

² Like Hamida Bosmajian, Sergei Ushakin in his study of trauma, points to the importance of the “understanding audience” for trauma narratives. He calls this audience a “community of loss” (soobshchestvo utraty) that plays a role both of the “author” and the “addressee” of trauma narratives (Ushakin 2009: 10).

uncanny world and the adult narrator’s perception of the states of abjection, trauma, and neglect to which his young ‘self’ is subjected. I will also discuss how the description of childhood war experience in Gorenshtein’s writing points to the failures of the social system that turns actual children into the unwanted ‘other’ or the “abject”³, contrary to its official claims of providing a safety net for young homeless and orphaned victims of war.

Gorenshtein closely follows the events of his life in three works: the short story, *The House with a Turret* (*Dom s bashenkoi*, 1964), the novella *Winter '53* (*Zima 53–60*, 1965), and the novel *Place* (*Mesto*, 1976)⁴. However, only the short story is based on his childhood, and therefore it will be the focus of my analysis of cross-writing in his autofiction. Gorenshtein’s biography is not

³ Julia Kristeva uses the term “abject” in her book, *Powers of Horror* (1982). For her, the “abject” is “the other”, neither “subject” nor “object”, something the society does not accept because it challenges its “norms” and stability”. The abject is always “the in-between” and “the ambiguous” (Kristeva 1988: 4).

⁴ Out of these three works, only *The House with a Turret* was published in the USSR in the large-circulation literary journal «Lunost’» (Youth) that targeted the young intellectual readership.

unique for his generation of Soviet people. He was born in Kiev to an educated Jewish family. His father was a professor of economics and his mother was an educator. In 1935, after his father was accused of agricultural sabotage and shot two years later in a gulag, young Fridrikh moved with his mother to the provincial Ukrainian town of Berdichev to escape further repressions against their family. When the war broke out, they were sent in evacuation to Siberia, and on the way there, his mother fell ill and died leaving young Fridrikh alone. He spent the remainder of his childhood in orphanages and after the war, with his mother's relatives in Berdichev. After finishing school Gorenshtein was a manual laborer and eventually enrolled at Dnepropetrovsk Mining University and graduated with an engineering degree. He worked in the Ural and Ukrainian mines while simultaneously writing and trying to break through into the Soviet literary scene. In 1961 he was admitted to State Film University to study screenwriting. From that time on his career was exclusively connected with literature and film, but it was hardly a success story despite the fact that

during his Soviet period he was known as a talented screenwriter. His work for the cinema includes seventeen screenplays, most notably for the well-known films, *Soliaris* (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972) and *Slave of Love* (dir. Nikita Mikhalkov, 1975). As Boris Slutskii observed, the publication of *The House with a Turret*⁵ made him "widely known in narrow circles", but the doors of Soviet publishing houses remained closed to him (Lazarev 1991: 3). *The House with a Turret* was too gloomy and reflective for the Soviet reader, but it "anticipated his future existentialist prose" (Polianskaia 2004: n.p.)⁶. Frustrated with the Soviet literary process, Gorenshtein began to publish his work in the West in

⁵ Although multiple sources on Gorenshtein's biography continue emphasizing the fact that *The House with a Turret* was his only work published in the USSR, in 2011 «Literaturnaia gazeta» stated that it published the author's other six short stories between 1968–1991: *Neproživlenets* and *Ot imeni kollektiva* (1968, XXV), *Chelovek na dereve* (1968, XXXI), *Dachnik* (1970, XXXII), *Arkheologicheskie strasti* (1973, IXXX), *Razgovor* (1991, XXXII), «Literaturnaia gazeta» (2011).

⁶ For Gorenshtein's affinity with existentialist writers, see Мина Полянская. *Ja – pisatel' nezakonnyi... Zapiski i razmyshleniia o sud'be i tvorchestve Fridrikha Gorenshteina*.

1977, and in 1980 he emigrated to Vienna and consequently to Berlin, where he lived for the rest of his life. Although he received critical acclaim in the West and his books and plays have been published in post-Soviet Russia and translated into several languages, his name is still not widely known to Russian readers and neither is his biography included in any major literary dictionaries or encyclopedias either in Russia or in the English-speaking world.

Revered by some critics in Russia and the West⁷, Gorenshtein nevertheless remained an outsider throughout his life, “the ‘black sheep’ of the ‘men of the sixties’” (shestidesiatniki) (Erofeev 1995: 16), and “the most gloomy of all Russian writers” (Glad 1988: 26)⁸. He steadfastly – and most likely,

intentionally – occupied an isolationist position among his generation of writers, vehemently denounced any association with the *shestidesiatniki*, and stated that that period – despite its achievement in “liberating consciousness” – “put a brake on literary development in terms of spiritual values” and pushed literature into assuming “the responsibilities of journalism” (Glad 1988: 193). Gorenshtein opposed any ideology and ideological affiliations (Etkind 1979: 10), was not fond of most classical Russian or contemporary Soviet authors, and felt alienated from and genuinely detested the Soviet, post-Soviet, and immigrant literary circles⁹. The only kindred spirit with whom he

⁷ Arch Tait names Gorenshtein among “the most worthwhile contemporary writers, along with Sergei Kaledin, Vladimir Makanin, Liudmila Petrushevskaja, Iurii Dombrovskii, Vladimir Voinovich, Anatolii Kim, Ruslan Kireev, and Valeriia Narbikova” (Tait 1997: 661).

⁸ In a memorial article in «Literaturnaia gazeta», Gorenshtein’s contemporary Russian writers remember him as “estranged” (otchuzhdennyi), “a different person” (otdel’nyi chelovek), “uncomfortable person” (neudobnyi chelovek), and “a strange person” (strannyi chelovek) (Popov 2002: 6).

⁹ Gorenshtein felt ostracized by Soviet, post-Soviet, and Russian immigrant literary communities. As Boris Khazanov writes, the author was in opposition not only to the official Soviet literary circles but also to “the liberal-democratic dissidents” (Khazanov 2002, 156). In his interview with John Glad, Gorenshtein complained, “Silence was always the main weapon used against me, both there and here. Silence is more effective than denunciation” (Glad 1988, 1998). When his novel *Mesto* was short-listed for the Russian Booker Prize but lost the competition to Mark Kharitonov’s novel, *Lines of Fate* (*Linia sud’by, ili sunduchok Milashevicha*), Gorenshtein felt humiliated and never participated in literary competitions again (Polianskaia 2012).

eagerly identified was Dante, who, in Gorenshtein's words, "tried to take revenge on his life. He understood that the more artistically he wrote, the more powerful his work would be. To a certain extent my work is also ruled by a desire to revenge" (Glad 1988: 193). These words resonate heavily with his entire writing in which the author's existential loneliness and outsider status found their full realization. In a sense, the author used his writing to "settle accounts" with his difficult childhood, with the regime, with many callous people around him, and with his own country that neglected him and became neither his "stepmother" nor his mother (Khazanov 2002: 155). Like no other contemporary Russian writer, Gorenshtein was a defender of "the humiliated and insulted" (Khazanov 2002: 154). His literary premiere, *The House with a Turret*, adumbrated his future themes, such as "the intertwining of tragic and absurd occurrences, despair, hopelessness, insecurity of individual existence in the face of threatening, catastrophic, and impersonal circumstances followed by a sudden epiphany and catharsis in the world overflowing with cruelty, evil, violence, and

prejudice" (Belousenko n.d.: n.p.). Gorenshtein's nuanced and heavily cross-written early autobiographical narrative touches on these themes and masterfully portrays the effect of war trauma on children.

The term "cross-writing" was coined by Uli Knoepfmacher and Mitzi Myers in order to re-conceptualize children's literary studies, calling attention to the "colloquy between past and present selves" in "texts too often read as univocal" (Knoepfmacher and Myers 1997: 7). Knoepfmacher and Myers argue that the concept of cross-writing does not solely apply to children's literature but is equally found in works for adult audiences. Rather than creating an authoritative, finalizing voice in the narrative, "cross-writing" authors engage the child's and adult's voices in "creative cooperation" and activate "a traffic between phases of life" (Knoepfmacher and Myers 1997: 8). This interaction of voices in the vein of Mikhail Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* is meant to intensify the reader's perceptions of existential realities the child character is affected by in the narrative. In essence, cross-writing enables the author to "re-experience childhood and continually re-activate her own child self"

(Knoepfmacher and Myers 1997: 7).

Autofiction lends itself to cross-writing because on the one hand, it “inhabits the referential space” of the author’s autobiography and on the other hand, it provides a “patently enriched and treated, hence fictionalized, and metamorphic, version of [the author’s – L.R.] life-story”. In autofiction, the structure of the ‘self’ – is permeable as the author does not “assume responsibility for his articulation of the ‘real’/‘true’” nature of events by constantly switching perspectives from “it’s me” to “it’s not me” (Hughes 2002: 567–568). However, despite this fluidity of the authorial self, autofiction does not falsify real-life experience but rather “communicates the data of ‘real life’ without adequately admitting to doing so” (Hughes 2002: 569). As Richard N. Coe demonstrates in his study of autobiography and the experience of childhood, the autobiographer often fictionalizes his/her identity to show that the child character is “a being alien to [the author’s] present self” (Coe 1984: 4). Cross-writing in the autobiographical text is then an organic mechanism that serves the purpose of crystallizing the au-

thor’s/character’s experience of childhood from two temporal perspectives of his/her life, and – by combining the child’s and the adult’s perspectives – it also has the power to dismantle the Romantic picture of childhood as happy and oblivious. Thus, in *House with a Turret* cross-writing helps to unveil the condition of marginality and abjection of the boy character, which is only subtly apprehended by him but obvious to the adult narrator.

The plot of *The House with a Turret* closely follows Gorenshstein’s autobiography and focuses on the unnamed nine-year old boy who travels with his mother to his grandfather’s place – also unnamed – far from the front line at the beginning of the war. During their journey east the boy’s mother falls ill, is taken off the train, and transported to a local hospital. The boy accompanies her, and when she dies he continues the trip on his own. Neglected by everyone and taken advantage of by unscrupulous people, he has to figure out how to survive as an orphan in an uncaring world ravaged by war. Without yet realizing it, he falls in with a group of unwanted children whom Christine Wilkie-Stibbs calls “outsiders”, or “border-

landers,” whom most of society and certain institutional structures “render invisible” (Wilkie-Stibbs 2008: 10)¹⁰.

Gorenshtein’s story has a solid ground in reality and resonates with autobiographical writing by many people who survived the war or evacuation in their childhood. The conditions of evacuation at the beginning of the war were particularly stressful and harsh for children. The Soviet government prioritized the evacuation of technical personnel, skilled workers, families of Red Army commanders, NKVD officers, and the party *nomenklatura* while excluding “children under 15 years of age” from its evacuation provisions (Potemkina 2010: 232). Although many children were nevertheless evacuated, the process was chaotic and, in some cases, inhuman and marked by negligence, inattentiveness, and lack of communication between the families and authorities. As a result, many children were forcefully separated from

¹⁰ For the description of “borderland children” see Wilkie-Stibbs (2006). She further elaborates on “child-outsidedness” in her book, *The Outside Child In and Out of the Book* (2008), formulating it as “an alterity inscribed into narratives about children located at the margins” of society, ideology, or a system of values” (9).

their parents or siblings and sent to orphanages. Some children never reached their evacuation destinations and died on the way there either from diseases, severe cold, or in bombings. Autobiographical accounts of people who survived evacuation in their childhood frequently relay memories of separation from or loss of parents, disorientation and fear of getting lost, hunger, cold, and witnessing death and destruction. Particularly vulnerable were young children who did not understand the meaning of war and suffered from physical and psychological deprivations (Potemkina 2010: 230–247).

The image of childhood in *The House with a Turret* is driven by the experience of deep psychological trauma. The uncanny atmosphere that surrounds the young character is introduced directly in the opening sentence of the story: “It was hard for the boy to distinguish faces; they were all alike and they inspired fear in him” (“Mal’chik plokhо razlichal litsa, oni byli vse odinakovy i vnushali emu strakh”). (Gorenshtein 1992: 5)¹¹. He can no

¹¹ All quotations from *The House with a Turret* are in my translation. For a full translation of this story, see Fridrikh Gorenshtein 2011.

longer see things as they are but rather as they appear to him in their strangeness and unfamiliarity. Estrangement haunts him for the rest of the story through sensations, sight, sounds, and dreams. The author's descriptive language vividly captures the boy's strong emotions. Thus, in addition to the visually indistinguishable faces in the opening scene, Gorenshstein depicts the hostile adult world metonymically, through the passengers' voices on the train that cast the boy's mother as disgusting and undesirable: "We'll suffocate here, it's like a gas chamber. She keeps soiling herself... And we have children here" ("My zadokhnemisia zdes', kak v dushegubke. Ona vse vremia khodit pod sebia... V kontse kontsov, zdes' deti...") (Gorenshstein 1992: 5). Then somebody else comments on the mother's "horrible voice" ("uzhasnyi golos") (Gorenshstein 1992: 5) when she sings something in delirium. The fear of losing his mother keeps the boy awake and makes him vehemently defensive against the passengers' unkind and spiteful comments. His mother also appears to him in a new frightening light as she lies in her own body fluids and excrement, smelly, feverish, uncontrollably smiling or

singing. When she is finally carried out of the train car, her weakness, indifference, and inability to communicate intensifies the uncanniness of the situation for the boy. In Freudian formulation, the uncanny emerges from the transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. Familiar things can suddenly become shocking, extraordinary, ghastly, sinister, disturbing, gruesome, disconcerting, uneasy, eerie, hidden, or dangerous. Freud uses a wide range of adjectives to describe the numerous nuances of the uncanny, but most importantly, he explains that the uncanny lies within the person's individual perceptions – not in the external world. Freud suggests that "the better oriented . . . [a person – L.R.] is in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny" (Freud 2003: 125). But for young children who can barely make sense of a world transformed by war, rationalizing dramatic events is even more difficult than for adults. The boy in Gorenshstein's story never saw death before the war and is horrified when a random adolescent at the train station sees his mother on a stretcher and inquires if she is already dead. Since the

boy is incapable of “orienting himself in the world” and separating the unfamiliar from the familiar, the uncanny seems to be omnipresent and unstoppable for him.

The uncanny is closely connected with cross-writing. Lee A. Tally theorizes that the uncanny contains the intermingling of “past and present selves: the earlier self learns about X and represses that knowledge; its return reminds the present self of his/her former knowledge”. Revisiting the uncanny past therefore signifies one’s belief that “she had outgrown a more primitive state” (Tally 2013: 240). This mechanism of “negotiating of past and present selves that defines cross-writing” (Tally 2013: 240) is strikingly similar to the cross-writing technique of autofiction (Tally 2013: 240). Gorenshtein’s story is a vivid illustration of Tally’s theorizing about the ability of the present authorial self to process the physical and psychological reaction of his younger self to the uncanny. Several times in the story, Gorenshtein’s autofictional narrator recalls how his younger self encountered death and how he gradually learned to recognize it. Early in the story, the boy enters the first-aid clinic at the train sta-

tion and sees somebody’s motionless body stretched out on the bench. Consumed by fear, he “swallows hard several times” (“glotnul neskol’ko raz tiazhelo”), but then suddenly sees “a hand with blue fingernails” (“ruka s sinimi nogtiami”) and, with relief, realizes that it cannot belong to his mother (Gorenshtein 1992: 7). For the boy, death is now associated with immobility and color. When he reaches the hospital and finds his mother, he himself is promptly hospitalized because of his fever. Lying just a couple of beds away from his mother, he cannot sleep and keeps anxiously checking whether she is still moving and breathing. The range of the boy’s anxiety is relayed linguistically, by repeatedly contrasting movement (“shevelit’sia”/to move) and immobility (“lezhala navznich”/lay flat on her back) without movement (Gorenshtein 1992: 11–12). When his mother dies, the uncanny image of death associated by him with color and immobility returns: “He kept looking at the motionless lump under the blanket and felt some strange indifference” (“On smotrel na nepodvizhnyi teper’ bugor, ukrytyi odeialom, i strannoe bezrazlichie, kakoe-to strannoe

spokoistvie ovladelo im”) (Gorenshtein 1992: 12). In a state of shock, his eyes are fixated on his mother’s “yellow foot and her naked belly” (“zheltaia noga i golyi zhivot”) (Gorenshtein 1992: 12). The adult narrator reflects on the boy’s intermingling thoughts: on the one hand, he immediately imagines that his mother will meet him at the platform when he arrives in his city, on the other hand, “He wasn’t a little boy anymore and understood that his mother had died” (“On byl uzhe ne malen’kii i ponimal, chto mat’ ego umerla”) (Gorenshtein 1992: 13). In a state of severe distress, he mechanically collects his mother’s clothing and money and monosyllabically answers the nurse’s bureaucratic questions. Although his traumatic experience makes him grow, he still cannot fully grasp the reality of his mother’s death and, in his day-dreaming, sees her alive and invents a myth of her fighting the war with the partisans, i.e., “projecting a dream onto reality” as a nine-year old would (Hetényi 2000: 144).

Gorenshtein intensifies our understanding of the boy’s loneliness and outsidership through the construction of space. While the young charac-

ter comforts himself by inventing a space where his partisan mother is fighting the enemy, the real space overwhelms and frightens him. The child’s perception of space is radically different from that of adults and is introduced in the story through the “relativity of size” or “the dialectics of large and small”, as Gaston Bachelard would put it (Bachelard 1994: 38). The dialectics of large and small increases the reader’s perception of the character’s fragility and vulnerability. For instance, the boy’s small size and light weight (at the hospital, the nurse easily lifts him to change his clothes) disadvantage him everywhere: at the post office, the door is too heavy, and then finding the right window to send a telegram is nearly impossible because adults block his view of the window and tell him not to get in the way. At the railway station, he gets easily swallowed by a crowd of passengers and bumped from all sides. At the bus stop, he gets in line first “behind a fur jacket with fur buttons on the back strap” and then “behind a greatcoat with a pinned-up empty sleeve” (Gorenshtein 1992: 7). What meets the eye of the boy is a faceless mass of fur jackets, greatcoats, leather coats, or

some other winter clothing. Gorenshtein abundantly employs indefinite pronouns to convey the boy's intense emotional perception of people and his fuzzy vision of them: "some guy" (*kakoi-to paren'*), "some passerby" (*kakoi-to prokhozhi*), an angry nurse appears from "somewhere" (*otkuda-to*), someone takes him by the hand ("*kto-to vzial mal'chika za ruku*"), he becomes feverish somehow (*pochemu-to*), some women (*kakie-to zhenshchiny*) are sitting in the corridor, some leather coat (*kakoe-to kozhanoe pal'to*) stands in front of him. However, when he actually sees adult faces, they appear to him as uncanny images or masks. The kind doctor examining him at the hospital is described metonymically, as a "gown covered by yellow spots" (*khalat ves' v zheltykh piatnakh*), one spot resembles a bug ("*piatno, pokhozhee na zhuka*"), and the other, resembles a turtle with a long neck ("*cherepakha s dlinnoi shei*") (Gorenshtein 1992: 14). The boy's hapless protector on the train, a drunk invalid with an amputated arm and a wooden prosthesis instead of a leg, is similarly strange and uncanny. Through the child's eyes, his badly shaven face, yellow

teeth, bad smell, and incomplete body turn him into a horrifying figure.

The "child's narrow optic" allows the boy to see a multitude of insignificant details (he loses a fish, his only meal for the day; misses his bus; forgets to pick up his belongings) but prevents him from noticing human cruelty and indecency (Hetényi 2000: 143). It is not accidental that the very image of the house with a turret appears in the story six times – although it has nothing to do with the story itself. As Hetényi suggests, "the house with a turret" falls into the "child's narrow optic" and serves as an allegory of the boy's romanticized vision of the peaceful times before the war (Hetényi 2000: 144). The words "house" and "little turret" (Gorenshtein uses the diminutive form "*bashenka*", as the child would call it, rather than the "adult" word "*bashnia*") stress the homelessness and orphanhood of the boy and imply that the surrounding world is "unfit for the child" (Hetényi 2000: 144). In the story, the boy is trapped in endless, hostile public spaces through which people transition without making attachments: trains, a railway station, a first-aid room, a hospital, a post-office, streets, landscapes

disfigured by war, with ruins, black ravens on white snow, burned-down houses, destroyed tanks and overturned trucks. There is no doubt that the memory of these places belongs to the adult self of the narrator because the boy in the story “could not see anything properly” (“nichego ne mog rassmotret’ kak sleduet” (Gorenshtein 1992: 20).

Gorenshtein masterfully cross-writes the “child’s narrow optic” in reference to the boy’s judgments of people and situations. Making sense of who is a friend and who is an enemy is perhaps the most challenging test he has to go through on his own. His naiveté and desperate desire for protection make him an easy victim of scheming adults. When the boy asks a man in a leather coat to validate his train ticket, he receives only a blank look and then a threat in response, yet his “luck” unexpectedly changes when the man sees the boy’s mother’s death certificate and realizes that he could benefit from presenting himself to the railroad authorities as the orphan’s chaperone. Very quickly he receives tickets not only for the boy but also for himself, his wife, and his little son. While the boy is grateful to the “uncle” (diadia)

who promises to the station official to deliver his young fellow-countryman home – like “his own son” (“kak rodnogo syna”) (Gorenshtein 1992: 14), the adult narrator draws attention to the uncanny twist of events. From now on, the “kind uncle” and his mean wife – whom the boy calls simply “the woman with curly hair” (“kudriavaia zhenshchina”) (Gorenshtein 1992: 15) – will manipulate the boy. The narrating present self interprets what his younger self could not process: in the time of human misery, the uncle and his wife wear expensive leather coats, transport big suitcases, and have plenty of money to buy food for themselves. The boy does not understand why the invalid confronts the uncle for not being at the front and why the uncle tolerates his rude behavior. Neither does the boy see any problem when the “woman with curly hair” appropriates his money.

Whenever the young boy sees kindness, the adult narrator reveals injustice that is reflected in language and imagery. Thus, Gorenshtein’s own childhood experience of suffering from hunger during the war becomes a theme in the

story¹². Food is associated with home and comfort, but an orphan is deprived of both. Since he never had to get food before the death of his mother, he has to learn how to provide for himself. Initially, he is so distracted and sick that hunger is still not a fixation, but back on the train, he begins to dream about food. Watching how ‘the woman with curly hair’ feeds her son with condensed milk, the boy begins to fantasize how enjoyable it would be to eat, smack, and lick it from a spoon. The hunger torture continues when “the uncle” brings fresh food to the compartment and begins to unpack it. The boy imagines how potatoes, bread, and pickles must taste and how – if he could have them – he would savor every piece. When the uncle gives him some food, the boy is so overcome by gratitude that he gives his ‘benefactor’ his last treasure, “a cut of brown cloth that smelled of naphthalene” (“pakhnushchii navtalinom korichnevyi otrez”) so that the uncle could sew himself a suit (Gorenshtein 1992: 20). Right at this moment an old man in a pince-nez and a short torn cardigan comes by and makes

¹² For the role of food in Gorenshtein’s work, see Bel’skaia 2011.

perhaps the most moral pronouncement in the story: “In such a tragic time, it is hard to be an adult . . . In general, it is hard to be a human being ...” (“V takoe tragichnoe vremia ... trudno byt’ vzroslym chelovekom ... Trudno byt’ voobshche chelovekom” (Gorenshtein 1992: 20). The uncle is outraged and throws the old man out of the compartment, which causes the boy to think: “Good uncle, he chased away the old man” (“Khoroshii diadia, prognal starika”). (Gorenshtein 1992: 20). This episode reveals the contrast between the boy’s erring judgment of the “kind uncle” – his surrogate father – and the older author’s moral distillation of the child’s perspective.

Perhaps the most intense aspect of the story is the boy’s psychological suffering after the death of his mother that cross-writing illuminates through language and silence. Children depend on adults for their protection and need-fulfillment, and this is the reason why subordination in their relationship is essential. But when the child loses his/her parents, he/she descends into the state of abjection, with no rights or privileges. Wilkie-Stibbs argues that one of the important manifestations of

parental authority is language that empowers the child and gives him/her agency. The loss or lack of language “marks out the subject as powerless, silent or silenced, by extension ‘feminized’, and as a potential victim to be exploited, expunged, exterminated” (Wilkie-Stibbs 2006: 329). Since the child does not have the linguistic skills of an adult, he/she becomes “significantly silent” and “lacking agency”: “Loss of language is the symptom of the abject status ... Loss of language makes ... [children] into non-subjects ...” (Wilkie-Stibbs 2006: 330). In the lives of orphans and other ‘borderlanders,’ “the abuse of power is incorporated into the very fabric of their bodily existence to bring them to the ‘no-place,’ that is also ‘the nothing’ of identity (Wilkie-Stibbs 2006: 331).

In *The House with a Turret* there are numerous cross-written instances of the young character’s loss of agency depicted through his awkward language or silence. In fact, after his mother’s death he rarely speaks, and his utterances are reduced to laconic, awkward phrases. He is caught up in a psychologically and verbally abusive situation controlled by the “woman with curly hair”. In the eyes of the child, she is an

ever-present threat to his life because she can throw him out of the train and he would be alone again. The fear of abandonment intensifies his anxiety and paralyzes his speech. Soon psychological oppression triggers a physical reaction in his body, and he endures bouts of pain in the chest, head, between his eyebrows, and ringing in his ears. Gorenshtein’s change of vision from the boy’s world to the adult’s evaluation of it is again cross-written. The narrative focus constantly shifts from the boy’s thoughts and sensations to the larger context, as the present narrator’s self reconstructs it. First, the boy is hastened to the upper berth where he is forced to lie in darkness, in an uncomfortable curled position because the “uncle” places his suitcases at his feet. Next, the “woman with curly hair” sends him to hold a spot for her in the long line to the toilet. She keeps reminding him that his mother is dead, publicly humiliates him for lying to the old man that his mother was still alive. Then, back in the compartment, she again scolds him for lying, for smiling to his own thoughts, and for crying when he cuts his finger. Her language is rude and aggressive as she continues to shut him

up: “Keep quiet, you idiot... you are a freeloader who is stuck to us” (“Ty durak, molchi... Pribludilsia na nashu sheiu”). (Gorenshtein 1992: 19). A weak attempt by the boy to defend himself comes out pathetic: “I don’t cry... When the uncle comes I’ll tell him what you are saying about me” (“Ia ne revu... a kogda diadia pridet, ia rasskazhu emu, kak vy na menia govorite”). (Gorenshtein 1992: 19). It is only when the “uncle” and his family suddenly hurry out of the compartment, leaving the boy behind that he raises his voice in hopeless despair: “Uncle, wait!” (“Dydia, podozhdite!”) (Gorenshtein 1992: 23). But his plea remains unheard. From the narrator’s perspective, for the “uncle” and his wife – a couple representing Soviet middle class values – the boy is a borderlander, the unwanted other – in contrast to their own young child whom they cherish – who does not fit into mainstream, normative life and can easily be disposed of. First, they symbolically marginalize him by giving him a tiny physical space on the upper berth, then driving him to silence, and finally, ‘erasing’ him all together.

In his article on trauma and memory, Sergei Ushakin di-

vides trauma into two categories: trauma as a loss and trauma as a plot. In the latter case, when trauma is narrated through the facts of individual or collective biography, it “acquires the status of authorial position from which he represents the past and perceives the present” (Ushakin 2009: 9). In a sense, what Ushakin describes is similar to cross-writing in autofiction in which trauma is projected through a dialogic interaction of the older and younger selves of the narrator. In the context of Gorenshtein’s story, the mix of these voices accomplishes a dual task: first, it draws attention to the conditions of abjection and marginalization of children; second, it brings specific historical circumstances into the picture. As Ushakin writes in his study, “biography and identity become impossible *outside* of the history of the experienced trauma” (Ushakin 2009: 9). Although Gorenshtein’s heartbreaking portrayal of trauma in the story is personal, it also principally challenges the myth of happy childhood in the country that guarantees equal care and protection for every child. Contrary to this myth, Gorenshtein’s young hero “experiences a collapse of his childish image of

the world as a kingdom of harmony and goodness. Everywhere he encounters indifference, hostility, and cynicism. A ruthless river of life carries him like a twig... into

the depths of a whirlpool” (Lazarev 1991: 6).

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