“They Drink Tea”: Everyday Loneliness and the Poetics of Place in Russophone American Short Stories (The Cases of Nina Berberova and Olga Zilberbourg)

by

Lina Turygina

A thesis accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Jenifer Presto, Chair

Dr. Katya Hokanson, Member

University of Oregon

Spring 2025

THESIS ABSTRACT

Lina Turygina

Master of Arts in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies

Title: “They Drink Tea”: Everyday Loneliness and the Poetics of Place in Russophone American Short Stories (The Cases of Nina Berberova and Olga Zilberbourg)

This thesis examines the short fiction of Russian-born writers Nina Berberova (1901-1993) and Olga Zilberbourg (1979-) to explore how female émigré and immigrant authors articulate displacement through the motifs of loneliness, memory, and space. Though separated by time and geography, both writers reimagine the short story as a vessel for negotiating fractured identities and the emotional topography of migration. Drawing on literary anthropology, semiotic theory, and reader-response criticism, I argue that the short story’s formal properties—brevity, ambiguity, and fragmentation – mirror the epistemic structures of exile. Berberova’s final American stories distill the Russian literary tradition into sparse, elegiac forms, while Zilberbourg reconfigures émigré poetics for a 21st-century context, navigating linguistic hybridity and cultural in-betweenness. In their narratives, both authors resist assimilationist tropes and articulate survival as a creative, recursive act of authorship. Ultimately, their work reveals how literature written from dislocation does not seek to resolve the problems of exile, but to dwell in exilic complexity – and to speak from within it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Roland Barthes once proclaimed the death of the author and the birth of the scriptor. I resented this idea during my college years – and then I grew up. I now understand that I am merely a scriptor of ideas shaped by midnight epiphanies and the gibberish of conversation, by love, by exile, by friendship, by tea. This thesis is not mine alone.

Nessie, you are one of the best things that has happened to me in all my twenty-four years. There would be no master's degree, no thesis, no thought-process if there were no you.

To my dear students: thank you for obediently laughing at my jokes, enduring my stand-up routines about Russian literature, and turning even the worst days into the best ones. You reminded me why I do this.

Dr. Jenifer Presto, thank you for being the best academic mom I could have hoped for: rigorous, generous, honest, and fiercely kind. Lara Ravitch, you are the best boss, mentor, and friend I've ever had. Working with you has shaped me more than any course or textbook could. Dr. Viktor Dimitriev, with whose guidance it all – absolutely all – began. I am forever grateful for your wisdom, care, and belief in me.

Женя, continents and oceans may separate us, but I feel your support in every moment I want to give up. Your voice lives in my head, steady and unshakeable. Zhenya, our friendship is still virtual (for now), but real and strong. You've read everything, struggled through all my drafts, added every missing article (the grammatical kind), and somehow always left a warmhearted comment in between. I could not ask for a better academic big sister.

Anya and Nastya – the original support group. It all started with you. No matter how far we drift, I carry you both with me. Sonya, your inexhaustible light saved me during the darkest times. Thank you for shining.

I am deeply grateful to the REEES Department at the University of Oregon, and to Dr. Katya Hokanson and Dr. Susanna Lim for their support, encouragement, and patience throughout

these challenging years. I also cannot leave unmentioned the Yamada Language Center and all the care and generosity I received there over the years – your presence made all the difference.

I am deeply grateful to the REEES Department at the University of Oregon, and to Dr. Katya Hokanson and Dr. Susanna Lim for their support, encouragement, and patience throughout these challenging years. A special thanks to our amazing Slavic librarian Heghine Hakobyan, whose energetic approach is always contagious. Thank you for tracking down books not only for my research, but also for my side obsessions – from German philosophy to crocheting houseplants. This journey would not have turned out nearly as gently or warmly without Julia Nemirovskaya, who was always ready to either feed or hug me – or, more often, both. I also cannot leave unmentioned the Yamada Language Center and all the care and generosity I received there over the years – your presence made all the difference.

To the students of the basement – our communal apartment in Friendly Hall – thank you for tolerating my messy desk, for witnessing all my crying, screaming, laughing, student-impression-mocking, and near-constant snacking. Thank you for your help with laptops and printers. You reminded me I wasn't alone. And to the Comparative Literature graduate students – thank you for the hallway and bar conversations, the curiosity about my work, the encouragement disguised as casual chit-chat.

Last but not least, C. – you kept bringing me coffee and snacks when all I wanted was to become a blanket burrito and disappear. You insisted that it all made sense, when I doubted every sentence. You made me keep going. And I did.

DEDICATION

For those who stayed when I disappeared into the abyss and footnotes.

For the women who write between languages, across silences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Returning to campus after spring break, Sonya, the protagonist of Olga Zilberbourg's short story "Graduate School," begins sorting through the emails that have piled up in her inbox. One message reports the sudden death of a faculty member whose body was found in the Humanities building. Apparently, the professor had come in during the break and succumbed to natural causes. After briefly reflecting on the news, Sonya arrives at the conclusion: "Debra Polk's death was Debra Polk's death, and was it so bad? Lots of people died doing their jobs, the jobs that they loved. Sonya's life was Sonya's life. She and Debra Polk had little in common," the author notes (Zilberbourg 2019, 14). And yet, they turn out to be on the same page, at least in Zilberbourg's story.

In this master's thesis I am also discussing two women who, at first glance, seem to have little in common. But that's one of the beauties of the humanities: the ability to discover shared ground. Thus, I argue that both authors, though separated by time and context, share a literary approach to the emotional landscape of émigré existence, mediated by common motifs.

The first motif is loneliness that drives one mad or, conversely, provides room for creative endeavors (which may or may not be considered a form of madness). Loneliness is intimately connected to the experience of leaving one's birth or childhood place behind, abandoning everything once known and learning to navigate a new environment from scratch. The second motif is memory, which serves as an instrument for trespassing space and time. Longing for a past or an imagined alternative life finds its way in both émigré and immigrant narratives, even as they often follow divergent trajectories. While émigré writing tends to lament the loss of homeland, immigrant literature focuses more on adaptation and degrees of integration into a new society. When memory becomes a technique in these narratives, it weaves together disparate timelines, forming a cohesive continuum that captures the émigré or immigrant experience. The third and final motif is spatial configuration or topos – the trope

used by Berberova and Zilberbourg to fulfill the urge of portraying common places. In a situation of displacement and stagnant uprooting, specific geographical places turn into anchors between reality and its literary adaptation.

My first chapter lays the theoretical foundation for this study. I explore the concept of topos through Yurii Lotman's semiotic lens, emphasizing space as an active element in literature. The chapter then examines the short story's evolution as a genre adept at portraying themes of exile and fragmentation, drawing insights from scholars like Mary Rohrberger, Charles May, Florence Goyet, and Michelle Pacht. I discuss the genre's connections to myth and oral traditions, highlighting its role in expressing the complexities of displaced identities. Finally, I position female émigré/immigrant authors, such as Nina Berberova and Olga Zilberbourg, within this framework, illustrating how their short fiction encapsulates the spatial, formal, and emotional nuances of displacement.

The primary sources for my study are, respectively, the last and the first works of fiction produced by the two authors. Chapter 2 focuses on three of Nina Berberova's short stories written in the United States, which mark the end of her known prose career. No additional fiction by Berberova is known to have been published after these texts. Of the five subsections, four are devoted to each story in chronological order: The first of these is the nearly forgotten, exceptionally brief story "The Big City" (1953), "In Memory of Schlimann" (1958), "The Thinking Reed" (1958), and "The Black Pestilence" (1959). The final section examines the issue of adaptation and Berberova's search for an appropriate artistic form. She addressed this challenge through rewriting across genres – a strategy she employed just before withdrawing from the literary scene.

The third chapter explores Olga Zilberbourg's first collection of short stories written in English. These stories reflect both continuity and transformation in the immigrant identity across generations. Tellingly, and in keeping with the transient nature of émigré/immigrant

experience, the collection includes original stories in English, translated and revised works previously published in Russian, and texts that, though initially composed in Russian, first appeared in English. Mirroring the structure of the previous chapter, the three subsections focus on the representation of key motifs across the collection: loneliness, longing, and topoi. The final section examines cross-linguistic adaptation – not only within the texts themselves, but also in the self-presentation of the author.

Though this thesis presents two distinct case studies, Berberova and Zilberbourg ultimately write from positions shaped by the absence of rooted identity, navigating an unstable – and at times self-effacing – resilience born of displacement. Yet through this condition, this shared vantage point, they carve out a narrative space where survival itself becomes a creative act – a form of authorship articulated through a patchwork of émigré identity.

CHAPTER 1. LAYING THE THEORETICAL GROUNDS

This chapter establishes the conceptual and theoretical framework for analyzing Russophone émigré short stories, particularly those written by women. I begin by unpacking the spatial category of topos, drawing on Yurii Lotman's semiotic theory to propose that space in literature is not merely a backdrop, but an active participant in the emotional and cultural lives of characters. I then situate the short story as a uniquely fitting genre for narratives of exile and fragmentation, tracing its development through Russian, American, and global literary traditions. I outline how the short story and the short story cycle emerged as flexible forms capable of containing multiple, sometimes conflicting, voices and identities. I also explore the genre's affinities with myth and oral tradition, and how these affinities inform the storytelling strategies of displaced writers. Finally, I turn to Nina Berberova and Olga Zilberbourg. Their use of the short story form – brief, open-ended, and structurally fragmented – mirrors the fractured subjectivities and evolving mythologies of émigré life. In this way, I argue that spatial and formal considerations cannot be separated from the broader cultural work these texts perform.

Before the word "topos" starts sounding like an incantation rather than a literary concept, let me unpack its meaning. Topos indeed is a confusing term. Writing a critical overview of its history, Andrei Stepanov follows the phenomenological method of Ernst Robert Curtius, who introduced the term to literary studies (see Stepanov 2018). This understanding of topos, as Aleksei Losev rightfully noticed, positions "topos" too close to other broad and therefore problematic literary terms such as "symbol," "imagery," "metaphor," et cetera (Stepanov 2018, 42). Instead, I turn to the semiotic approach of Yurii Lotman's programmatic work "The Structure of the Artistic Text" (1970). While Lotman avoids a direct definition of a topos, he nonetheless makes it clear that topos is a spatial category: "The whole spatial continuum of a text in which the world of the object is reflected forms a certain topos." (Lotman

1977, 231). Thus, in this paper "topos" refers to a certain space represented through a set of narrative techniques, which produce a system of spatial relations – the space of characters' lives (Ibid). As a cognitive shorthand, topos provides not just a location but a coherent image, puzzled out of the whirl of associations.

In the compressed form of the short story, topos functions as a crucial cognitive anchor, enabling authors to evoke complex emotional and cultural landscapes with minimal exposition. As a genre, the short story is particularly well-suited to narratives of displacement – not only because of its formal economy, but also due to its own marginal status within the literary canon. Long considered a "lesser" genre compared to the novel, the short story occupies a liminal space that mirrors the condition of exile itself. Ironically, it was the long nineteenth century that gave rise to this brief yet potent form – one that would fully flourish during the short century that Eric Hobsbawm (1994) has called "the age of extremes."

To frame the discussion that follows, I will outline several major contributions to the study of the short story genre, the short story cycle, and émigré literature, highlighting intersections that have often gone unnoticed. As I partially focus on geographical settings, I predominantly draw on American scholarship on the short story, as my primary sources emerged within the American literary scene.

In the context of Russian literature, discussions of short fiction inevitably bring to mind the name of Anton Chekhov. In the Anglophone tradition, Nathaniel Hawthorne is widely acknowledged as the father of the modern short story. Mary Rohrberger's *Hawthorne and the Modern Short Story: A Study in Genre* (1966) is one of the first major scholarly works dedicated to short fiction. Although focused primarily on Hawthorne's role in shaping the genre, Rohrberger immediately pointed out the contested origins of the form: "Some scholars feel that the Russian Nikolai Gogol was the first great practitioner of the short story; others feel that it had its real beginnings in American literature" (Rohrberger 1966, 10). The shared cultural

conditions of nineteenth-century Russian and American literature – particularly through the figures of Gogol and Hawthorne – are explored in Anne Lounsbery's *Thin Culture, High Art: Gogol, Hawthorne, and Authorship in Nineteenth-Century Russia and America* (2007). While Lounsbery focuses primarily on the authors' novels and their parallel efforts to construct national literary identities, a comprehensive scholarly account of the tension between Russian and American short story traditions remains largely undeveloped.

Although early scholarship mostly focused on discussing the short story through the lens of national literature, the genre itself outgrew any national framework way before it began to be studied. As the research on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century short story spread and flourished across different literary traditions, it became increasingly clear that the short story goes way beyond any national model. Seeking to fill this gap in the study of world literature, Florence Goyet turned her attention to the short story at the height of its international expansion.

"As a global study of the classic form was still missing," Goyet "undertook to concentrate on the short story at this time of its greatest efflorescence" (Goyet 2014, 5). In her major research, titled *The Classic Short Story, 1870-1925: Theory of a Genre*, Goyet considered around a thousand short stories across countries and languages. In contrast to many preceding works, the main question she pursued was not on the definition of the short story, which "many critics have stressed would not be very interesting, even if it were possible" (Goyet 2014, 6). Goyet was after the "classic" essence of the short story: "It was a question of describing the tools of brevity in this particular form, and the relationship between the reader, the author, and the spectacle that one puts before the other" (Ibid). Looking into short stories from France, Russia, Italy, the United States, and Japan, Goyet formulated a set of almost universal genre characteristics.

"The main feature of the genre is its *monologism* – only the author (or narrator) has a full and autonomous voice, whereas the characters in all their 'otherness' are put at a distance" (Goyet 2014, 9). Monologue, in its turn, is only a fragment, according to Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic nature of speech genres (see Bakhtin 1981). In this sense, the short story's reliance on a fragmented, monologic structure closely resonates with the experiences of displaced authors, considered in my paper. For émigré/immigrant writers, whose identities are almost inevitably fractured across languages, cultures, and geographies, the short story offers a form that mirrors their own fragmented sense of self. Rather than presenting a fully coherent world, the genre captures isolated moments, voices, and perspectives – much like the scattered narratives of exile and immigration.

Before turning to theories specific to émigré literature, it is important to acknowledge a few other critical studies that have shaped short story theory. Despite disagreements among scholars about the precise features of the genre, one recurring observation is the short story's structural and thematic closeness to myths and legends. Ten years after Rohrberger's study on Hawthorne, Charles E. May described the short story as "mythical and spiritual" in the essay collection *Short Story Theory*, first published in 1976 (May 1994, 133). Over the following decades, May continued to explore the genre's distinctiveness, publishing studies on Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction and revising his own earlier work in collaboration with other scholars. May's monograph *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (2002) presents a selective chronology of the genre's development since the nineteenth century, while *"I Am Your Brother": Short Story Studies* (2013) offers a more accessible overview of the short story's form, its divergence from the novel, and its central motifs. Significantly, in his later work, May explicitly identifies myth as the origin and essential foundation of the short story.

This emphasis on the genre's mythic underpinnings is echoed in the introduction to a volume of the journal *Narrative*, where Per Winther, Michael Trussler, Michael Toolan,

Charles E. May, and Susan Lohafer trace the critical discourse surrounding short fiction from Poe's essentialist views to contemporary theories. While noting the historical marginalization of the short story as the "little brother" to the novel, they highlight its unique narrative strategies and readerly effects. The shift from defining what a short story is to exploring what it does further underscores the form's capacity to evoke profound human experiences – a quality rooted in its enduring connection to myth.

Though mythical narratives bring us back to American soil. Building on the short story's inherent capacity for fragmentation and resonance, scholars developed the American short story cycle as a way to extend and deepen the form's narrative possibilities. Evidently, geographical location of both writers and stories plays a formative role, as Michelle Pacht shows in her monograph *The Subversive Storyteller: The Short Story Cycle and the Politics of Identity in America* (2009). Pacht analyzes how the short story cycle is utilized to explore subversive themes while navigating the literary marketplace. The author argues that the short story cycle, distinct from mere collections, allows for thematic cohesion and deeper exploration of identity, reflecting the fragmented nature of American society. "Story cycles are made up of elements often called text-pieces, a term that applies to any component of the larger text, including poems, quotations, fragments, and, of course, short stories. While story collections or miscellanies permit rearrangement of these component parts, the text-pieces of a short story cycle require a certain sequence in order for the larger text to achieve its desired effect" (Pacht 2009, 3). The difference between a collection and a short story cycle could be seen as rhetorical rather than strictly definable. Nevertheless, the short story cycle is capable of bringing together fragmented and multifaceted cultural experiences within displaced narratives, which makes this distinction instrumental in the framework I adopt in this study.

In his study, James Nagel – author of *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* – focuses on the story as the basic unit of the cycle, once again

linking it to myth: it "is a far more ancient and fundamental narrative unit, more closely linked to the oral tradition than the extended narrative line of the traditional novel" (Nagel 2001, 3). Nagel's approach to relationships among stories within a short-story cycle allows, albeit unconventionally, for the inclusion of works by Berberova and Zilberbourg under this generic umbrella. In agreement with Ian Reid, Nagel identifies two primary methods for organizing individual stories into a unified narrative: internal linking and external framing (Reid 1977, 30–33). Following the first model, three of Berberova's short stories – although originally published in different venues – suggest connections through recurring characters and overlapping geographic settings. Here, the flexible and slightly blurred definition of the short story cycle proves particularly useful. As Pacht notes, "authors create a rhythm for the reader through the placement of the various elements, juxtaposing text-pieces to produce a particular effect and using the contrast between them to help convey their point" (Pacht 2009, 3). In Zilberbourg's case, the collection's external framing speaks for itself. Yet her stories interlock structurally and thematically, producing a unified experience for the reader.

Myths originating in the ancient oral tradition were designed to construct narrative models of the world and its everyday life (see Meletinskii 1988). Mirroring this structure, émigré communities – as they resettled across various countries following the Russian Civil War – began generating their own myths to aid adaptation to their new conditions. The myth-making of early twentieth-century émigré society has been the subject of substantial scholarly attention. Leonid Livak examined the notion of émigré literature's isolation from European culture, tracing the influence of French modernism on the so-called "unnoticed generation" (see Livak 2003). Irina Kaspe explored the construction of generational models, while Annick Morard reinterpreted the rhetoric of young émigrés as a conscious "detachment from the roots." Maria Rubins, in turn, situated émigré literature within a transnational framework shaped by both Russian and non-Russian Montparnasse (2017, 17). However, following the dispersal of

émigré communities after the Second World War, these myth-making processes became more difficult to trace, as networks fragmented and cultural narratives grew more decentralized.

Yet myth-making did not vanish in the wake of displacement; rather, it found new forms. I argue that the short story – with its brevity, intensity, and openness to ambiguity – became an unnoticed yet powerful vehicle for this process. In particular, women writers in emigration use narrative to process their dislocation and fractured identities. They turn to this marginal genre precisely because it accommodates fragmented realities, allowing for the layering of recurring motifs across different temporal, cultural, and social contexts, and blending multiple literary traditions into a unified yet fractured form.

In my interview with Olga Zilberbourg, she remarked, "Russian literature is its own thing in America." She was referring to the tradition of studying Russian literature in the United States – a field shaped by more than a century of academic development. Yet I found myself returning to her phrasing with a different interpretation: what if Russophone literature produced in America is an inherently distinct phenomenon? This question led me to notice that the overlap between Zilberbourg and Nina Berberova lies not only in their geographical trajectories but also in the genre they both adopt – and, crucially, in their shared gender. As an émigré researcher in emigration, the subject became not only intellectually compelling but deeply personal. Why compare two women writers separated by nearly a century, seemingly linked only by a common place of birth? On a more personal note, all three of us were born in the same city – though arguably in three different countries (the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and post-Soviet Russia). So why draw these connections? Perhaps the better question is: why not?

Female émigré literature beyond the well-studied context of interwar Russian Paris remains so overlooked that one could begin almost anywhere. I begin with a brief biographical comparison. Nina Berberova emigrated from Petrograd in 1922, while Olga Zilberbourg left

Leningrad seventy years later. Although Berberova famously stated that she had chosen life over art, at the end she remained unmarried (a green card marriage to a queer fellow émigré does not quite count) and childless – a fact that shaped both her independence and literary identity. In contrast, for Zilberbourg, motherhood becomes a central force in her creative development. While Berberova maintained her émigré identity throughout her life, Zilberbourg distances herself from that narrative, describing her presence in the United States, in her own words, as "like any other immigrant."

While their biographies at times shape their narratives in markedly different ways, both authors employ similar narrative strategies. They emphasize shared motifs of loneliness, displacement, and cultural in-betweenness – all framed through the flexible form of the short story. In the artist's statement that precedes Zilberbourg's first English-language collection, she writes: "Typically, we think of published stories as 'finished' – but, as most writers know, a 'finished' story is a kind of fiction. In the process of maintaining a dual, bicultural identity, the artist never fully adapts, never fully belongs, never stops becoming" (Zilberbourg 2019, *ix*). It is precisely this state of continual transformation that resists the bulk and closure of the novel and instead finds its ideal expression in the lightweight, adaptable form of the short story.

Another defining feature of these texts is their distinctly urban setting – a choice that is far from incidental. Displacement often begins with physical uprooting, making space the first site where a new sense of belonging must be negotiated. In Berberova's fiction, this takes the shape of isolation, exile, and nostalgia. In Zilberbourg's work, it emerges through hybridity, activism, and shifting identities. As Olivia Laing observes in her exploration of loneliness in the urban landscape, "You can be lonely anywhere, but there is a particular flavour to the loneliness that comes from living in a city" (Laing 2016, 3). In much the same way, both writers use the city not just as a backdrop, but as a charged emotional and cultural terrain – one that refracts the experience of dislocation and transformation.

Having traced the theoretical contours of the short story as a form that uniquely accommodates fragmentation, myth, and spatial complexity, I now turn to one of its most nuanced practitioners: Nina Berberova. Her late short fiction, composed in the United States during the final phase of her literary career, offers a particularly rich site for examining how the short story operates as both a vessel of memory and a response to exile. In the next chapter, I explore how Berberova's prose maps emotional and geographical dislocation onto narrative form, making visible the intersections between place, loss, and literary self-fashioning that would later echo – albeit in transformed ways – in the work of Olga Zilberbourg.

CHAPTER 2. THE THINKING BURDOCK:

THE CASE OF NINA BERBEROVA

Looking across Berberova's body of work and the scholarship on it, one cannot help but wonder why the theme of *adaptation* has not yet been recognized as central to her literary project. Scholars frequently emphasize her pursuit of modernity – so decisively, in fact, that she left behind not only the traditions of the past, but even her first husband, once hailed as the greatest poet of the twentieth century. Her separation from Vladislav Khodasevich is often read as a symbolic break: when he could no longer keep pace with the times, she walked away. This puzzled me for a long time – how could someone so celebrated fall out of step with the present in less than a decade? It turns out, in the spirit of Bakhtin's chronotope, the answer lies not in being outdated, but in the inability to adapt.

In hindsight, Berberova acknowledged the adaptive ethos that guided her life, though she never articulated it quite so directly. This ethos is especially evident in her account of the second stage of her emigration, as narrated in *The Italics Are Mine*: "The entire chain of passive responses to circumstance and active steps that reshaped the fabric of my life culminated in the most important, most meaningful, and most difficult conscious decision I have ever made: to move to the United States" (Berberova 1983, 561; *my translation – L.T.*). Olga Demidova underscores this in her article "The American Experience of Nina Berberova," noting that while many Russian émigrés fled Paris during the 1940s to escape the war, Berberova chose to emigrate five years after the war had ended (Demidova 2007, 11). For many Russian émigrés from Paris, America never became a true homeland; their cultural value system placed Russia at the top, followed by Europe, and only then America – seen as the most distant both geographically and symbolically from Russia. Berberova, however, refused to remain bound by this ossified hierarchy of belonging.

Yet the tension between Berberova's belief in creative transcendence and her prolonged, paradoxical silence upon arriving in the United States reveals deeper questions about the cost of adaptation. Drawing on the case of Stravinsky, Berberova described creativity as a vital human function: "Creative crafting, therefore, is a function of the organism within a given biological and social situation – a situation that, through this function, we can accept, transform, or transcend" (Berberova 1983, 561; *my translation – L.T.*). However, this assertion stands in striking contrast to the biography of her writings. Although she left Europe with Khodasevich's words echoing behind her – "Here I can't, can't, can't either live or write" (Demidova 2007, 12) – Berberova later admitted that she, too, was unable to write during her first years in the United States.

"I don't feel like writing. Maybe that feeling of "it needs to come out of me" will return – but right now, it's not there. And more importantly, I will only pick up the pen if it becomes truly irresistible" she wrote in a letter dated August 29, 1954, to Boris Zaitsev (Bakhmeteff Archive, quoted in Vinokurova 2023, 84, my translation). Alongside these creative struggles, she also lamented the absence of an intellectual circle in which she could feel stimulated – another trace of the adaptive pressures shaping her life and work. Only after securing a position at Yale and re-entering the field of Russian literature did Berberova formally return to the craft of the sentence. This raises a central question about her creative drive: was it adaptability itself – her capacity to remake herself across contexts – or was it the painful, often disorienting process of adaptation that ultimately compelled her to write again?

Like the aforementioned article by Demidova, this chapter explores Nina Berberova's American experience. Both Demidova's work and the recently published first book-length monograph – Irina Vinokurova's *Nina Berberova: Known and Unknown* – contribute primarily biographical insights into Berberova's life. While Vinokurova does not focus extensively on the earlier stages of Berberova's biography, she provides a vivid, detailed reconstruction of the

American period, recovering events and relationships that are absent or only lightly touched upon in *The Italics*.

The present chapter, by contrast, moves beyond biographical reconstruction and the analysis of quasi-biographical materials, focusing instead on Berberova's own narrative articulation of the American experience. Through her final works of fiction, she not only reflects but actively reshapes the complexities of exile, authorship, and adaptation in her late career – articulating, with increasing formal precision, recurring themes of loneliness, longing, and the symbolic function of urban space.

Short and Forgotten: The Very First Very Short American Story

Most of Berberova's short stories fall within the 20–40 page range – a length fairly typical for Russian short fiction. Yet one unusually brief piece (barely ten pages long) has all but vanished from her Russian-language corpus. "Bolshoi gorod" ("The Big City") appeared in 1953 in the émigré journal *Novy Zhurnal*. Based in New York, *Novy Zhurnal* is notably the only émigré journal of its kind to have survived into the present day. Still, its longevity did little to preserve the legacy of this story in the Russophone world: "The Big City" was never reprinted in any Russian-language collection of Berberova's short fiction – not even in those she herself helped compile. In contrast, the story holds a more visible place in the American reception of her corpus. In the foreword to the conversation with Berberova's translator and friend Marian Schwartz, interviewer Janet Phillips refers to "The Big City" as "one of her best-known works from that period" (Lee and Phillips 2021).

This may be Berberova's most overtly American story. Set in an unidentified metropolis (which is unmistakably New York), it follows an unnamed émigré protagonist as he navigates a new, unfamiliar urban environment. Despite its male narrator, the story clearly documents Berberova's own early experiences in New York – moments of quiet vulnerability

she allowed herself to express only through fiction: “It’s a good thing no one could tell that I’d started feeling sorry for myself,” the narrator admits (Berberova 1998a, 101).

In this brief, reflective narrative – part essay, part fictional sketch – Berberova offers not only momentary laments and circumstantial regrets but she also begins to articulate an identity she had not previously assumed: that of an immigrant. “What was even more amazing was that I could not forget for a second that all these millions of women and men – or else their fathers, or their grandfathers – had taken the same journey as I had” (Berberova 1998a, 106). Her protagonist shares this dawning awareness. He begins to domesticate his rented room by painting its walls – a symbolic act of settling in – even as his thoughts remain entangled with memories of his former life in Europe.

But memory is not so easily painted over. “And suddenly, as if in revenge for that thought, I let a fairly long drip that reminded me of the shape of a willow leaf fall on my knee” (Berberova 1998a, 107). From this moment, the story veers into the surreal. The protagonist befriends a neighbor, and through the lens of the neighbor’s mysterious binoculars, he witnesses fragments of his past appear in the illuminated windows of distant skyscrapers – a cityscape transformed into a screen for memory and loss.

The journey through surreal memories and ghostly images ends as smoothly and abruptly as it began. The story closes on a note of quiet hope: “I realized then that every person brings whatever he can to this big city. <...> All this has dissolved on this cape and formed the life I plan to take part in too from now on. With you, who are not here with me but alive in this air I breathe” (Berberova 1998a, 122). This closing gesture aligns with Berberova’s own aspirations during her early years in the United States. Though simple, the story captures the delicate threshold of adaptation – a moment when the past begins to dissolve, and the life lived already starts to blur into something closer to fantasy than memory.

In Memory of Schliemann: Descent into Émigré Madness

Fast forward five years: Berberova's presence in the New York literary scene shifts from backstage to the spotlight. "In Memory of Schliemann" stands out as an unusual piece within Berberova's oeuvre. Begun around 1953 and completed only in early 1958, according to Vinokurova, it is Berberova's sole foray into dystopian fiction (Vinokurova 2023, 96). It was published in the inaugural issue of *Mosty* (*Bridges)* – an émigré almanac based in Germany, for which Berberova, as a member of the editorial board, appears to have done most of the editorial work (Vinokurova 2023, 95). This publication marks the true beginning of her American literary period and stands as her first major fictional work written from the United States.

Strikingly, however, Berberova would later remark in a letter dated February 21, 1959, that the story is "not quite about America" at all. Instead, she noted that "the first thought I had about it came while watching an Italian film, when people on the shore, on a Sunday in Ostia, could barely fit into the sea. America is wide and spacious, and there is plenty of room. There are, of course, 'nightmares' too, but perhaps no worse than the European ones" (*Russkii Mir* 2016, 173–174, my translation).

Why does Berberova feel the need to justify – almost defensively – that this one exceptional story does not reflect her immediate American surroundings? What kind of gap is she attempting to bridge in "In Memory of Schliemann" – historical, psychological, literary? Could this fiction be less about any particular geography and more about a persistent condition of displacement – the unresolved residue of exile that resists being mapped at all?

Rather than viewing it as a creative void, Demidova interprets Berberova's prolonged literary (or rather publishing) silence following her second emigration as a "slow inhabiting of America" – *obretenie Ameriki* (Demidova 2007, 19). During this period, Berberova was far from idle: as her letters show, while learning the language, she immersed herself in English-

language classics and essential readings. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine she did not encounter George Orwell's *1984* – a cornerstone of dystopian fiction. It is no coincidence that 1984 is also the year in which "In Memory of Schliemann" takes place.

The story represents Berberova's attempt to grapple with the consequences of twentieth-century scientific and technological progress, particularly the shift into an era of industrial automation. At its core, the narrative explores a hallmark of dystopian literature: the individual's flight from totalizing systems of control and rigid structures of civilization into the imagined refuge of nature.

The unnamed protagonist, employed at a large institution, embarks on a rare three-day leave from his role as a junior bookkeeper. His direct supervisor is a colossal machine that regulates everything from working hours and salary to who may fall ill or go on vacation. The system is total, and impersonal. So, his modest but long-awaited break feels almost miraculous.

He has been planning this departure for some time, hoping to leave the city with his love interest, Deli. Their brief encounter – just two pages long – evokes another foundational dystopia: Evgeny Zamyatin's *We*. Deli seems to inhabit a middle ground between two of Zamyatin's archetypal women: the rebellious I-330 and the docile, state-assigned partner O-90. Careless enough to be dismissed from her job, Deli lacks the defiance needed to abandon the system entirely. Instead, she accepts a new position, quietly undoing the protagonist's hope of escape.

Berberova also echoes Zamyatin's depiction of regulated intimacy, where "pink tickets" authorize state-sanctioned sexual encounters. In her story, this protocol is replaced by a symbolic gesture: Deli takes the comb out of her hair – a universally understood signal that prompts her roommate to leave them alone (Berberova 1991a, 281). The comb's significance is further underscored by one English-language translation, which retitles the story "The Comb," shifting focus from Schliemann to this intimate token (see Berberova 1991b, 153-195).

Just as in *We*, this pattern is designed to suppress any form of resistance. The gesture feels automatic, mechanical – a reminder that even intimacy has been reduced to routine. What lingers is not closeness, but the protagonist's deepening emotional isolation – and his quiet inability to withstand it.

In search of a fleeting sense of freedom, he boards a bus heading in an unknown direction – alone. The choice of route is solely based on the names of the stations: "Big Fountains," "Blue Shore," "Green Shore." All connected to water, these names suggest a gradual retreat from the urban world, which will be echoed in the aquatic imagery in Zilberbourg's collection. They mark not just a physical journey but an emotional distancing from the rigid structures of the city.

However, according to the laws of genre, the escape from dystopia is ultimately doomed to fail. The protagonist drifts into daydreams, sleep, and possibly hallucinations verging on madness. In the end, he finds himself back where he began, telling Deli the trip was not worth it: "I was telling her that all in there was no point going anywhere, that fountains don't gush, there's no swimming in lakes, there's no room for anyone in the gulfs, but soon all this was going to change" (Berberova 1991a, 308).

Nevertheless, the trip, however futile in practice, initiates a period of introspection, during which the protagonist constructs his own speculative vision of a more just society. Ievheniia Vyshynskaia explores this vision in tandem with the key features that define Berberova's story as dystopian (see Vyshynskaia 2015). She points to several central formal and thematic elements: the individual's conflict with a technocratic, totalitarian regime; the suppression of personal consciousness; the use of satire to expose societal flaws; and the recurring motif of preemptive control. Vyshynskaia also identifies distinct aspects of Berberova's dystopian mode, including a circular and inescapable chronotope, the protagonist's lack of rebellious potential, and society's total submission to a mechanized order

that cultivates apathy and hopelessness. Ultimately, she reads the story as a sharp critique of depersonalized existence and the brutal rationality that governs a dehumanized social world.

The only other scholarly reading of "In Memory of Schliemann" appears in Natasha Grigorian's recent monograph, *Visions of the Future: Malthusian Thought Experiments in Russian Literature (1840–1960)* (2023). While the study focuses primarily on authors such as Vladimir Odoevsky and Alexander Chaianov, Berberova's story is unexpectedly situated within a broader inquiry into how Russian literature has imagined alternative futures.

Grigorian examines the function of counterfactual narratives in addressing social and philosophical concerns, particularly through the prism of Thomas Malthus's theories on population growth. Her analysis suggests that literary thought experiments can both challenge ideological assumptions and reshape readers' perceptions, illustrating literature's capacity to influence broader social imaginaries.

Berberova's story is read as a dystopian vision of overpopulation in a future urban society reminiscent of both Russian and American contexts (Grigorian 2023, 120-132). The narrator ultimately proposes a radical restructuring of human habitation as a solution to the crisis – a "master plan" that reimagines spatial organization in response to social and ecological collapse. In Grigorian's reading, the story operates as a cautionary tale about environmental degradation, emphasizing the urgent need to preserve natural resources for the generations to come.

While these earlier studies offer valuable insights into genre and social theory, they overlook a crucial dimension of the story. My analysis introduces a new line of inquiry by foregrounding the émigré dynamics at play – thereby enriching our understanding of Berberova's fiction and the complexity of her American period.

The challenge Berberova presents is not merely one of genre, but of narrative foundation: the central question is not how to adapt a story to dystopian conventions, but how

to write an émigré dystopia at all – when there is no stable point of origin, no normative homeland from which to imagine decline or loss. The émigré "norm" is already dystopian, albeit internalized and personalized. In this context, the protagonist is not driven to resistance but toward a quiet madness – a psychological disintegration that is masked by the surreal logic of the dystopian narrative. The external dystopia thus mirrors the internal disorientation shaped by displacement and the impossibility of return.

Thus, the dystopian genre serves a dual function: it both conceals the protagonist's madness by framing it as a generic condition and erases émigré longing by imagining a future where no past life remains to be mourned. Yet longing re-emerges – now directed toward the future – revealing the character's deeply émigré sensibility. This desire differs fundamentally from the revolutionary impulses common to dystopian protagonists. Berberova's character remains passive; his vision of a better world is purely speculative, devoid of action or transformative intent. Still, even these abstract theories gesture toward rootedness – toward the possibility of dwelling, quite literally, in the earth – exposing a persistent émigré longing for place and stability.

"It would follow to promulgate a law: when a twelve-story building is built, twelve floors plus, then twelve floors minus must be built as well, *into the earth,* where neon light, warm air, cold air, sea air, would be supplied continuously, imperceptibly, noiselessly" (Berberova 1991a, 279 [my emphasis]). Though framed as a thought experiment, the proposal is deeply revealing. The opportunity to take root – "into the earth," as deep as possible –- is imagined as not merely as acceptable, but as actively desirable, even at the cost of freedom. This vision presents a paradox: while the protagonist seeks to escape into open nature, his urbanistic utopian scheme demands forced descent into a controlled, artificial underground. Is this simply a formal adherence to dystopian convention, or does it reflect the inner

contradictions of émigré identity – a craving for rootedness in a world where all ground has already been lost?

Inescapable longing alienates the protagonist from those around him, giving way to a more profound state of loneliness. Rejecting overt displays of sorrow, Berberova's hero attempts to elevate this condition into something noble. The English language proves useful here: most dictionaries distinguish between *loneliness*, which implies sadness and isolation, and *solitude*, which suggests peace and voluntary withdrawal. This distinction likely informs Marian Schwartz's translation of "In Memory of Schliemann": "A place for everyone, even those who love solitude. <...> Solitude is no crime. There are people who long for it. Don't get in their way" (Berberova 1991a, 283). In the original Russian version, the word in use is *odinochestvo* – a term commonly translated as both "loneliness" and "solitude," though it rarely conveys the nuance of the latter. Thus, the dissonance between the character's idealization of solitude and the oppressive emotional weight of loneliness is rendered more ambiguously – left for the reader to intuit between the lines. Yet by the end, he remains entirely alone in his abstract world-modelling. Even his girlfriend fails to listen, replacing his philosophical reflections with a gesture of physical, sexual distraction as the comb falls out of her hair.

The solitude of the protagonist's journey raises the question of whether it happened at all. Could the entire trip be a construct of his imagination? The abrupt transitions between fountains, shores, and distant vistas resemble the logic of memory more than that of public transportation. This blurring of perception echoes Berberova's own experience: while living in New York, she would sometimes glimpse fragments of Saint Petersburg or Paris. As Demidova writes, "clearly, the former life, unwilling to be fully 'repressed,' forcefully intruded into the present – and, to some extent, into the future as well" (Demidova 2007, 13). What we encounter is not yet a clinical condition, but rather a kind of émigré madness: the mind, seeking the path

of least resistance, replaces the unfamiliar terrain of the present that demands new reflection with familiar, though repressed, fragments of the past.

This subtle madness is juxtaposed with the figure of Heinrich Schliemann – the German archaeologist who famously unearthed the site of Troy. At the heart of Berberova's narrative is the tension between imagined landscapes and the drive to make those visions real. Schliemann's story becomes a realized metaphor: he romantically pursued a dream for twenty years and, through sheer persistence, made it tangible. Yet in the process, he also destroyed the very thing he sought, mistakenly digging too deep in search of King Priam's city beneath the Hisarlik mound.

This final, destructive irony seems lost on the protagonist of "In Memory of Schliemann," who misremembers the archaeological record, suggesting Priam's Troy lay at the bottom of the mound, when in fact it was in the sixth layer from the top: "Schliemann found Troy," I said, examining my cuff links. "That's why they erected a monument to him. Do you know what Troy is?" She shook her head. No. "He made excavations, he excavated nine cities. The ninth was Troy. Vertically, you see, they were lying on top of each other" (Berberova 1991a, 308). To attribute this historical inaccuracy to Berberova's own misunderstanding would be to overlook her layered critique. The protagonist's utopian vision is likewise structured around vertical stratification – his imagined city extends downward, into the earth. Within this parallel, Berberova elegantly critiques the very logic of such designs: any number of floors driven into the ground would still be one too many. The layered city becomes not a symbol of rootedness but of suffocation.

Paired with the dystopian genre, Berberova's narrative issues a double warning: against unchecked technological advancement and ecological degradation, and against the cultural unraveling of the émigré community itself – once devoted to safeguarding Russian intellectual values. Her protagonist finds himself isolated among people who no longer even recognize the

name of Troy, mirroring Berberova's own alienation from fellow émigrés in America. As she recalled: "Khodasevich's sharp remark came to mind – that the day would come for the émigré community when writers would connect with one another solely on the basis of still being able to tell an iamb from a trochee" (Berberova 1983, 595; *my translation – L.T.*). Yet the deeper tragedy lies not in his isolation, but in his self-deception. The protagonist, too, does not truly remember history. Lost in his own myth-making, he sees only what he wishes to see, cutting himself off from meaningful action or human connection.

Can the protagonist be held fully accountable for his disconnection, or is this simply another symptom of what might be called émigré madness? While gender remains an undercurrent in Berberova's narratives (a theme explored in the following sections), this story shifts the focus squarely onto the émigré condition itself – a condition grounded in physical dislocation and, by extension, geography. In the distant city glimpsed by the protagonist, it is difficult not to recognize New York (see also Vyshinskaia 2015, 44). Tellingly, the protagonist's imaginary project of constructing twelve-story buildings underground begins as he observes the city's iconic skyscrapers.

Though Berberova was perhaps most fond of New York among the many cities she inhabited or visited, she was deeply disappointed by the state of the Russian émigré community there (Demidova 2007, 14, 17). In this light, her remark in the letter cited above – that "In Memory of Schliemann" is "not quite about America" – reads less as sincere deflection and more as a strategic hoax. While evasiveness was uncharacteristic for Berberova, the story appears to reflect a conflict she herself could not fully reconcile: the tension between pursuing a cultural mission and embracing the comforts of a new life – a dilemma shaped by circumstances, sympathetic from both sides, yet still fundamentally unresolved.

And yet, other words from Berberova – in the very same letter – suggest that her choice had already been made. Caught between mourning for the lost past and fantasizing an

impossible future, she instead delivers a stark, sober verdict: “The pay is decent. And the place is respectable. Of course, it all carries a certain air of virtuous dullness – like everything with us these days. No bold ventures worthy of a great power. But where would one even find those, if the power itself no longer exists?” (*Russkii Mir* 2016, 173, my translation).

The Thinking Reed: Between Loneliness and *No Man’s Land*

After nearly eight years of publishing silence, Berberova reemerged with three substantial short stories – what she herself called “big thingies” (*shtuchki*) – released in quick succession. The second of these, titled “Mysliaschii trostnik” (“The Thinking Reed”), appeared in 1958 in *Novy Zhurnal*. Yet, like “The Big City,” this story also faded from view – in spite of the journal’s endurance. “The Thinking Reed” was translated and published under the title “The Revolt” in separate editions in Great Britain and France (see Berberova 1989). Still, it remains largely overlooked within Berberova’s oeuvre. Beyond two striking signposts – the title’s invocation of Blaise Pascal’s concept of the human as a “thinking reed,” and the landscape of a *no man’s land* (a strip of land not claimed by either side in the middle of a war zone) – the story has received little critical attention.

“The Thinking Reed” is a work of pure autofiction. Its heroine navigates a love triangle, rejection, and betrayal in the wake of World War II. The story opens with a scene of parting in wartime Paris: one lover departs for Stockholm, while the other – a Russian émigré woman – stays behind, making desperate, impractical plans to follow him to Sweden, escape with him to Brazil, or even return together to Russia. None of these fantasies come to fruition. Instead, she remains occupied: surviving the war, caring for elderly émigrés, and working a series of odd jobs.

Seven years pass. The war has ended, the older generation of émigrés is gone, and the narrator has returned to her literary craft. Wryly, she observes that she has “forgotten how to wash, sew, iron, and cook” (Berberova 1994, 237, my translation). With time and mental space

restored, an old idea resurfaces – a theory of what it means to be human. Without a private space for reflection, she writes, a person is no more than a plant. That private space, for her, is what she calls *no man's land*:

"From my earliest youth, I believed that every person has their own *no man's land*, where they are entirely their own master. There is the visible life that everyone sees, and then there is another – one that belongs to them alone, and that no one else knows about. This doesn't mean, from a moral standpoint, that one life is virtuous and the other immoral, or from a legal standpoint, that one is permitted and the other forbidden. Rather, it means that a person, from time to time, lives without supervision – in freedom and secrecy – alone or with someone else, perhaps for an hour a day, an evening a week, or a day each month. They live that secret, free life from one evening (or day) to the next – and those hours continue to exist" (Ibid).

It is quite unsurprising that for Berberova – as for many émigrés – the idea of secrecy and freedom takes material form: not merely an internal condition, but as something spatial, a kind of *land* of one's own. A tangible, private space. And, by definition, one inaccessible to those in exile.

The male protagonist (that lover the narrator once met in the metaphorical *no man's land*), by contrast, has since been reduced to something like a houseplant: dependent, stagnant, and ornamental within his wife's world. Yet as painful as personal disappointment may be, it pales in comparison to a more profound disillusionment – one with cultural authority itself. Berberova's autofictional narrator traces this rupture back to her youth: "I once had a severe disappointment in my youth (this is me telling you about Russian poetry)," she recalls, "when I found out that our great poet Tyutchev stole his best line from a Frenchman. Actually, I still haven't recovered from it" (Berberova 1994, 256, my translation). The wound is not simply about literary theft; it is about discovering that even cultural icons are fallible. In exile – where

literature and memory become fragile anchors of identity – such realizations destabilize the very foundations upon which émigré life attempts to rebuild itself.

Yet Berberova's hesitation about Tyutchev's authority is not outright rejection. She remains deeply engaged with both his and Pascal's intellectual legacy. The line in question comes from Tyutchev's well-known poem "The Singing of the Waves Proceeds" (in translation by Colin John Holcombe), where *ponom* (*ropot)* – murmur or grumble – evokes the sound of reeds bending in the wind. But if the "thinking reed" is a person, then that murmur takes on new meaning: it becomes a whisper of rebellion. Berberova's objection is quiet but decisive. While Tyutchev laments humanity's reflex to resist – wondering why people are so quick to rebel – she reclaims that impulse, suggesting that rebellion is not a flaw but a sign of consciousness. It is what makes a reed *thinking* in the first place.

To cultivate such a kind of resistance – such independent thought – one inevitably requires space to be alone. For Berberova's heroine, that space is *no man's land*: a private, inward refuge where, though heartbroken and disillusioned, she remains steadfast. Her former lover Einar, by contrast, inhabits another kind of such space – physically alone while his wife is off attending to her business, yet emotionally overshadowed by her connections, her routines, her world. This contrast marks another turn in Berberova's American fiction, where the line between loneliness and solitude is drawn not by circumstance, but by agency.

By this point, Berberova was fluent in English. The decision to leave the phrase *no man's land* untranslated in the Russian text is not due to any lack of linguistic alternatives – rather, it is a deliberate signal: the story's deeper meaning unfolds, at least in part, through another language – another cultural framework.

Coping with her own loneliness in this second emigration, marked by isolation and the absence of close friends or an intellectual circle, Berberova begins to map two distinct forms of Russian *odinochestvo*. The first is embodied in the heroine's *no man's land*: a chosen,

generative solitude that enables thought and inner autonomy, allowing one to become a truly thinking subject. The second is portrayed through Einar: a passive, empty loneliness marked by absence – of attention, of connection, of belonging. One space is claimed; the other endured.

No man's land, in turn, becomes not just a refuge from external pressures, but a strategy for managing longing – or at least for displacing it into an interior space that can be tolerated. For Berberova's heroine, longing is both personal and structurally imposed: the absence of a lover, the absence of home, the absence of belonging within any social configuration. Yet rather than dwelling in nostalgia or romanticizing what has been lost, she constructs a private zone where longing can be observed, contained, and ultimately sublimated into thought. In this sense, *no man's land* functions as a preventive measure: loneliness, transfigured into solitude, neutralizes the longing beneath the surface of creative energy – an energy that sustains one through the shapelessness of exile.

In this context, solitude is not passive but fiercely defended. Any intrusion into it becomes a threat to freedom itself – particularly creative freedom, which, for the émigré writer, is non-negotiable: "If you allow someone to arrange your *no man's land* for you, then logically – in the end – it will lead to this: they'll place you in a luxurious suite in a luxury hotel, burn your books, and drive away everyone you love. Just yield once – and there will be no boundary, no place to stop; everything will be taken from you" (Berberova 1994, 257, my translation). In this striking declaration, Berberova draws a hard boundary: longing, if left unchecked, can undo a person – but if granted its own protected space, it can be transformed into reflection, endurance, and ultimately, authorship.

Ultimately, the spatial dimension of "The Thinking Reed" functions as a narrative strategy of adaptation – a way of modelling space to make it inhabitable through memory and fiction. Notably, this is the only short story from Berberova's American period that is not set

in the United States. Instead, its locations form a kind of layered autobiographical map – a psychic geography infused with personal resonance.

Paris, for instance, emerges as the site of Berberova's artistic and personal emancipation: the city where she succeeded as an independent writer after leaving Khodasevich, yet also remained a figure of non-belonging, unassimilated within the French literary world. Italy – and Venice in particular – was first introduced to her by Khodasevich, but later became a place of solitary return – a topos of independence, memory, and reflection. Finally, Sweden (a more unexpected location) entered Berberova's orbit after World War II. It was there she learned to swim, forged lasting friendships[1], and found a long-standing retreat in her personal geography.

In the story, the heroine travels to Stockholm to manage a translation issue on behalf of an émigré writer she works for – this scene Berberova transposes almost word-for-word from her own experience handling Bunin's Swedish translations in 1947–1948 (see Berberova 1983, 295). This overlap suggests not just autofiction, but something more: an effort to anchor personal memory within a specific, recognizable topos. Thus, fiction becomes a way of reclaiming, reshaping, and emotionally re-inhabiting space.

The Black Pestilence: On Superfluous Men and Forgotten Women

In 1958 Berberova eagerly let her friends know with characteristic energy that she had been working on three texts: "I've written a long short story for the Munich almanac (for which, Boris, I urge you to write – they pay, and it seems to be a serious endeavor). I gave another story, even longer, to Karpovich. I'm working on a third one now. Each of these is about 30–40 pages long, so as you can imagine, they take time. I'm also doing quite a bit of work for the

[1] Berberova's correspondence reveals a profound intellectual and emotional bond with Sergej Rittenberg, a fellow Russian émigré residing in Stockholm. Over nearly three decades, their exchange of more than 150 letters and postcards delves into Berberova's literary endeavors, personal reflections, and the broader cultural landscape of the Russian diaspora (see Berberova 2020).

almanac – I'm on the editorial board, but in reality, I'm functioning more like an editor. I'm handling a lot of correspondence; it seems that everyone who could possibly be tracked down has been invited."

In this letter of July 28 (cited in Vinokurova 2023, 96), Berberova does not indicate to her correspondent, Boris Zaitsev, whether the "third thing" she refers to would be her final work of prose fiction. Her intentions remain ambiguous – but the text of "Chernaia bolezn'" ("The Black Pestilence") published in *Novy Zhurnal* in 1959, seems to offer its own answer. The story reads as a final statement on her body of prose writing, drawing together thematic threads and personal motifs in what may well be her last fictional statement.

Schwarz published the translation of "The Black Pestilence" in 1991. "The earrings had been at the municipal pawnshop for nine years. Much had happened in the world, events had taken place which had dazzled and shaken mankind. But the earrings remained in their numbered box…" (Berberova 1991b, 69). With this understated but piercing observation, Berberova opens "The Black Pestilence." As the story unfolds, the reader learns that the two diamond earrings – once identical – have come to hold vastly different value: one retains its worth and is eventually refashioned into a ring, while the other is deemed worthless and cast aside. This unassuming anecdote from the world of jewelry quickly takes on metaphorical weight. What begins as a tale of matching objects becomes an allegory of asymmetrical fates. Once equals, the two earrings diverge – until one is reimagined, and the other is rendered obsolete, with no space left in the world for its existence.

In Russian, the term *вытеснение* (*vytesnenie*) most precisely captures what this story enacts. In English, the closest equivalent is *displacement* – a word that similarly denotes being forced out of one's home or position, though often without clarifying the source of that force. *Вытеснение*, by contrast, suggests spatial pressure – a literal lack of room. Someone is pushed out because there is no space left for them.

In this section, I move beyond loneliness as an emotional condition to examine its structural consequence: the gradual removal of women from literature. This, I argue, is the real site of loss. "The Black Pestilence" confronts this process not by lamenting it, but by dramatizing it – tracing how isolation turns into erasure. What begins as a portrait of detachment gradually becomes a narrative of displacement, both literal and literary.

The story reads as a meditation on literary erasure. Berberova, who never received a formal doctorate (though she was later granted an honorary one after decades in the U.S.), offers a kind of diagnosis – not of herself, but of the literary culture that surrounded her. In doing so, she traces the contours of her own marginalization. "The Black Pestilence" reveals a narrative space dominated by male protagonists and male perspectives – a space in which the female voice has no room to develop, no plot to inhabit, no future to claim. If *displacement* names the social and historical condition of emigration, ***вытеснение*** here marks a subtler but equally violent process: exclusion from narrative possibility.

While earlier works only hinted at the psychological cost of exile, "The Black Pestilence" makes it explicit: emigration, in Berberova's portrayal, leads to a kind of mental unraveling – forgetting one's own alphabet, losing one's inner structure, as if falling ill. The title itself carries layered significance. In Russian, *chernaia bolezn'* (*чёрная болезнь,* "black disease") is a colloquial term for epilepsy – the very illness that afflicted Fedor Dostoevsky and was famously embodied by his character Prince Myshkin. By invoking this term, Berberova not only gestures toward literary lineage, but suggests that exile induces a comparable crisis of control: a condition where identity fragments and agency falters.

Berberova wrote extensively about émigré life – nearly all of her stories center on Russian emigrants and the lived conditions of displacement. In this, she follows Boris Poplavsky's assertion that fiction in the twentieth century has become redundant: "there is only a document" (Poplavsky 2009, 47). Yet "The Black Pestilence" stands apart in its focus on a

second crossing – not from the homeland, but from one emigration to another. It narrates the passage from émigré life in Europe to a new and equally uncertain exile in America.

The protagonist, Evgenii, is a middle-aged Russian who has spent at least a decade in Paris by the time we meet him. He has lost the love of his life – and while the story offers a woman as the object of that loss, it becomes increasingly clear that the true referent is Russia itself. This absence is neither healed nor forgotten; and rather than seek resolution, Evgenii seeks escape.

Yet leaving Europe is expensive, and like many émigrés, Evgenii is nearly destitute. He tries to raise money using the last remaining gift from his beloved – a pair of diamond earrings. One of them, however, is afflicted with what the story calls "the black disease," a flaw that renders it worthless. Though this term does not correspond to any real gemological condition (as far as my research confirms), it is worth noting that black diamonds were only recognized as valuable in the mid-twentieth century. Within the story's symbolic economy though, the diseased diamond becomes the first sign of existential deterioration: something once whole has been corrupted, leaving only half its former value intact.

When Evgenii falls short of his fundraising goal, a woman named Alya enters the narrative – a femme fatale whose description suspiciously echoes a photograph of Berberova from 1946 (see Vinokurova 2023). Alya is clever, pragmatic, and decisive. She orchestrates a small financial scam – of the sort common in émigré life – that ultimately enables Evgenii to book passage to New York.

Once in America, Evgenii continues to drift. He takes odd jobs for other emigrants, briefly becomes involved with another woman, and eventually abandons her as well to move to Chicago – his supposed destination all along. His friend Druzhin awaits him there. The name, derived from the Russian word *drug* (friend), is a clear signal that this companion does not exist at all. The journey ends not in arrival, but in a quiet dissolution – one final retreat into

fantasy. Inherently, to be an émigré is to know that no one is waiting for you, that there is no home to return to. The only way forward, then, is to keep searching – for something, anything: a place, a future, even a friend, imaginary or not. As Evgenii says at the story's close, rather than write to the women of his past, he would do better spending his "evening walking the streets and searching for Druzhin – he has to be somewhere after all!" (Berberova 1991b, 150).

One seemingly minor but telling detail in the story is Evgenii's intrusive fantasy about throwing a bomb. This alludes to Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* – often called Russia's modernist answer to *Ulysses* and one of the most intricate literary explorations of terrorism. In Bely's novel, a bomb becomes an existential symbol, surfacing and vanishing, imagined as the key to revolution. Berberova doesn't follow this device to its extreme, but her protagonist's passing thoughts about violence echo both the assassination of Alexander II and the recurring myth of a single act capable of transforming history. Here, that fantasy is not so much revolutionary as it is empty – a faint echo of a once-potent narrative trope. In mocking this logic, Berberova seems to mock the literary tradition itself: a canon where men dream loudly and ineffectively, while women remain peripheral or entirely excluded.

The gender dynamics in "The Black Pestilence" are quietly subversive. As mentioned, one of the women in the story bears a striking resemblance to Berberova herself – but so does Evgenii. Like her, he leaves Europe for the U.S.; in a sense, her identity splits between them. And yet this division changes little. Alya, strong and decisive, outmaneuvers a man whose name – Evgenii – already evokes a crowded lineage of literary heroes. Still, it is he who remains at the center of the story. "I'd like to get better," he says, "but I just can't. I can't shake off that black pestilence, I can't be resurrected" (Berberova 1991b, 144). Perhaps that's what the black pestilence is, after all: the inability to break out of a pattern in which superfluous men no longer belong to narrative – not even as literary characters. And a woman who exists beyond that

pattern does not belong in literature at all. This pattern that writes men out of stories, and women out of literature – can it not be overcome?

On the other hand, Berberova turns this gender dynamic to her advantage, transforming it into a kind of gender fluidity. Out of the four short stories discussed here, only one features a female protagonist. Yet in every case, the male characters are strikingly weak. The tables have turned. These men come to embody aspects of Berberova herself – the emotions she did not want to claim, but could not deny: loneliness, destructive longing, the failure to adapt. In contrast, her female characters are vehicles for resilience. They are proactive, pragmatic, and above all, adaptable. They survive the narrative – but at what cost?

This short story is a farewell – a quiet departure from literature, just as the protagonist departs from Europe. It carries the weight of finality, not only for the character but for Berberova herself. More than that, it marks a recognition: that even in the twentieth century, there remained no true space in literature for female experience in its full complexity. “The Black Pestilence” does not resolve this absence – it names it in a sharp rebuke, mourns it, and ultimately walks away.

Adaptation In-between Genres

Adaptation in Berberova’s American writing is not just another motif; it is the canvas – the measure of her characters’ resilience, literary survival in exile, and the mechanism by which displacement is rendered into narrative. Yet adaptation within prosaic literature fails. Or rather, it proves to not be enough. Evidently, as a lived condition, adaptation exceeds the structural capacities of the short story – demanding something looser, more compressed, and emotionally unresolved. In response, Berberova turns to adaptive rewriting in another genre – one even more concise, fragmented, and open-ended: poetry. This shift is not purely aesthetic (Berberova wrote poetry throughout her whole life). It reflects Berberova’s deepening skepticism toward linear fictional forms and their ability to express the fractured, unresolved

nature of diasporic subjectivity – particularly that of a woman. Poetry, in its compression and ambiguity, becomes a vessel for resistance found anew – a form that undermines authority by eluding its structures. The poem's murmuring rhythm mimics the burdock's subdued protest – – a grumble more deeply felt than overtly declared.

Berberova's gravitation toward poetry comes to crystallize in one of her most poignant acts of self-revision. Nearly two decades after publishing "The Thinking Reed," her only American short story centered on a female protagonist, Berberova returns to the same image in poetic form – now reshaped by irony, ambivalence, and the burden of time. In a 1975 poem titled "Mysliaschii lopukh" ("The Thinking Burdock"), she casts doubt on whether rebellion – once the mark of the "thinking reed" – remains possible, or even desirable. The focus shifts from a quality (thinking or thoughtless) to the very nature of the subject itself. The poem appears below in the original Russian (Berberova 1998b, 121), alongside my own translation:

Летит на солнце легкий пух По воздуху, в зеленой роще. Ты знаешь: мыслящий лопух – Он тоже ропщет, тоже ропщет!	A weightless fluff flies in the sun, Through air, within the leafy grove. You know that the thinking burdock – It also grumbles, also grumbles!
Когда души и моря нет, Откуда быть морскому пенью? А тростнику, ему сто лет, И научился он смиренью.	When there's neither soul no sea, From where would come a sea-born song? And the reed, it's a hundred years old, And old, it learnt humility.
Тот, у кого хороший слух, Услышит шорохи и шелест В овраге, там, где мох и вереск: То ропщет мыслящий лопух.	But one with a finely tuned ear Will catch the rustling through the hush In hollows where the moss meets heather: It is the thinking burdock's grumble.

The burdock becomes the true hero of Berberova's poetic revision – a new figure of displacement. Where Tyutchev wonders why the human soul cannot attune itself to the song of an ever-present sea, Berberova rejects the premise altogether: there is no soul, no sea, and therefore no song. More importantly, the reed is static – dependent on a particular environment to survive. The burdock, by contrast, is a weed. Undesirable, overlooked, and resilient, it can

grow anywhere. Its displacement is not a fall from grace, but a quiet defiance – a tenacious way of adapting to an inhospitable world.

The reed came to terms with its fate and learnt humility; the burdock, by contrast, persists in its murmur. Berberova does not mistake this persistence for triumph – the burdock is left to grumble in hollows, far from the spotlight, its resistance unnoticed, perhaps even absurd. And yet, she leaves room for a subtle hope: that someone with a finely tuned ear might one day catch the burdock's defiant rustle.

What makes this image even more poignant is a linguistic irony: in Russian, *лопух* is also an old-fashioned slang term for a fool. And this, perhaps, is what emigration comes down to – a stubborn, almost foolish faith in survival. The burdock's resilience trades beauty for anonymity, grace for grit, speaking to the quiet dignity of those who endure displacement without recognition. A quiet, hard-won wisdom, earned at the cost of seeming foolishness.

In Berberova's poetic turn, adaptation is no longer just a thematic concern – it becomes a condition of form itself. This interplay between identity, form, and displacement continues in the works of Olga Zilberbourg, where the question of adaptation acquires new gendered, and translingual dimensions.

CHAPTER 3. "THEY DRINK TEA":
THE CASE OF OLGA ZILBERBOURG

Literary anthropology and reader-response criticism remain messy and underdeveloped areas – white spots in the scholarship. Despite the groundbreaking monographs of the 1970s and 1980s, the field has since wilted (see Iser 1980, Fish 1980, Tompkins 1980, Flynn and Schweickart 1986, etc). Perhaps this is because cultural anthropology demands extreme proximity to its research subject, whereas literary studies often favor distance, as if echoing Sergey Esenin's "big things are visible from afar." My approach moves in the opposite direction. I am drawn to fragments – to pieces that may or may not form a coherent picture, that, in turn, may or may not change – adapt – over time. In getting as close as possible to the text, I bring into dialogue the writer, the literary heroines, and the scholar, in a shared effort to capture fleeting social phenomena reflected in displaced identities.

To explore one such phenomenon, I turn to a recently popular narrative structure based on a scientific theory: the "butterfly effect." Though commonly associated with chaos theory and popular media, this framework is also revealing when viewed through the lens of reader-response criticism, which emphasizes the role of the reader's own history, perspective, and emotional context in shaping meaning. As a scholar positioned within the émigré/immigrant experience I am analyzing, I find it necessary to acknowledge the contingencies that brought me into contact with this material in the first place. Had the war not begun in 2022, I would not have come to the University of Oregon. Without the "Slavic Immigrant Artist in the Northwest" internship, I would not have met Olga Zilberbourg. Without a course in social anthropology, I might never have dared to study a living writer. And without all the above, I would not now be transitioning into one of the most renowned PhD programs. These personal circumstances are not merely biographical noise; they shape how I read Zilberbourg's work, and how I locate the self – reader, scholar, émigré/immigrant – within its interpretive field. If reader-response theory

invites us to see the reader as a co-creator of meaning, then I approach this analysis not from a place of critical distance, but from a position of entangled proximity.

Zilberbourg's short story collection follows a similar logic – it gathers fragments of growth, adaptation, and everyday observation, stitching them together through literary narrative into a mosaic of social consciousness. While attempting to gauge the degree of autobiographical content in the collection may not be the most productive approach, the question about the autobiographical inevitably arises for the reader. This is largely due to the spatial architecture of the stories, which are set across Saint Petersburg / Leningrad (Zilberbourg's birthplace), New York (where she lived during college), San Francisco (her current home), and other cities the author has likely visited. This grounding in identifiable geographies, closely tied to the author's biography, subtly affirms the empirical plausibility of the experiences depicted – encouraging the reader to relate more directly to the characters' trajectories and to interpret the stories as reflections of lived, if not strictly personal, reality.

Although I cannot examine every short story in the collection, the following chapter traces key patterns and peculiarities in Zilberbourg's representation of loneliness, longing, and urban space – themes I found not only compelling and at times unsettling, but also deeply resonant. The selection of stories discussed is intentionally subjective, shaped by my own experience of *em/immigrantness* and positioned within the framework of reader-response criticism, which recognizes the reader's perspective as a co-creator of meaning. This approach does not diminish the representativeness of the analysis; rather, it foregrounds the interpretive potential of lived experience, particularly in narratives that are themselves rooted in migration, adaptation, and the fragmented self.

Loneliness, Against Loneliness and Everything In-Between

In Zilberbourg's stories, as in Berberova's, loneliness is not merely a mood or emotional state – it becomes a lens through which broader questions of gender, identity, and

cultural dissonance are explored. Zilberbourg, like Berberova, draws a careful distinction between loneliness and solitude – a distinction I explore further in the next section. Crucially, however, Zilberbourg does not assign loneliness solely to men: her female protagonists also struggle with its weight. Loneliness, in her work, is not a harmless condition; it breeds violence. For women, this violence often turns inward – manifesting as spiraling thought, emotional withdrawal, or self-erasure. For men, it more frequently erupts outward, destabilizing their surroundings. Alongside these gendered patterns, Zilberbourg introduces a subtler variation: cultural loneliness – a sense of estrangement born not from isolation, but from the inability to be understood or culturally translated, even among others. In the pages that follow, I trace these variations through close readings of several stories that illuminate this spectrum of loneliness: its weight, its consequences, and its strange, sometimes generative silence.

The idea that Professor Helen More, "a celebrity in her own field," could have ended her own life "seemed outlandish" (Zilberbourg 2019, 15). Yet this is precisely what happens in the short story "Helen More's Suicide." The title character, despite her centrality, never appears on the page – she is already gone. Her closest friend, Marguerite, offers a spare explanation: "It's the loneliness that gets to you, I suppose" (Zilberbourg 2019, 17). The story follows Marguerite and the narrator as they try to understand what drove Helen to this irreversible choice.

What unfolds is not just a personal tragedy, but a collapse of social trust – a collapse that Helen, a trailblazing feminist scholar, did not survive. After retirement, she found herself isolated, and in that isolation, she experienced a final, crushing realization: "Nobody cares!" (Zilberbourg 2019, 23). With no audience left for her life, no one to witness her continued presence, the narrative itself loses meaning – a bitter fate for a brilliant professor and writer.

The answer is devastating: "The death of an *old woman* cannot even be properly tragic. It's expected" (Zilberbourg 2019, 23 [my emphasis]). The focus on "woman" – marked by the

indefinite article, referring to any woman and not specifically to Helen – is not incidental. It emphasizes a painful dichotomy – the implication that the death of an old man would still be treated as significant, even tragic, while the death of an old woman, no matter her accomplishments, fades into the background. She is not remembered as a professor, or a poet working on a new book "everyone looked forward to" (Zilberbourg 2019, 17), but simply as an old woman. And that, it seems, is not enough.

Yet the most chilling part of the story may be its quietest line: "What's the point of living after one has accomplished everything she wanted to?" (Zilberbourg 2019, 21). This sentence, tucked in mid-story, is easily missed – and nevertheless it reveals everything. It is not despair that undoes Helen, but the impossibility of continued adaptation. The story implies that she has "fulfilled her potential" – but whose definition of "fulfillment" is that? Is it self-determined, or shaped by external metrics of success, visibility, or productivity? The ambiguity is telling: once Helen has achieved what society deems worthy for a woman – career, acclaim, perhaps even a reputation as a "trailblazer" – she is left with no socially legible next step.

This reveals a brutal asymmetry: for men, adaptation is often depicted as episodic – a phase between chapters. For women, it is a continuous condition: a creative force they must sustain in order to remain socially or narratively viable. Helen is stripped of circumstances in which that force can act. With no further role to grow into, no sanctioned transformation left, she becomes trapped. And when there is no outlet for creative energy, it implodes – turning into violence, which Helen ultimately directs inward. In this light, her suicide reads as a final, painful form of adaptation: the only one left to her when all others have been foreclosed.

The gendered mechanics of adaptation continue in another of Zilberbourg's stories. "Companionship" – a striking one-page piece – captures Michael's intense and unsettling desire to "return to his mother's stomach" (Zilberbourg 2019, 92). The story reads as a manifesto against loneliness: a desperate yearning to be as close as possible to another human

being, even if that closeness is impossible, regressive, or invasive. Michael's failure to adapt – to metabolize his loneliness into something survivable – is stark. Yet more shocking is his solution: to escape loneliness by reinserting himself into his mother's body – to collapse the boundary between self and other, and render intimacy literal, total, and ultimately annihilating.

The tone of the story remains uncertain. In the end, the mother welcomes her son's return to her body. On one level, she embraces the companionship – grateful for a reprieve from her own loneliness and fear. Yet the story complicates this seeming comfort: "In his turn, he provided emotional support. Having made himself comfortable, he could afford to share" (Ibid). Michael's comfort becomes conditional; his ability to support his mother comes only after he has imposed himself physically and emotionally. What initially appears as mutual solace begins to resemble a deeply gendered imbalance – one in which the woman becomes a site for male restoration. Her consent, while explicit, is shadowed by the story's ironic tone, leaving readers unsure whether to read this intimacy as healing, horrifying, or both.

The final blow arrives in the closing lines, cloaked in warmth and sentimentality. After carrying her son for nine months already, the mother seems content, and the reader is almost invited to accept this strange arrangement as a form of mutual happiness – as if, when chosen, even total dependency might count as love. But does Michael actually love his mother? The story is strikingly clear on this point: "Her love for Michael brought his mother great pleasure, and knowing that pleased him, too" (Zilberbourg 2019, 92). Michael loves the comfort of her body – not even the womb he came from as refuge, as he is occupying the stomach now, and, to put it to the extremes, is threatening her life – but not necessarily the woman herself. What masquerades as emotional support is, in fact, comfort taken at her expense.

Michael's agency is underscored by the fact that he retains a name and a symbolic arc, while his mother remains faceless – reduced to a vessel for his comfort. In this, Zilberbourg

stages not just dependency, but a kind of anti-adaptive impulse: Michael does not evolve through loneliness, but collapses backward into it, dragging another body with him.

This anti-adaptive response is not uniquely male in Zilberbourg's work – women, too, fail to adapt. But what distinguishes the genders is the direction of the response. Female characters often internalize failure, turning their violence inward through spiraling, collapse, or erasure. Male characters, by contrast, tend to externalize violence: they impose, dominate, or consume – and most often, it is women who bear the cost.

This final mode of loneliness both deepens and complicates the gendered dichotomy discussed earlier. In the short story "Blan-Manzhe with the Taste of Pear and Cream," Zilberbourg explores the quiet alienation that arises within a cross-cultural marriage. Living in the United States, Victoria attempts to introduce her American husband to her Russian heritage – through food[2]. This choice is far from incidental: food, as a sensory and cultural artifact, carries psychological associations of safety, memory, and belonging. Historically, shared meals have been sites of connection; here, Victoria hopes food might also serve as a bridge between identities. When her husband shows a rare tolerance for a specific bonbon – a blan-manzhe with the taste of pear and cream – she clings to this moment of overlap and makes it her mission to find more.

But her efforts are quickly thwarted: the local Russian grocery store has closed – "the owners were losing money" (Zilberbourg 2019, 74). Victoria turns to online catalogues and obscure suppliers, guided only by a green bonbon wrapper bearing a sketch of pears. Yet her search is haunted by uncertainty. She does not recognize many of the flavors herself: "Victoria couldn't remember any such dessert in her mother's repertoire, but she'd been seven when her

[2] Throughout this section, I use the spelling *blan-manzhe*, as it appears in Zilberbourg's story, instead of the standard *blancmange*.

family emigrated from the Soviet Union. Once in the United States, her mother came to rely on frozen cheesecake" (Ibid). This personal dislocation is echoed by a stranger's casual remark that her children are "growing up all-American" (Ibid).

What begins as a bid to connect across cultures soon spirals into something lonelier: Victoria is not just bridging the gap between her husband and her past but also grappling with the erosion of cultural meaning itself. The sweets he enjoys – "a white chocolate shell [that] coated the mouth with the taste of vegetable oil," with "gelatinous, neon-green filling [that] looked like a biohazardous waste"[3] (Zilberbourg 2019, 75) – are stripped of any personal resonance for her. If anything, they are faintly repulsive. And yet, he does not mind.

In the end, Victoria's efforts dissolve in quiet futility: her husband "gave it three chews and chased it down with beer," treating the bonbon not as a nostalgic artifact or gesture of intimacy, but as a disposable oddity (Ibid). His anonymity throughout the story only heightens the asymmetry between them; he remains distant and disengaged, while she builds meaning around him. This scene crystallizes a deeper truth: cultures are meant to be shared, but what happens when no one is listening? Her attempt to transmit identity through culinary memory becomes a quiet crisis – not of absence, but of incomprehension. Her world cannot be meaningfully translated into the shared domestic space, and because it is not understood, it cannot be acknowledged. The failure to be received is a failure to be recognized.

Taken together, these stories reveal loneliness not as a monolith, but as a spectrum of estrangement – emotional, cultural, gendered, and even linguistic. Zilberbourg charts this terrain with careful ambiguity, leaving her characters suspended between longing and disconnection, identity and erasure. What makes Zilberbourg's treatment of this theme so

[3] I have preserved the original orthography in all quotations from English-language sources. All translations are my own; any errors or choices therein are solely my responsibility.

resonant is her refusal to reduce it to a single cause or moral. Instead, she offers a nuanced, often gentle mediation between conflicting perspectives: the mother and the son, the immigrant and her American spouse, the brilliant woman and the world that quietly forgets her.

Whether through death, regression, or a failed act of translation, each narrative maps the limits of adaptation – and the quiet, aching spaces where it falters. Without absolving anyone, Zilberbourg allows her characters their blind spots and contradictions, portraying loneliness not as failure but as something more fragile: a condition of being human in translation.

Solitude as Threshold: Longing, Nostalgia, and the Quiet Work of Adaptation in "Like Water," "We Were Geniuses," and "Sweet Porridge"

This fragility finds a different expression in Zilberbourg's other stories, where loneliness – once transformed into solitude – becomes not only a mode of emotional survival, but a framework for reimagining agency. Though writing in a different literary context, shaped by distinct genres, manners, and cultural expectations, Zilberbourg continues a conversation that Berberova began decades earlier: what can women do with their loneliness? In *The Black Pestilence*, Berberova's male protagonist unravels under the weight of displacement, unable to adapt or act, his isolation leading to inertia and collapse. His loneliness becomes a dead end – a state with no exit, no transformation ahead.

Zilberbourg's heroines, by contrast, are not spared loneliness, but some of them inhabit it differently. In stories like "Like Water," solitude is not a sentence, but a space for observation, for thought, for the quiet reassembly of self. Rather than being undone by solitude, these women turn inward and, in doing so, encounter new forms of agency. Here, solitude is not the absence of connection, but the presence of possibility – – a moment of suspension where change can take root.

"Like Water," aside from being an exceptionally beautiful piece of prose, is also the title story of Zilberbourg's first short story collection published in English. The narrator walks down memory lane, tracing her journey from leaving Russia to her current life in the United States: "I was fifteen when my parents brought me, against my will, to the Bronx. Most people are confused by the 'against my will' part. They assume everyone wanted out of Russia. But how does one explain one's home? The only way I know is to tell the stories" (Zilberbourg 2019, 159). What follows are three brief, interconnected narratives, each bound by the motif of water – or more precisely, its absence.

The thread that ties the narrative together is first prompted by "loneliness on the net" (see Wiśniewski 2001), where physical distance drives people to seek connection through social media. "In honor of Pushkin's birthday," the heroine posts a memory of seeing *Eugene Onegin* at a theater in Leningrad (Zilberbourg 2019, 160). A former classmate responds: "That was the moment I fell in love with you" (Zilberbourg 2019, 161). Tanya's (surely a coincidental name) comment becomes the catalyst for reflection. This moment, buried in the sediment of a busy adult life, resurfaces just as a second kind of loneliness sets in: her husband and children are away on a trip, and she finds herself alone in a sun-drenched California house, stifled by heat and thirst – deprived of both water and fresh air.

However, this loneliness does not lead to collapse. Transformed into solitude, it instead opens a space for gentle, melancholy reflection – a quiet exploration of "girl-on-girl love," tinged with the sadness of what might have been. Even in the 21st century, the narrator's imagination can reach toward certain boundaries, but not fully cross them – particularly within the enduring constraints of the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural space. The heroine has adapted: to immigration, to motherhood, to the persistent ache for a home that no longer exists. And yet, she remains in some ways solidified by habit – the same habit that keeps her elderly Soviet couple (her grandparents) from drinking water: they drink tea.

In fact, the heroine's solitude bears a striking resemblance to Berberova's concept of no man's land. If life is a constant war zone, then solitude becomes a zone of adaptation – unoccupied, malleable, and quietly resistant. Berberova's protagonist in "The Thinking Reed" survives heartbreak and disappointment by retreating into that private space. Likewise, Zilberbourg's narrator uses solitude to explore possibilities that might otherwise remain unthinkable – as if imagining them were a way to keep despair at bay.

However, not all of Zilberbourg's characters are as fortunate in sidestepping longing. In "We Were Geniuses," the protagonists are not just nostalgic for the past – they are haunted by a future that never arrived. They long for the lives they once believed were inevitable: brilliant careers, intellectual triumphs, a world reshaped by their talents. "So what if we weren't geniuses in mathematics? By the age of fourteen or fifteen, it was clear that we were deficient in that department. We simply had to apply ourselves to other disciplines... We watched each other carefully for the signs of the budding genius. We knew exactly what it would look like" (Zilberbourg 2019, 87). This is not just nostalgia, but a kind of retroactive mourning – for imagined selves that failed to materialize, for adaptive paths never taken. The story captures the quiet ache of unrealized potential, the dissonance between youthful certainty and adult compromise.

Yet this longing is not regenerative – it does not spark creativity or lead to meaningful connection. Instead, it becomes circular, even paralyzing, deepening their sense of inertia. Their shared past becomes an emotional dead end: they mourn and yearn for not only what they were, but the selves they never had the chance to become. The title's ironic use of the past tense – "we were" – highlights the impossibility of return and the fragility of their former identity. As their nostalgia is tethered to an imagined future rather than a recoverable past, their longing offers no path forward – only a recursive return to what might have been.

In contrast to the heroine of "Like Water," who transforms solitude into a space for reflection and quiet agency, the characters in "We Were Geniuses" remain suspended in nostalgia. Unable to adapt, their longing calcifies into passive resistance. The story closes with a poignant reference to Viktor Tsoi's "Peremen" ("Changes") – once an anthem of change – now echoing not as a call to action but as a relic of a transformation already underway. Rather than engage with the Soviet system, the characters sidestep it: skipping a math exam to attend the first screenings of *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* by the Beatles in the USSR.

This act of rebellion is both modest and momentous, capturing the gap between the sweeping historical shifts they anticipated and the quieter gestures still available to them. The tone is both mournful and wry, and its placement in the collection implies that these characters eventually emigrated, choosing reinvention abroad over stagnation at home. While other stories present solitude as a crucible for growth, "We Were Geniuses" offers a cautionary tale: longing without self-reflection can leave one immobile. Adaptation, as the story reminds us, requires not only memory, but reinvention.

The final short story, steeped in nostalgic longing, brings me home as well. Zilberbourg's "Sweet Porridge" revisits a well-known fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm – popularized and retold throughout Soviet and post-Soviet childhoods (including mine), but largely unfamiliar to an American reader. In her retelling, Zilberbourg explores the lingering effects of food insecurity, cultural inheritance, and emotional adaptation within the immigrant experience.

In the original tale, a magical pot produces an endless supply of porridge, but when the proper command to stop is forgotten, the pot floods the village with food. In Zilberbourg's version, this moment is rendered with dry humor: "But the porridge is so sweet and delicious, the villagers don't mind. They eat. The end" (Zilberbourg 2019, 108). When the heroine's son

brings home a version of this book, it triggers a return to her own childhood – but the tale on the page does not match the one she remembers.

Curious, she compares the Soviet and English versions and uncovers subtle but telling mismatches. In the stories of her own past, for instance, the girl in the tale was not described as poor – unsurprising, given that although Soviet children often experienced hunger, poverty as a concept was officially denied. The contrast becomes even sharper when her son, puzzled by the moral of the tale, fails to grasp what it means to be truly poor: “If the girl can have the things she likes, life can’t be that bad. She’s not really poor” (Zilberbourg 2019, 110). This moment exposes a deeper rupture between the narrator’s Soviet childhood and her American present. The mother suppresses her frustration but is thrust into a quiet crisis of identity. Her grandmother would have called her son spoiled; her American friends would likely find his confusion understandable. She, meanwhile, remains suspended in her immigrant identity – able to perceive both perspectives, yet unable to fully belong to either.

The story ends not with resolution, but with quiet compromise. The porridge is eaten. The story is retold. But something in the mother remains unsettled – not because she cannot explain the tale to her son, but because she finds herself pulled into a silent, uneasy work of translation. The hunger of her childhood is not his and never will be. His response, shaped by comfort and distance, challenges her to soften her instinct for judgment and reimagine her own past through his eyes. In her solitude late at night in the kitchen, she is not grieving the world she left, but contorting, adapting herself to hold both worlds at once – to understand her son’s perspective without betraying her own memory. The adaptation is not seamless; it comes at the cost of emotional friction. In that moment, her longing is not just for the past, but for a shared frame of reference – for the impossible ease of being understood without having to translate the untranslatable or fail in the attempt.

Across these stories, longing emerges as a complex, shape-shifting force. It may nourish imagination, as in "Like Water"; it may curdle into stagnation and a following outburst, as in "We Were Geniuses"; or it may surface in the quiet frictions of immigrant life, as in "Sweet Porridge." What links them is not only the presence of longing, but the way solitude functions as both its catalyst and its container – a space where memory collides with change, and identity is quietly reshaped. Zilberbourg neither romanticizes nor condemns this condition. Like Berberova before her, she treats solitude as a state of precarious balance – one that can offer clarity, connection, or collapse. This condition is inevitably shaped by its surroundings – often precarious, sometimes sustaining, always spatial. In the following section, I turn more fully to this interplay between interior emotion and exterior space – examining how the urban environments Zilberbourg's characters inhabit either foster or frustrate their experiences of loneliness and longing.

Stuffy and Anxious Cities

"The city occupies a peculiar place in the system of symbols generated by the history of culture. Two basic aspects of urban semiotics should be noted: the city as space and the city as name. <...> The city as a closed space can find itself in a twofold relationship to the land surrounding it: it can be not only isomorphic with the state, <...> but it can also be its antithesis," writes Yuri Lotman in what remains one of the most influential analyses of city-culture dynamics in Russian literary studies (Lotman 2020, 161).

However, Lotman's formulation, rich as it is, centers primarily on the internal structures of the city and its relationship with the state, presuming an imagined subject who is already part of its cultural and symbolic order – a so-called rightful citizen. What happens, then, when the individual is an unsettled observer, an outsider who is trying to make a claim to the city's language, infrastructure, or memory? This is the question that animates the stories I turn to in this section.

Rather than assuming cities as stable mirrors or counterpoints to the state, this chapter explores the more precarious and ambiguous relationships between cities and immigrants – those who are physically present yet not fully symbolically legible. Can cities be inhabited without being possessed? Can they offer refuge without recognition? If Lotman's model accounts for the semiotic coherence of urban space, it does not yet explain the emotional, material, or symbolic frictions experienced by those who live within the city but remain unassimilated by its meaning-making systems.

This tension is immediately felt in the opening of Zilberbourg's collection. *Like Water and Other Stories* begins in San Francisco – the city Zilberbourg herself calls home. And yet, just like many narratives about Saint Petersburg (her former home), the text quickly introduces an uncanny quality to the setting: "The spring came on hard and much too early this year, which must be why the dimensions of reality shifted. It was a January afternoon in San Francisco" (Zilberbourg 2019, 3). The story "The Rubicon" establishes San Francisco as an unsettled backdrop for unsettling events. On what seems to be an ordinary day, the heroine is moving through her usual routines when something inexplicable interrupts the rhythm: a shiny red Jeep swerves out of traffic and stops directly in front of her.

As the heroine notes, "Behind the wheel was this kid I used to be close to in Russia, back in the 1990s, still seventeen on this day in 2018…" (Ibid). The city, already made strange by its seasonally inverted weather and off-kilter rhythms, becomes a space where time and geography collapse. What should have been a brief moment of urban routine turns surreal, as the past intrudes upon the present not through memory but physical reappearance. San Francisco becomes a liminal space – one that does not anchor the protagonist in her current reality, but instead destabilizes her, allowing unresolved narratives to break through. The city's fluid identity reflects the emotional vertigo of immigration: a place of promise that becomes, in this story, a site of haunting. Rather than serving as a neutral or welcoming backdrop, the

city functions almost as a character itself – its spatial and temporal instability enabling the reemergence of suppressed memory. Zilberbourg thus reimagines urban space not as a setting for new beginnings, but as a permeable surface through which longing and dislocation can resurface.

The site that was supposed to become a new home does not accept the heroine. “I tried to tell myself that this was nothing but a common anxiety, the one I’d had ever since moving to San Francisco” (Zilberbourg 2019, 7). The city may offer sunshine and opportunity, but it never quite offers belonging. Its topographical and emotional disorientation mirrors the unsettled state of its immigrant inhabitants – those who live as suspended figures negotiating between past and present, language and silence. In Zilberbourg’s rendering, San Francisco becomes less a sanctuary than a site of psychic and temporal leakage, where longing distorts the urban landscape and memory resists containment.

This uneasy dynamic with place continues elsewhere in the collection – for instance, in Zilberbourg’s depictions of New York, another city drawn from her own biography. Notably, the tendency to frame emotionally significant cities within subtly surreal contexts emerges as a pattern across an otherwise strikingly realistic collection. These urban spaces, though grounded in familiar geographies, are repeatedly unsettled by memory, emotion, and displacement – transformed into sites where the boundaries between past and present, real and imagined, begin to blur.

“Dandelion” tells the story of a promising young writer, Oz, who has nearly won a major prize and is contacted by a literary agent: “I have read a story of yours and think it’s wonderful. Do you have a novel you need representation for?” (Zilberbourg 2019, 26). This seemingly congratulatory message strikes at the heart of a deeper anxiety – not just about success, but about legitimacy. The question implies that only a novel can confirm a writer’s worth, casting doubt on short stories and fragmentary forms as somehow incomplete or lesser.

For Oz, as for Zilberbourg herself, this moment encapsulates a broader cultural pressure: in the literary hierarchy of both Western and Russian publishing, the novel often functions as a rite of passage, a symbol of arrival. But for immigrant writers – whose voices may emerge from dislocation, linguistic hybridity, or shifting identities – the demand for a coherent, marketable novel can feel like a form of erasure.

"Dandelion" quietly challenges these assumptions, asking whether a story must be long to be true – and whether literary form must conform to institutional expectations to be considered real. Zilberbourg dramatizes this through a sharply humorous, surreal juxtaposition: "Oz had no novel, but she did have a nineteen-month-old. 'He's very much like a novel,' she told the agent. 'Can I ship him to you?'" (Ibid). The irony is pointed. Women give birth to children; men, historically, give birth to literature. Can Oz do both? Or rather – must she choose between them? Zilberbourg's story not only questions literary hierarchy but also the gendered structures that underpin it, exposing the quiet absurdity of a system that equates legitimacy with genre, length, and disembodied productivity.

New York – though only lightly sketched – becomes a metonym for literary gatekeeping: a space where success hinges on assimilation into normative modes of authorship. Zilberbourg rejects that model. Oz's refusal to conform is not a failure but a reclamation – of the short story, of embodied creativity, and of authorship that resists containment. As elsewhere in the collection, place is not neutral; it shapes the terms of belonging. In this story, New York represents constraint, while the story form itself becomes a quiet act of adaptation and defiance.

In the end, Oz returns to writing short fiction. Does this signal a failure to adapt, or a refusal to compromise? Resilience lies not in conforming to external expectations, but in holding onto things that remain truer to one's voice. Yet the story closes on an unsettling note: "[Dandelion] ran to his old bedroom, where Oz had recently moved her desk, and went to hide in her drawer" (Zilberbourg 2019, 28). This strange image hints at the cost of non-belonging –

when adaptation becomes impossible, what is left may not be identity or sanity, but something quieter and more fragmented: a life deferred, hidden in plain sight, never fully allowed to unfold.

To close the circle, I come back to the image that opened this section: Saint Petersburg. In Zilberbourg's collection, the city consistently evokes constraint – a landscape of limited choices, emotional suffocation, and ideological stagnation. "Contemporary St. Petersburg feels hopelessly backwards," the narrator notes, referencing not only outdated technology (contrasting Berberova's anxieties about modernity) but also the regressive convictions that govern thought and behavior (Zilberbourg 2019, 49). Whenever heroines return from the United States, they find themselves weighed down by familial expectations and the invasive moral certainty of others – reminders of a worldview they have, however incompletely, begun to shed.

In these moments, Zilberbourg crystallizes a tension at the heart of émigré/immigrant literature: the past is not merely remembered, but physically returned to, revisited, re-embodied. The city of Saint Petersburg becomes a kind of litmus test – not for belonging, but for distance. It no longer fits. And yet, this mismatch itself is meaningful: it reveals the degree to which her characters have changed, adapted, and outgrown the psychic and spatial limits of their former home. In this way, Saint Petersburg functions not only as a setting, but as a final provocation – an indicator that adaptation does not always lead to harmony. Sometimes it sharpens the contrast between who one was and who one has become.

These cityscapes – San Francisco, New York, and Saint Petersburg – serve not just as geographic markers but as emotional topographies, mapping the fractures between memory and present, self and environment. Zilberbourg's cities are never just backdrops; they are semiotic systems that both shape and resist the immigrant's sense of self. Each story demonstrates how space mediates identity, sometimes enabling transformation and at other

times reinforcing alienation. In these spaces, adaptation as an ongoing and uneasy process demands both internal reconfiguration and continual negotiation with the world outside. It is solely to the dynamics of adaptation – both as a narrative impulse and as an external negotiation between mediums – that the following twin sections now turn.

Adaptation I: Narrative

Immigrant identity is often framed in a familiar binary: there is the immigrant and there is the local. In this thesis, I have already complicated this view by introducing the figure of the émigré. Yet Zilberbourg, with her attunement to the unspoken and her refusal to settle for neat categories, goes further. She gestures toward a third category – unnamed, elusive, and deliberately undefined. In her stories, there is the immigrant, the émigré, and "her."

Gender dynamics are laid out with deliberate clarity in the story "Her Turn." Oksana's boyfriend – yet another unnamed man – abandons her and their newborn daughter, prompting Oksana's mother to send her alone "off to America" (Zilberbourg 2019, 62). Twenty-four years later, the two meet again in San Francisco.

While the story avoids direct comparisons, subtle details suggest Oksana's superiority: she has a prestigious and intellectually demanding job in headhunting; her English is fluent, while his is "barely comprehensible"; she is confidently "Californian," while he "looks out of place" (Ibid). The most pointed line, however, comes in the summary of his life: "His is an immigrant story" (Ibid). The narrative goes on to describe his path but leaves Oksana's trajectory curiously undefined. If his is an immigrant story, then what is hers?

The contrast sets up an unresolved asymmetry, prompting the reader to ask: what category does Oksana belong to – a Russian woman with a Californian husband, fluent in the language and embedded in American life? Intriguingly, Oksana's position seems to mirror that of Zilberbourg herself – a Russian woman partnered with an American man, negotiating multiple cultural identities. But where does that leave her, symbolically? Once again, there

appears to be no predefined space for a woman who succeeds across boundaries. And yet, Zilberbourg does not retreat from this narrative gap. Instead, she presses against it, gradually carving out a literary space for a woman from elsewhere – a woman whose homeland lies far behind her, but whose story moves forward as she adopted a new one. It is, as the story's title quietly insists, her turn.

What ultimately distinguishes Oksana – and many of Zilberbourg's heroines – is not her assimilation or success, but her capacity for adaptation. Adaptation here is not a neutral skill nor is it struggle-free, but a quietly radical one, and crucially, it is gendered. Zilberbourg frames adaptation not as a passive response to external conditions, but as an active and creative force – one rarely recognized as such. Oksana's ability to survive abandonment, motherhood, immigration, and reinvention is not presented with fanfare, but with subtle authority. Her transformation is not linear and her identity is not fixed, but she continues, nonetheless – reworking the life she was given into one of her own design. If the man in the story is marked as "an immigrant" and granted a legible life story, Oksana's path resists categorization precisely because it does not conform to expectations. In that resistance, Zilberbourg elevates adaptation as a specifically female mode of authorship – one that operates not through visibility or conquest, but through endurance, reinvention, and the quiet, cumulative labor of becoming.

Adaptation II: In Writing

Two years after the publication of *Like Water and Other Stories*, the book appeared in Russian under the title *Zaderzhi dykhanie* (*Hold Your Breath*). While most stories appear in both editions, some notable differences emerge. For instance, the title story of the Russian version is absent from the English edition. The stories are also rearranged – except for those opening and closing the collections – reinforcing the view of Zilberbourg's work as a cohesive short story cycle. Furthermore, several stories are slightly revised – one might even say *adapted*

–across languages. To bring the discussion homeward, I will offer just one example of the story from which this thesis takes its title.

As previously discussed, "Like Water" includes a poignant recollection of attending a performance of *Eugene Onegin* in Leningrad. In the English version, the opera is identified explicitly, offering the reader a way into Russian culture. In the Russian edition, however, the title is conspicuously absent; instead, the reader is expected to gather contextual clues and identify the opera themselves, yet this anchors the reader immediately in a shared cultural reference point. This shift is not trivial. It highlights the layered work of adaptation – between languages, but also between cultural expectations. The English version offers accessibility and immediacy, while the Russian version assumes a deeper cultural literacy. The change subtly inverts the direction of translation: while the English reader is guided toward understanding, the Russian reader is invited into an active act of recognition. This difference reveals Zilberbourg's sensitivity to the audience – how memory, art, and identity are framed depending on who is presumed to be listening.

Another instance of adaptation emerges in the portrayal of "girl-on-girl love." In the English version, the heroine's reflections unfold with remarkable sobriety and restraint, presenting her fantasies without apology or embellishment. The Russian edition, however, softens the narrative's edges, subtly recalibrating the tone to align with cultural expectations in the post-Soviet context. A telling moment occurs when the narrator interrupts the flow of introspection with a distancing aside: "this is something that is often seen here, in California" (Zilberbourg 2021, 23). The phrase functions as both explanation and self-protective gesture, redirecting attention from the narrator's interiority to her environment. In doing so, the Russian text reframes the heroine's desire not as something deeply personal, but as a response to cultural conditioning – an adaptation to local norms, rather than an expression of inner longing. This shift underscores how adaptation in Zilberbourg's work extends beyond language or plot; it is

a matter of emotional framing, shaped by audience, geography, and the unspoken rules of what can be said aloud. That same logic of recalibration appears not only within her stories, but in the voice that frames them.

Even Zilberbourg's authorial identities adapt alongside her stories. In English, she writes under the name Olga Zilberbourg – her maiden name. In Russian, she publishes as Olga Grenetz – using her husband's surname. While this has originated as a commercial decision, the effect is more than pragmatic. Each name signals a shift in context, creating a quiet distance between the author and her audience. Like the narratives she crafts, her names bear the mark of displacement – neither fully rooted nor entirely foreign but suspended in-between.

Just as Berberova adapts across genres, Zilberbourg adapts across languages. Her bilingual authorship is not simply a matter of translation, but of transformation. She edits, omits, rewrites – tailoring each version to the expectations, norms (that are still ought to be broken), and emotional registers of its readership. Whether subtly reframing intimacy, withholding cultural reference, or exploiting the grammatical quirks of English for stylistic effect, Zilberbourg uses language itself as a tool of navigation. In doing so, she embraces adaptation not as compromise, but as a creative principle – a way of surviving displacement, of claiming narrative space, and of telling stories that stretch between worlds.

CONCLUSION: WRITING BETWEEN WORLDS, SPEAKING ACROSS SILENCES

"They drink tea." This almost incidental phrase captures all the tension of a displaced narrative. In order to survive, one must adapt. But just as naturally, one resists, holding tight to old habits. Finding balance between these oppositions, while failing more times than winning, becomes the quiet work of diasporic life – a process that unfolds not in grand gestures, but in everyday acts, partial transformations, and stories told in the in-between.

To trace the contours of displacement is to navigate a terrain that is at once intimate and elusive, stitched together by memory, absence, and the quiet labor of adaptation. Across decades, languages, and radically different political and cultural landscapes, Nina Berberova and Olga Zilberbourg chart parallel paths through this terrain – writing not to resolve the rupture of exile, but to dwell within it, observe its textures, and articulate its often-invisible effects on the everyday lives of women.

Berberova, whose final prose works mark both a geographic and literary transition, transforms the short story into a vessel of elegiac defiance. Her American fiction does not abandon the Russian literary tradition but distills it, adapting its preoccupations –loneliness, loss, rootedness –into sharper, briefer forms. For her, the short story becomes not merely a genre of necessity, but one of precision: capable of capturing the fragmented subjectivities of émigré existence and the quiet unraveling of its protagonists. As her prose thins into poetry, her voice grows more ambiguous, more resistant to categorization. The murmur of the "thinking burdock," grumbling unnoticed in the underbrush, encapsulates a poetics of minor resistance – female, displaced, enduring.

Writing in a twenty-first-century American context, Zilberbourg continues this lineage, reconfiguring it through new linguistic and cultural frames. Her stories do not simply echo Berberova's – they absorb, retranslate, and adapt emotional and narrative structures of similar

experiences. In her hands, the immigrant experience becomes less a teleological journey from dislocation to belonging than an ongoing negotiation between selves, languages, and expectations. Her female characters are often suspended in the act of becoming – caught between inherited memory and immediate reality, between self-effacement and authorship. They do not speak from a fixed position; instead, they adapt in motion, revising the very narratives that attempt to contain them.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the short story's formal properties – its brevity, compression, and ambiguity – mirror the epistemic structures of exile and immigration. Yet I have also shown how this genre becomes a particularly generative space for female authors navigating cultural in-betweenness. Loneliness, longing, and topos emerge not only as recurrent motifs, but as narrative techniques for surviving displacement. Cities, in this corpus, are never neutral: they are hostile, uncanny, or indifferent, shaping the emotional and symbolic contours of immigrant identity. Space itself becomes semiotic – a contested terrain where memory leaks into the present, and solitude becomes a place of refuge, and loneliness – a battleground.

Importantly, Berberova and Zilberbourg do not simply describe displacement – they enact it, formally and linguistically. Their narratives do not move linearly toward closure but instead dwell in fragmentation, contradiction, and suspended time. They adapt across genres, languages, and even names, modeling a form of authorship that resists containment and thrives in multiplicity. In doing so, they challenge both the gendered conventions of the literary canon and the cultural assumptions of what it means to write – and to belong.

If adaptation is often seen as survival, both authors suggest something more radical: that survival itself can be an act of authorship. To write as an émigré/immigrant woman is not simply to document dislocation – it is to remake the coordinates of literary space. Their stories, fragmentary and open-ended, do not seek a single home, but instead chart a constellation of

provisional dwellings – each marked by memory, estrangement, and the quiet, persistent labor of thought. And perhaps that is the deepest truth these stories offer: not that adaptation is always possible, but that even in the act of narrating its limits, something else, probably more meaningful, emerges – call it literature, call it resistance, or, as Berberova might have, call it a murmur no less true for being nearly drowned out.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Almanakh "Russkii Mir: Prostranstvo i vremia russkoi kul'tury" [*Almanac "Russian World: Space and Time of Russian Culture"*], no. 10 (2016).

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Bely, Andrei. *Petersburg.* Translated by Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Berberova, Nina Nikolaevna. *Neizvestnaia Berberova: Roman, stikhi, stat'i [The Unknown Berberova: A Novel, Poems, Essays].* St. Petersburg: Limbus Press, 1998b.

Berberova, Nina. "Bol'shoi gorod" ["The Big City"]. *Novy Zhurnal*, no. 32 (1953): 68–80.

Berberova, Nina. "Mysliashchii trostnik" ["The Thinking Reed"]. *Novy Zhurnal*, no. 55 (1958): 11–49.

Berberova, Nina. *Kursiv moi: Avtobiografiia v dvukh tomakh* [*The Italics Are Mine: An Autobiography in Two Volumes*]. 2nd ed., revised and expanded. New York: Russica Publishers, 1983.

Berberova, Nina. *My Dear, Close and Distant Friend: Nina Berberova's Letters to Sergej Rittenberg (1947–1975).* Edited by Magnus Ljunggren. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2020.

Berberova, Nina. *Rasskazy v izgnanii [Stories in Exile].* Moscow: Izdatel'stvo imeni Sabashnikovykh, 1994.

Berberova, Nina. *The Ladies from St. Petersburg: Three Novellas*. Translated by Marian Schwartz. New York: New Directions, 1998a.

Berberova, Nina. *The Revolt*. London: Collins, 1989.

Berberova, Nina. *The Tattered Cloak, and Other Novels*. Translated by Marian Schwartz. First edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991a.

Berberova, Nina. *Three Novels: The Second Volume: The Cloak, the Black Pestilence, the Comb*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1991b.

Demidova, Olga. "Amerikanskii opyt Niny Berberovoi" ["The American Experience of Nina Berberova"]. Kosmopolis 2 (2007): 11–23.

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Flynn, Elizabeth A., and Patricia P. Schweickart, eds. *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Goyet, Florence. *The Classic Short Story, 1870–1925: Theory of a Genre.* Translated by Marielle Sutherland. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014.

Grigorian, Natasha. *Visions of the Future: Malthusian Thought Experiments in Russian Literature (1840–1960).* First edition. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1515/9798887190563.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991.* London: Michael Joseph, 1994.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Kaspe, Irina. *Iskusstvo otsutstvovat': nezamechennoe pokolenie russkoi literatury* [*The Art of Absence: The Unnoticed Generation of Russian Literature*]. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2005.

Laing, Olivia. *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone.* First U.S. edition. New York: Picador, 2016.

Lee, Yew Leong, and Janet Phillips. "An Interview with Marian Schwartz on Nina Berberova." *Asymptote*, October 2021. https://www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-with-marian-schwartz-on-nina-berberova/.

Livak, Leonid. *How It Was Done in Paris: Russian Émigré Literature and French Modernism.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

Lotman, Yuri Mikhailovich. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Translated by Ronald Vroon. Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, University of Michigan, 1977.

Lounsbery, Anne. *Thin Culture, High Art: Gogol, Hawthorne, and Authorship in Nineteenth-Century Russia and America.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

May, Charles E. *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.

———. *"I Am Your Brother": Short Story Studies.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013.

———. *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice.* 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Meletinskii, Eleazar M. *The Poetics of Myth.* Translated by Guy Lanoue and Alexandre Sadetsky. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Morard, Annick. *De l'émigré au déraciné: La "jeune génération" des écrivains russes entre identité et esthétique (Paris, 1920–1940).* Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2010.

Nagel, James. *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001.

Orwell, George. *1984.* New York: Signet Classics, 1961.

Pacht, Michelle. *The Subversive Storyteller: The Short Story Cycle and the Politics of Identity in America.* Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

Poplavskii, Boris. "O misticheskoi atmosphere molodoi literatury v emigratsii" ["On the Mystical Atmosphere of Young Literature in Emigration"]. In *Sobranie sochinenii: v 3 t. T. 3: Stat'i. Dnevniki. Pis'ma* [*Collected Works: in 3 vols. Vol. 3: Articles, Diaries, Letters*], Knizhnitsa, 2009.

Reid, Ian. *The Short Story.* London: Methuen, 1977.

Rohrberger, Mary. *Hawthorne and the Modern Short Story: A Study in Genre.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Rubins, Maria. *Russkii Monparnas: Parizhskaia proza 1920–1930-kh godov v kontekste transnatsional'nogo modernizma* [*Russian Montparnasse: Transnational Writing in Interwar Paris*]. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2017.

Stepanov, Andrei Dmitrievich. "Poniatie 'topos' – problema granits" ["The Concept of 'Topos': The Problem of Borders"]. *MIRS*, no. 2 (2018): 41–46.

Tompkins, Jane, ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Tyutchev, Fedor Ivanovich. *The Poetry of Fedor Ivanovich Tyutchev: An Introduction.* Translated and with notes by Colin John Holcombe. Ocaso Press, 2019.

Vinokurova, Irina. *Nina Berberova: Izvestnaia i neizvestnaia* [*Nina Berberova: Known and Unknown*]. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023.

Vyshinskaia, E. I. "Rasskaz-antiutopiia N. Berberovoi Pamiati Shlimana" ["The Dystopian Short Story by N. Berberova In Memory of Schliemann"]. Naukovi zapysky Kharkivs'koho natsional'noho pedahohichnoho universytetu imeni H. S. Skovorody. Seriia: Literaturoznavstvo 1 (2015): 37–52.

Winther, Per, Michael Trussler, Michael Toolan, Charles E. May, and Susan Lohafer. "Introduction." *Narrative* 20, no. 2 (May 2012): 135–170.

Wiśniewski, Janusz L. *Loneliness on the Net.* Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2001.

Zamyatin, Evgeny. *We.* Translated by Clarence Brown. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

Zilberbourg, Olga. *Like Water and Other Stories*. Santa Rosa, CA: WTAW Press, 2019.

Zilberbourg, Olga. *Zaderzhi dykhanie i drugie rasskazy* [*Hold Your Breath and Other Stories*]. Moscow: Vremya, 2021.