

Real Men and Phantom Stories: Pain and Prosthesis in Soviet War Literature

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ABSTRACT

The proposed paper examines the role of pain in the creation of foundational political narratives by focusing on Boris Polevoi's 1946 Story of a Real Man (Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke). Polevoi's Story, typical of wartime works of national cohesion, operates by means of what I call prosthetic narrative: the transformation of pain and suffering into an instrument of national victory. In medicine and in common usage, a prosthesis is an artificial limb; in rhetoric, it is an addition or supplement (in both English and Russian). Polevoi's novella is prosthetic because it is a supplement to his journalistic account of the Nuremberg trials; it both excises and reattaches accounts of Nazi atrocities to the heroic Russian tale it tells, and it is a hybrid genre that combines biography, journalism, and fiction. The work is prosthetic in another sense: its hero is a double amputee who resumes his mission as a cyborg bomber pilot. In Civilization and Its Discontents Freud noted technology's prosthetic function of extending human capacities beyond their limits. The use of technology to enhance human capacity is, however, double-edged. Central to the prosthetic device is the interrelation of loss and (improved) restoration: the artificial limb indicates the missing amputated limb. The

production of the national body depends on the excision of the injured limb that nonetheless persists in phantom form as an always available source for the continuous production of prosthetic national narrative.

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Literature

In medical science, and in common usage in both English and Russian a prosthesis (*protez*) is an artificial limb; in rhetoric, it is an addition or supplement to a word. In his book Prosthesis David Wills lists a string of activities that suggestively unite the philological and the orthopedic usage of the term: "placement, displacement, replacement, standing, dislodging, substituting, setting, amputating"(Wills 9). My discussion of Soviet Socialist Realist war literature relies on this double meaning of the prosthetic, having to do both with bodies and pain and literary devices and strategies of representation. I focus in particular on Boris Polevoi's 1946 Story of a Real Man (*Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke*). Well known in its time, the novel had over 2.34 million copies in print within ten years of its initial publication in 1946(Kasack). Polevoi's Story is prosthetic because its hero is a double amputee who resumes his mission as a cyborg bomber pilot. The importance of the prosthesis in this text and others like it, however, goes beyond orthopedically enabled heroism. The Story of a Real Man is a supplement to Polevoi's journalistic account of the Nuremburg trials; the testimony of

what was not called the Holocaust reattaches itself to the story of the amputee-pilot. More generally, as I will show, the literary prosthetic serves as a technology of reshaping the human being during the war years. The prosthetic transformation of injury and pain into an instrument of national victory is a highly productive trope in Soviet war literature.

Freud serves as a useful point of departure for the link between technology and prosthesis, although he was not the first to note the significance of this interaction. ⁱ In Civilization and Its Discontents Freud describes the numerous technical and mechanical means by which the defects and limits of human capacities, for example, of sight, hearing, movement, and memory—can be overcome:

With every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits to their functioning. Motor power places gigantic forces at his disposal, which like his muscles, he can employ in any direction; thanks to ships and aircraft neither water nor air can hinder his movements; by means of spectacles he corrects defects in the lens of his own eye; by means of the telescope he sees into the far distance; by means of the microscope he overcomes the limits of visibility set by the structure of his retina. In the photographic camera he has created an instrument, which retains the fleeting visual impressions, just as a gramophone disc retains the equally fleeting auditory ones; both are at bottom materializations of the power he possesses of recollection, his memory.(Freud 37-38).ⁱⁱ

The use of artificial instruments and technical devices transforms humanity into a higher form of life. Freud concluded, but not without irony: "Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent: (Freud 39). Written in 1930, Freud's essay critically reflects on the love affair with technology that was central to his time.

Viktor Shklovsky is another important 20th century thinker who even earlier than Freud registered the impact of technology as prosthesis. In Zoo, Or, Letters Not about Love (ZOO, ili pis'ma ne o liubvi), first published in 1923, Shklovsky describes the impact of the instrument (in the sense of "tool") on the human being:

The instrument not only extends the human arm; but also extends into the human. I do not experience any particular attachment to my footwear, but it is nonetheless an extension of me; it is a part of me. Most of all, it is the machine that changes the human being.

To make his point, Shklovsky cites the scene from Tolstoy's War and Peace in which the gunner Tushin enters "a new world created by his artillery" (Shklovsky's language).

Tolstoy writes that Tushin "imagined himself as a powerful man of enormous height, who hurled canon at the French with both hands." Instruments, and in particular, the instruments of war-- transform ordinary human beings into Freud's prosthetic gods. Even more than Freud, however, Shklovsky sees human beings as constructed by technology: "the machine gunner and the double bass player are extensions of their instruments." He

concludes: "Underground trains, construction cranes, and automobiles are humanity's prostheses" (protezy chelovechestva).

There is a connection between Shklovsky's notion of art as device and his model of the human being as prosthetic extension. In his Theory of Prose, the device is the supplement that replaces character, emotion, biography, history, psychology, and everything else that up until the Formalists was taken as the central core of the artistic work. When Shklovsky says "skorost' trebuet tsel'" velocity demands a purpose—the attribution of agency to "velocity" decenters the human subject. Shklovsky writes in a similar way about the artistic device that "creates content." In both cases the mechanism, whether linguistic or physical, takes over and extends the function previously attributed to the human author.

The use of prosthetic or technological devices to enhance human capacity, whether for creativity or destruction, is, however, double-edged. What is added on always implies a capacity that is limited or has been destroyed. Central to the idea of the prosthetic is the interrelation of loss and (improved) restoration: the artificial limb indicates the loss of the amputated limb (Wills).ⁱⁱⁱ The connection between enhancement and loss is central to the prosthesis of writing, which, according to Freud, and later, Derrida, is a device that replaces a missing voice ; for Derrida, however, voice is always already absent and not merely missing. Speech, writing, and narrative, the entire symbolic order function in absence and differentiation, and not presence and identity.

Soviet war literature, however, disavows both foundational absence and contingent loss.

In his important article "Trauma, Absence, Loss" Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between absence and loss and shows the pitfalls of conflating the two. He defines absence as constitutive of the human condition, as in the absence of metaphysical foundations, the absence of a unitary community and an integral self. Loss, in contrast, whether of an individual, a group, or a culture, is historically contingent. Mistaking loss for absence can lead to endless, paralyzing melancholy. Confusing absence (of foundations, for example, or of the unitary community) with loss may lead to "utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community." Conventional narrative, according to LaCapra, may also be guilty of confusing absence with loss, because the beginning of a conventional narrative, "construed as a variant of full presence, innocence, or intactness –is lost <...> only to be recovered at the end" (LaCapra). The happy endings of conventional literature and popular culture turn tragedy into triumph. Eric Santner's analysis of German war stories of the 1980s identifies what he calls "narrative fetishism ... the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called the narrative into being in the first place" (Santner). Prosthetic narratives such as Polevoi's, however, not only deny foundational absence; they refuse to recognize even contingent loss. The prosthetic operation—hyperfetishism, if you will-- reattaches the missing limb to the injured hero, whose new body is not only intact, but even better than it was before.

Polevoi's Prosthetic Hero

Polevoi's prosthetic hero was not new in 1946. The transformation of the human being into a super being made of metal was a central trope of Soviet proletarian poetry of the twenties (Hellebust). The proletarian poets' glorification of the new artificial man of metal and construction novels of the thirties celebrating the transformation of landscape and the human being under industrialization also relied on notions of technology that prosthetically extend human agency.

In the Soviet context of the 30s and 40s, the cult of Stalin is a crucial factor in the prosthetic transformation of the individual. It is not just technology that empties out individual human agency, but the power of the masses, embodied in the leader, to which individuals must subordinate themselves.^{iv} In Itsik Fefer's poem "Stalin," for example, Stalin is the one name that replaces all personal pronouns: "I say Stalin—I mean us <...> I say Stalin—I mean you/ I say Stalin—I mean myself" (Zog ikh Stalin—meyn ikh mir <...> Zog ikh Stalin—meyn ikh dikh, / Zog ikh Stalin—meyn ikh zikh) (Fefer Roytarmeyish 4) In Fefer's poem, there is no "I" or "you;" there is only Stalin, the universal prosthetic pronoun. To use the language of Polevoi's story, there is only one "real man" (nastoiashchii chelovek).^v This one real man, Stalin, fills in all the gaps.

A Story of a Real Man does not refer to Stalin directly, but stages his presence through the undead figure of the "commissar." In his moribund condition, (his face

"looked as if wax had been poured into it") the commissar brings a breath of "Moscow spring" to the hospital ward where the injured pilot Meres'ev receives treatment , inspiring him to try to fly again after his double amputation. The commissar reads the wounded pilot Ostrovskii's How the Steel Was Tempered, the story of a civil war prosthetic hero who loses his vision, the use of legs, and the use of one arm, but continues to serve by writing novels.

The moment that the amputee pilot sees the commissar die is the moment that he realizes that he "very much wanted to become a real man, just like the man who just now was being taken on his last journey" (I ochen' zakhotelos' Alekseiu stat' nastoiashchim chelovekom, takim zhe, kak tot, kogo seichas uvezli v poslednii put') (Polevoi Povest' O Nastoiashchem Cheloveke 147).

Meres'ev gets his wish when he flies his plane again. Polevoi writes, "He was fused with his machine, he sensed it as a continuation of his own body" (On slisia so svoei mashinoy, oshchutil ee kak prodolzhenie sobstvennogo tela) (Polevoi Povest' O Nastoiashchem Cheloveke 249). He names himself a "real man" precisely in the last moment of a desperate battle with a German plane, when he is very nearly out of fuel ("he became a real, yes, a real man," stal nastoiashchim . . . nu da, nastoiashchim chelovekom") (Polevoi Povest' O Nastoiashchem Cheloveke 287). Meres'ev feels the motor change as the fuel drops: "the pilot felt this in his whole body, as if it were not the motor, but he himself who was choking" (Polevoi Povest' O Nastoiashchem Cheloveke

296). Polevoi's hero loses all sense of the distinction between himself and his plane. He becomes a cyborg, in the sense that the originators of the term defined it, that is, a "self-regulating man-machine system."^{vi} Just as the commissar is a "real man" as a waxen, reanimated corpse, Meres'ev becomes a real man only when his humanity is replaced and supplemented by the power of a machine. By the end of the story, the terrible pain, exhaustion, isolation, and despair that Meres'ev suffered no longer have any weight or meaning for the narrative. The ordeals of surviving the plane crash, crawling for help, and undergoing the double amputation—are not even bad memories any more. They are simply erased.

From atrocity to triumph

Polevoi's "real man" depends, as I have shown, on earlier Soviet literature, and on the ideology of the leader, Stalin. His "real man" most crucially depends on the war itself and the campaign of hatred of the enemy, a theme that Evgenii Dobrenko emphasizes in his work. Il'ia Erenburg was the chief architect of this campaign. His numerous propaganda articles that appeared (in Russian) in Pravda in the spring and summer of 1942, among which were included, "The Justification of Hatred, " "They Must Not Live," and "Kill!"—rely on a prosthetic series of substitutions while at the same time demonizing technology as particular to Nazi atrocity. In "The Justification of Hatred," for example, Ehrenburg describes German soldiers as "monsters" and "savages armed with

the latest technology." He provides both a genealogy of and an incitement to hatred of the German enemy, affirming "hatred did not come to us easily, We paid for it with whole cities and provinces, with hundreds of thousands of human lives" (Erenburg Voina 7). In Ehrenburg's article, hatred supplants every other emotion: "Death to the German occupiers—these words sound like an oath of love <...> The death of every German—this is a pledge that children will no longer know grief (Erenburg Voina 8). As in Fefer's poem, the "oath" is also important in this work, where it is offered as a security against all future evil. The prosthetic structure of the narrative works in a series of steps, each replacing what came before: (1) hatred for the enemy replaces the awareness of loss; (2) hatred becomes attached to love; and (3) hatred is a guarantee of future happiness.

Polevoi wrote Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke in the nineteen days that he was covering the Nuremberg trial. The connection between the novel and the trial, while noted in the critical literature, has not been analyzed. Polevoi's novel is prosthetic because it is a supplement to his journalistic account of the Nuremberg trials; it both excises and reattaches accounts of Nazi atrocities to the heroic Soviet tale it tells. Polevoi is not sure of his hero's true name (Meres'ev or Mares'ev); he cannot say where his hero is now, or what became of him, but there is no need of notes, or an additional meeting with him, because:

he is always with me <...> In the courtroom, at evening parties in the press camp, at some gangster film that the press watches on occasion, I never part

with him. I hear and note down some piece of monstrous testimony, and I think of him, about this Russian man from the lower Volga, and when during the trial there is a discussion of the great feat of the Soviet people, about the valor of the Red Army, I see him before me—simple, guileless, frank, so Russian (i kogda na sude zakhodit rech' o velikom podvige sovetского naroda, o doblesti Krasnoi Armii, ia vizhu pered soboi ego—prostogo, beskhitroznogo, iskrennego, takogo russkogo (Polevoi V Kontse Kontsov: Niuremburgskie Dnevnik 229).

The legless pilot is "always with" Polevoi—just as Stalin is "always with us"—both in the courtroom during the day and in the evenings, when Polevoi relaxed with other reporters, including reporters from the US, smoking, drinking, and watching American gangster movies. The phantom "real man" is both an analgesic and a prophylaxis: analgesic against the pain of the "monstrous testimony" of Nazi atrocities and a prophylaxis against the temptations of the capitalist West.

The problem is that the analgesic and the prophylaxis prosthetically replace the very thing that they are supposed to guard against. The "real Soviet man" is supposed to stand for everything the Nazis were not, but the story of how the real man came to be the real man reads very much like the testimony of how the Nazis produced what Vasili Grossman and Hannah Arendt called "living corpses." Polevoi's account of the Nuremberg trials includes testimony of the medical experiments conducted at Dachau.

The first part of his story of the legless pilot's eighteen day journey on broken feet in German occupied territory reads like the account of the Dachau experiments to test the limits of pain, hunger, cold, and exhaustion. When he catches sight of his reflection in a frozen pond, Meres'ev is startled at what he sees, "It looked like a skull over which dark skin had been stretched. From dark hollows huge, round, wildly bright eyes looked out." (Ono napominalo ob'iatnutyi temnoi kozhei cherep. Iz temnykh vpadim smotreli bol'shie, kruglye, diko blestevshie glaza) (Polevoi Povest' O Nastoiashchem Cheloveke 41).^{vii}

Later descriptions emphasize his moribund state: the pilot is "a human skeleton covered in dark skin, with sharply protruding kneecaps, with a round and sharp pelvis, with a completely sunken belly" (Polevoi Povest' O Nastoiashchem Cheloveke 57). Meres'ev resembles the emaciated Nazi concentration camp inmates that Polevoi heard testimony about in Nuremberg and about which he himself reported on in his articles for Pravda in 1945. Remember that Polevoi says he writes The Story of a Real Man without reference to his notes about the pilot's ordeal and without recourse to interviews with him. Polevoi transforms the Nuremberg trials, the scene of *testimony* into the stuff of *prosthetic* narrative. The story of the cyborg-superhero completely absorbs the testimony of crimes against humanity into a narrative of Soviet triumph. Reading the buried layers of testimony in the fiction requires an act of reading that is tantamount to an archeological dig.

The transformation of testimony into national prosthetic is remarkable for the

substitutions and slippages it entails, especially the operation that makes the body in pain into the national Soviet superbody, the "great feat of the Soviet people." This prosthetic operation can be found all over Soviet war literature, including not only Erenburg's propaganda articles, which I discussed earlier, but also example, Kazakevich's Zvezda, Grossman's Za pravoe delo. Itzik Fefer's poem "Di shvue"(The Oath) is a particularly important example. Published in 1942 in the first issue of the Soviet Yiddish newspaper Eynikayt, the organ of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, it was translated into Russian as "Kliatva" and published in the journal Znamia in the same year (Fefer "Di Shvue"). The poem, which ultimately derives from Psalm 137, simultaneously produces the horribly mutilated body of the soldier and traces his transformation into a cyborg warrior. The poet swears that his hatred and wrath will not be spent until he feels his enemy's blood on his own flesh, and vows to fight on even if he loses both arms:

And if the dark whirlwind tears off my arm

I will choke off the enemy's hateful breath with my other arm

And if a shell destroys my other arm,

My sacred hatred will dull the pain <...>

If the night darkens my eyes with blindness

My hatred –my sister in battle will not let me

Bow my head. The eye of my heart will discover the enemy

The flame of my hatred will obliterate his memory forever (Un oyv s'vet der

fintsterer vikher a hant mir tseflikn,/ Vel ikh mit der tsveyter dem fayntlekh
 otem dershtikn; / Un oyb s'vet a koyl mir di hant oykh d tsveyte tsestroybn,
 Vel ikh mit mayn heyliker sine dem veytik fartoybn <...> Un oyb s'vet di
 nakht mir mit blindkayt farleshn di oygn,/ Mayn sine—mayn shvester in
 shlakht vet nit lozn farnoygn / Mayn kop. Der flam fun mayn hos vet af eybik
 zayn zeykher farmekn) (Fefer Roytarmeyish 3).

The Russian translation, appearing in Znamia in 1942, reads:

Klianus' ia pri solnechnom svete, pri svete mertsaiushchikh zvezd,

<...>

Moia nenavist' ne istechet, moi gnev do tekh por ne ostynet,

Poka na rukakh ne pochuvstvuiu krovi vruga svoego.

I esli vo mrake mne ruku odnu otorvet,

Ia drugoiu rukoiu dykhan'e vruga zadushu;

I esli kovarnyi snariad vtoruiu ruku otorvet,

Ia v gneve sviashchennom svoiu bol' zaglushu!

<...>

I esli mne noch' slepotoiu potushit glaza,

Sestra moia –nenavist'- ne dopustit, v boiu chtob sognulas'

Moia golova. Glazom sertsu povsiudu naidu ia vruga,

Ogon' moei nenavisti navsegda ego pamiat' sotret.

The list of injuries could be extended; each successive injury transforms the body into an ever more powerful fighting machine. The prosthetic production of the national superboddy depends on continuous injury.

Shklovky and Freud's reflections on the relation between humans and their instruments and indeed both earlier and later critical elaborations of the model of the human as already constructed, not natural, but worked on, or made by technology, including technologies of gender or of power--reveal broad sweep of the human as prosthetic extension. The romance of the artificial man goes at least as far back as the legend of the Golem, and continues in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Olesha's Ophelia. The Golem was reanimated in American comic books of the 1940s in the guise of various superheroes. The utopian projections of the human-machine of the 1920s and the deconstructive models of the 1990s, are distinct; the latter seeks to dismantle the autonomy and mastery of the human agent. What is unique, however, about Soviet war literature is the use of this prosthetic transformation of pain and injury into weaponry as a tool of war mobilization. The production of the national body depends on the excision of the injured limb that nonetheless persists in phantom form as an always available source for the continuous production of prosthetic national narrative.

The question of what happens afterwards, how memorialization looks back and revisits the phantom pain, displacing it in new ways, is beyond the scope of this paper. I would like to leave you, however, with an image from an important postwar work,

Erenburg's The Thaw (Ottepel', 1954) that gives some indication as to the fate of war time prosthetic superheroes—not the real life amputee veterans who were exiled from the capital cities, but their symbolic counterparts, the ordinary Soviet "real men," as represented in literary fiction.

The characters in Erenburg's novel live in the bright future of happiness achieved, however, their illnesses, hysterical outbursts, and difficulty in speaking to one another indicate the weight of an intolerable burden. In The Thaw, the war is a closed topic. When, for example the young engineer Koroteev and Zhuravlev, the factory director, talk about their experiences during the war, Koroteev "felt that closeness which arises between former front-line soldiers: they knew something that others did not see and did not experience" (Erenburg Ottepel' 89). The war transcends ordinary conversation and approaches something like the sublime in its indescribability and overwhelming power. Those who experienced that sublimity, however, are left incapacitated by it. The men and women of steel, who had been reforged in the early years of the Soviet Union, and who were mobilized into human weapons during the war, appear a decade later as "half-finished" products (nedodelannyi polufabrikat) (Erenburg Ottepel' 93). Whatever Erenburg's flaws as a writer are, his novel lays bare the device that he himself helped to create, revealing the abject body that is the twin of the prosthetic hero.

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ⁱ The idea that human beings rely on artificial means to extend their interactions with each other and with nature is not new either to the industrial or to the computer age, but can be traced at least as far back as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Adam Smith. Smith, for example, described human society as a vast productive machine, which both diminished the human individual to a mere "fabricating man," *homo faber*, but which offered compensation in the form of consumer products, which increased the laborers' happiness. Labor and consumption are both ways that we "mix" with nature and each other, according to Locke. These interactions shape who we are. More recent critical discussions of the prosthetic, in contrast, argue that the body never appears as simply natural, but is already constructed (as gendered, as able or disabled, for example), as formed by technologies of power both under capitalism (Foucault's carceral society, for example) and socialism. Susan Buck-Morss argues that both capitalism and socialism share a model of the human being as a productive unit within a large production unit, and quotes not only Adam Smith but also Stalin's model of the human being as a cog in the machine of society. Buck-Morss elaborates the reduction of the human being under capitalism as the reduction of the possibility for political action. She writes: "The point of market exchange is the null point of social community" Susan Buck-Morss, "Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display," Critical Inquiry 21.Winter (1995): 437.. The compensatory advantage of a capitalist economy is that money frees each individual from obligation to the whole. Under socialism, in contrast, the individual's obligation to the whole was "infinite."

ⁱⁱ In the 1990s Freud's insight into the prosthetic role of technology served as the jumping off point for a significant body of critical literature on technology and the constitution of human subjectivity Sarah S.

Jain, "The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope," Science, Technology, and Human Values 24.1 (1999)..

ⁱⁱⁱ See Mark Seltzer, who writes about the duality of technology's prosthetic function. Henry Ford's vision of the numbers of armless, legless, and blind men who could work on his production line inspired Seltzer's insight about "the double logic of technology as prosthesis." The production line "projects a violent dismemberment of the natural body and an emptying out of human agency," but it also projects a transcendence of the natural body and an extension of human agency through the forms of technology that supplement it" Mark Seltzer, "'Writing Technologies'," New German Critique 57.Autumn (1992): 170-71..

^{iv} I am relying here on Evgeny Dobrenko's notion of the centrality of the masses in Soviet literature under Stalin E. I. Dobrenko, Metafora Vlasti: Literatura Stalinskoi Epokhi V Istoricheskom Osveshchenii (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1993)..

^v "Chelovek" is usually translated as "person," but given the story's strongly masculinist imagery (the bomber plane, the amputation of the pilot's legs, the almost complete absence of women and the domestic sphere) "man" is a more suitable translation. To become a real man means becoming a copy or a substitute for the one true "real man." To be like the real man, Stalin, but not to be him requires an injury that diminishes manhood and the capacity to act. For more on the model of Soviet subjectivity and injured masculinity, see Kaganovsky Lilya Kaganovsky, "Bodily Remains: The 'Positive Hero' in Stalinist Fiction," University of California at Berkeley, 2000..

^{vi} Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, "Cyborgs and Space," *Astronautics*, September, 1960, cited by Donna Harroway, "Cyborgs and Symbionts: Living Together in the New World Order," The Cyborg Handbook, ed. Chris Hables Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995) xv..

^{vii} The intense gaze of concentration camp inmates on their last legs is the subject of a discussion between Claude Lanzmann and Maurice Rossel in Lanzmann's film Un Vivant qui Passe. Auschwitz 1943-
Thereseinstadt 1944.