# Preface

# Valery Vinogradovs

It is a pleasant task to introduce our topic and contributors, who are by far more fitting to contemplate ageing than myself. In the year of my birth, John Carvalho attended Michel Foucault's iconic lectures dedicated to fearless speech, while in Boston Babette Babich was studying with Hans-Georg Gadamer. David Konstan, Ken-ichi Sasaki, and Michael Alpert, stepping around octogenary, are about twice as old as I am. Finally, turning 91 in 2023, Arnold Berleant published a new book!

The symposium kicks off in the cradle of the Western intellectual tradition, classical antiquity. We are introduced with a light piece by David Konstan, which seamlessly draws from both poetry and philosophy, with a keen eye on the joys and perils of erotic passion as well as the passion for critical activity. Then, in the manner of a rhapsode, Ken-ichi Sasaki takes us on a self-reflective voyage accentuating the role of creative recollection in the experience of ageing, as well as the special status of "a precious witness", a friend, whose loss thins down one's past, present, and future. Next, we are fortunate to feature an ebullient dialogue between two friends, Arnold Berleant and Michael Alpert, who share their perceptual wisdom with respect to matters as diverse and riveting as the "world of shadows", a fox and bears, trauma, the vivid presence of dead friends and, of course, happiness and beauty. Two essays conclude our symposium. First, engaging with Alfred Schutz and Shaun Gallagher, John Carvalho fleshes out a stylish, enactivist account of growing old in terms of intimate companionship, or a shared performance, comparable to actors in a play we call love. Finally, Babette Babich capitalises on her encyclopaedic understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, among others, and considers paintings, mirrors, and sculpture, so as to unravel the aesthetics of aura, and laugh at death.

As the invited authors share their ethos and arts of thought, our gathering makes it clear that ageing is a pluralist phenomenon demanding our utmost care and, therefore, like human life, ageing is an open-ended enigma. As for my own words below, influenced by the findings of the symposium and emerging in view of today's escalating ecological and geopolitical disasters, in a piece where one would expect a salutary firework of thought, readers will find the traces of a smokework, glimmering.



A process immanent to life itself, ageing presents a radical challenge to the philosopher in search of their feeling of life, and, as a corollary, their feel for ageing with its cycles, ins and outs. A meaningful life is coterminous with meaningful ageing, intercircled, spiralling out into the world – an insight from a drawing exercise Seneca offers in Letter XII to Lucilius.

Naturally, life carries galaxies within, and yet the most basic and universal features of our shared experience are the most politicised, twisted, and policed. It is hard to breathe!

Nominally, one's life begins within an institution, not by a tree or in a creek. Labour and birth in a medical ward, compulsory and yet consensual, surveilled and safe under the LED lights.

State-laid educational rails, via school and the academy, commonly lead to nothing else but a habit of occupation, as normal as a right for vocation and chewing meat, voting and woe from wit. Follow the lead.

The reality is such that the nuances and endless secrets of one's nature, opening and contracting in relation to their milieu, percolate through the seemingly unavoidable matrix of the workforce, of having to be of service to a dubious, man-made whole. Nation, society, family – alas, the policy of greed bends these arbitrary formations into fearful divisive units under the stars.

The noose tightens: unless chance and our brutal history have privileged one with hereditary assets, rest assured, back-breaking, boring or ground-breaking – workship will turn into the justification of existence, while money and recognition may justify work in turn. No work record – no man. No reason to worry about the wonders of a simple life, grow up – be productive.

Otherwise, the system will threaten, even be prompted to discharge the likes of you to the margins of a common dream, building up to a crystal or pearl anniversary of paying off a private construction undergird by cement, steel, bricks, and plaster. Here, looking up into the window at night you can see your own reflection. You deserve it, you decorate it.

In a time to come, there is also official permission to end the cycle of work due to old age, assuming you're not dead yet, of fatigue or illness, by a fateful accident or suicide. Entitlement to retirement, and an ultimate gamble.



Too tired to resist? Mother, daemons, and tricksters – forgive, and let this cup pass from me!

VALERY VINOGRADOVS

#### 1. In the Bowels of Leviathan

"Can you draw out Leviathan with a hook? Or tie its tongue down with a rope?" The Book of Job, 41:1

All groaning and grunting muted, a slow zigzagging sequence, "mental asylum" in *Werckmeister Harmonies* (Tarr, 2000a), unreels an unruly rabble passing through the hallway and wards hammering utensils and convalescents to pieces, one by one, the scene guides us to a far room. A limit, in the clinic's bath. As a light piano theme fills the hollow soundscape, we see a wizened man against the wall, nude and nameless in the tub. Spellbound, the mob retreats back to the streets, swaying like corpses, while young János Valuska, hiding in plain sight in a cavity in the wall, grips us with bright eyes wide-opening e matter deorbiting his health past retrieval. This matter presents an aporia concerning ageing in a dangerous age. When anything is permissible indeed, any rule and crime, in the eyes of the Hungarian artist notorious for screening black-and-white narratives verging on eschatological parables sans special effects, sanctity meets madness in a ceremonial passage.

Like Béla Tarr's final two works, *The Man from London* (2007) and *The Turin Horse* (2011), *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) is co-created with Ágnes Hranitzky, Tarr's spouse. It adopts the novel *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989) by Laszlo Krasznahorkai and the piano theme *Valuska* by Mihály Víg – Tarr's old friends and collaborators in-arms. In this intimate film-project, all eyes are on an orphaned soul, János (Ján-Jean-John-Ivan), living quietly in a small town cut from the same worn-out cloth as countless other spaces amidst the late Socialist Bloc. Having grown up in a comparable milieu, the noir anarchy of the mob is no fiction to me, and Valuska is no naive stranger.

We first see him in the opening scene in a taproom (Tarr, 2000b). Lip-licking, one of the patrons approaches János, "Valuska, come on – show us". The rendition of a great philosophical memory that transpires next will astonish any philosophical connoisseur. In the manner of Ludwig Wittgenstein feeling child-like, circling enthusiastically around Norman and Lionida Malcolm in Cambridge (Malcolm, 2001, p. 44), Valuska choreographs a giddy group in a dance replicating the cyclical movements of celestial bodies, the earth, the sun, and the moon.

A newspaper clerk at night, in-between running errands, János dedicates much of his time to uncle György, a musicologist and savant, his bloodbound relative suffering from ill humours. The key character of György thumbs toward a structural error at the root of European culture. One can approach the global, cancerous crisis of modernity through multiple examples and optics, but in a dialogue with oneself, uncle György asks whether harmony really exists at the basis of a masterwork – a work of art or in the strivings of one's life – for if it does, it will necessitate "faith" (in truth, mankind, god – contingent on reader's ontology) (*Legendary Scenes: The Problem with Werkmeister's Harmonic Principles*, 2016). With János by his side, György argues that, owing to the work of Andreas Werckmeister (1645-1706): All the intervals in the masterpieces of many centuries are false, which means that music and its harmony and echo – its unsurpassable enchantment is entirely based on a false foundation.

Out of sync with the basics of the philosophy of music, I asked Arnold Berleant to comment on György's speech and Vig's *Valuska* that exemplifies the ancient, as opposed to the modern tonal system:

The music is in the genre known as minimal music and is based on simple triadic harmonies in a sequence not governed by 18th-20th century principles of harmonic progression by intervallic relationships of a fifth (i.e. the circle of fifths, as in most Western music from Haydn through Brahms). From what I can make out, uncle György's mutterings are about favouring natural (i.e. pure) intervals (and tuning) rather than altered (or tempered) tuning, which was adopted in the 18th century to make it possible to stay pretty much in tune while modulating through all keys, whether closely or distantly related. Finally, the film's music theme claims to be written in accordance with "seven fraternal stars in the heaven". There is an old tradition beginning, I think, with Pythagoras of relating music and musical intervals to astronomical objects and events, thus giving music a cosmological standing.

In a way inaccessible to words, the film finely attunes the possibility of true cosmic music with the possibility of *Valuska*'s harmonious existence. Indeed, the scenes featuring János and the Valuska theme together are so bright that no one can accuse Tarr of fatalism. Valuska is a messenger of nostalgia, one who refers to many locals as *uncle* and *aunty*, as if related to all of them. He is not troubled by doubt – yet.

Most anticipated by the locals, the central social event in the film is a show by a travelling circus, set up in the heart of the town square. The poster announces two parts: a public display of a whale, which Valuska is yearning to see, and a performance by "The Prince". In the history of mythology and thought, the figure of Leviathan is called upon at least on three major, diverging occasions, which we shall now draw together to cast light on Valuska's premature tragic fate.

The Book of Job (41) portrays Leviathan as a colossal sea monster/serpent, the most magnificent creature that demonstrates both: i. God's (or nature's) might and ii. mankind's humble niche in the grand scheme of things. It would not then be misleading to say that *Job* informs the inclusion of Leviathan in the film as a whale, probably a blue whale, the largest, non-extinct animal on earth. But, much time has worn on since the origin of this myth, and humans have found a way to draw Leviathan out of the deepest waters of being. In *Werckmeister Harmonies*, the prehistoric creature is presented in the form of a rotting carcass, a spectacle for the masses.

The invocation of Leviathan in St. John's *Book of Revelation* (12-3) is more contentious, for it is not mentioned directly by the name, being called "the Red Dragon" instead. Still, the iconographic similitudes have led church fathers and commentators to posit that this "ancient serpent" is Leviathan, now representing "Satan, the deceiver of the whole world", who elsewhere comes by the name of the prince of this world (e.g. Ephesians 2:2). This explains why the whale's corpse and The Prince travel together: lies flourish as nature

degenerates. What is The Prince's service? Here is an instance of fearless speech from the novel:

A town built on lies will continue to be a town built on lies ... What they do and what they will do are both based on lies and false pride. What they think and what they will think are equally ridiculous. They think because they are frightened. Fear is ignorance. He says he likes it when things fall to pieces. Ruin comprises every form of making: lies and false pride are like oxygen in the ice. Making is half: ruin is everything. ... His followers will wreak havoc because they understand his vision perfectly. (Krasznahorkai, 2002, pp. 262-3)

The Prince is the antithesis of János, and he attacks everyone, attacks our cultures and achievements, insofar as we consent to thrive out of a sense of foolish pride consistent with pervasive fears. The fear of not being acknowledged as worthy, of one's life and job security, of losing comfort and followers. Don't these fears orient vital choices in our lives? And when one gets these things, do they tend to feel full of themselves? The old seducer!

No wonder these provocations fuel the rabble, having nothing to lose and little left to revere, paving the way for the "mental asylum" sequence. Total control and division, domination in the heart: the wizened man is merely a fugitive, last barrier, overstepped, and followed by an even more abject chain of cruelty, involving mass murder, rape, and, naturally, Valuska's descent into madness. In a world as divided, depleted, and butchered as ours, the question remains if ruin, in the end, is the sum of all things. Sadly, the likes of János Valuska, or Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin/Mouse – the holy fools and heroes, having no enemies, are doomed to spirit away as lightly and surely as their being in this hostile, old world.

Finally, Leviathan makes another appearance – this time in Thomas Hobbes' eponymous book (1651/1668). Like his intellectual predecessor Niccolò Machiavelli, Hobbes had a pessimistic view of human nature: reckless, fickle, predisposed to immoderate self-interest and cruelty. As a political solution to the problem of political governance, he advocated for the establishment of a strong state ruled by a sovereign, a philosopher-king of modern making willing to resort to violence whenever they feel it is right. An imperial state is a criminal *par excellence*.<sup>1</sup> This way Leviathan becomes politicised and comes to signify the entire body of people, counting children and elders, subsumed under the state in command of an almighty ruler.

For Hobbes and his followers, the Leviathan state is God's most magnificent creation on earth. For me, it is a watered-down veneer of The Prince, commanding dominance and "voluntary servitude".<sup>2</sup> Thus, in case readers have begun wondering what Leviathan has to do with ageing, as a matter of fact, we have returned to the point at which the preface erupted. Namely, the appropriation of one's open-ended nature under the machinations of a ruling regime, whether it is monarchy or neo-liberal corporatocracy. Here is a string of anecdotal examples to this effect.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This wording takes many shapes; most recently: "the state is a rapist" in Dilar Dirik (2022).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> I borrow this expression from Étienne de La Boétie's (1975) *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, published posthumously by Michel de Montaigne in 1577.

### 2. Seniors Protest

Protest is a common praxis deployed by a group of people to voice their disagreement with a matter of public significance. In legal terms, an act of peaceful disobedience is one's right. In recent years in Australia, protests have become severely regulated and restricted. In New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, and, most recently, South Australia, a series of anti-protest laws have been passed by the authorities, threatening people with astronomical fines and imprisonment.<sup>3</sup> The officials claim that protesters disrupt peace and normal operations within a polis/business. Should one choose the ethics and politics of freedom and march – against the weapons industry or intergenerational inequity in academia – they are likely to face the hostility of the police, entitled to use violence as part of their contractual duties.

While protest is typically the province of younger generations, it is not an anomaly for elders to gather together to convey their concerns regarding the state's affairs.<sup>4</sup> One precedent is the massive 1973 senior citizens' solidarity march in Chicago, rallying against inflation, unemployment and high taxes. Now, while no massive senior protests have taken place in Australia,<sup>5</sup> let me call your attention to an event that occurred on the 18th of September '21 in Melbourne. On one hand, it was an anti-lockdown protest. On the other, an act of breaching public health orders. What matters here is that it was an elderly woman in her 70s, with an Australian flag over her head, who was leading the way, confronted by a wall of policemen, fit and armed with pepper spray and stinger grenades (Australian Police Concuss & Pepper Spray 70 Year Old Woman, 2021). In Werckmeister Harmonies, the rabble retreats in presence of the elder. In Melbourne, cops go all the way: the senior is pepper-sprayed, shoved to the ground, her head hitting the asphalt, and, as she lay twitching, two young lawenforcement units bent a little to spray poisonous chemical agents directly in her face.6

#### 3. Faust and Gretchen

Stuck in the meatgrinder of the Australian migration industry, we picked up a house-sit in Lake Bunga in the first half of this year, in the company of two animals. A cross between a Jack Russell and a Beagle, named Gretchen, and Faust, a common domestic short-haired cat.

When we met, Gretchen and Faust had been completely domesticised. Looking like a pup in her bright moments, other times as a worn-out labourer, Gretchen's rare routines outside of the house would climax in being allowed out to the fenced backyard to do her business. As for Faust, we were advised that he was strictly a home cat, even though their house, overlooking a patch of the bush, is located on a very quiet street. They must have been afraid that

- <sup>3</sup> See a brief overview can be found on the Amnesty International site (*Amnesty.org.au*, 2023).
- <sup>4</sup> A related issue, that of the crisis in aged care, goes beyond the limits of this piece, but please see the work of Silvia Federici (2012).
- <sup>5</sup> There is one curious event worth mentioning though: a group of seniors stripping in Melbourne's CBD to protest humiliating pensions. See *Theage.com.au* (2008).
- <sup>6</sup> Is the world without the police imaginable? Yes (see Maher (2021))!

the neighbours would report them. After all, the council's rules prohibit cats outside of homes. In any case, at ten years of age, Faust had never been outside. Like Gretchen, he would be fed fast, greasy and granulated food out of a metal bowl, and sleep throughout the day on a personal mat, causing obesity and boredom. Last but not least, for masters' convenience, both animals underwent the standard procedure of being desexed; anaesthetised in childhood, Gretchen's uterus and ovaries were scraped out, and Faust's testicles snipped, in early preparations for ageing next to men.<sup>7</sup>

But things change, even if temporarily. Gretchen swiftly earned my trust to roam freely in the bush off the track, hopping around and sniffing the world in. Her favourite treats are freshly dug-up bones, the ultimate trophy for someone who knows the difference between flesh, bones, and marrow. Dogs are pack animals and prefer to be included in everyday activities, be it a balloon marathon, dining, or sleeping, so Gretchen and I now rest in one bed, coiled up in a circle of togetherness. When he is not out and about, Faust joins us too, preferring the folds between my limbs. One day, Gretchen and I were sitting outside on the porch, and Faust stretched his tiger-like body over half of the flyscreen's cage and, looking straight into me, made a tenor-like series of meows, which resonated in my heart as follows "Let me the hell out of here, man!" (cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, §327). Well, now he greets me every day with a headbutt, our skulls meeting in a knock of solidarity – Faust is a castrated prince of the block!

#### 4. Roza

*February 24th, 2023.* Melbourne, a housing commission tower is due to be flattened with the ground. All tenants had been relocated, except one family. Vlad, with broad shoulders and golden hands like a warrior, is from Kharkiv. He loves Plato and Aya, his spouse and a Vedic astrologist, looking like a Persian queen, born in Lugansk. We are on the balcony overlooking a vacant playground, the joint is passed around. Mahmeed drops by, our common friend, born in Afghanistan. He says, "My dream is to return to a home I remember not"; we nod.

In the kitchen, Aya's mother Avrora is doing homework in English. She is grieving. Just before the war and migrating to Australia last year, her spouse passed away in Cambodia. Victor was a free diver. Avrora tells stories of her life. She recalls the early days of Lugansk's seizure by the enemy. Nightmares of bombings. Once she was in her garden weeding a veggie patch and heard the approaching Hailstorm field rockets. Following the instinct, she prostrated over the ground as they flew over her home. As her body got numb and she could not get up back to her feet, she could not stop laughing. Avrora switches between the memories of her eventful life at no effort, with no gaps, and I start noticing that what matters is not so much the captivating stories she tells, but everything in-between, and particularly her friendly face, smiling eyes and something else, something glowing that escapes words.

<sup>7</sup> In Tasmania, as of 2022, apart from mandatory desexing, cats have to be microchipped.

Avrora makes me reminisce about my grandmother Roza, who raised me. At the age of six, she took me across the vast Soviet space to Danilovo, a village tucked away in the Golden Ring, to meet my great-grandmother Shura, born in the late 19th century. Drinking tea from a saucer, hearing mice in the wall, carrots off the patch into my mouth, and playing cards with Shura amount to the deepest grey, almost folkloric memories that live within me. Little Roza knew that this trip had set in motion one of the more significant ageing cycles in my life! The maths is simple: the older parents are when they create a child, the less likely it is for the latter to ever get to connect with their great ancestors. Luckily, my eldest son Seraphim is old enough now to undertake a trip with me to meet Roza, his great-grandmother now aged like Shura. It is my sacred duty, one that however may not be fulfilled, for the state would not let me the hell out of here.

Aya sits next to us, and I ask her if she could recall any pearls that her father Victor brought from the deep blue. Of course, she says, here is one impossible to forget: "Государство не должно мешать людям жить / The state must not ruin people's lives".

## 5. Stars

One key detail in "the mental asylum" scene is that the elder in the bath is a common man, representing deep ageing in general. Suppose he was a recognisable person, like a famous actor or a politician, and the effect would be entirely different. Suppose we knew that what was hiding behind a deeply aged soma was a person guilty of systematic cruelty, and the effect would be entirely different. The elder's anonymity vouchsafes the effect of sacredness that characterises old age.

However, this precious quality can be easily squandered. While low-profile examples are extremely common, a high-profile example will illustrate my point well. For the most part, we are ruled by gerontocracy: the leaders of the world's most powerful and abusive empires are all aged people, with younger generations desperate to climb the hierarchy. Suppose the elder in the bath is not a common man, Vladimir Putin or Joe Biden, but Queen Elizabeth wearing a brooch with the Great Star of Africa. Taken from South Africa in the 19th century, this monstrous diamond represents imperial being, rule and pride. For peoples and cultures devastated by it, the stone represents tyranny. In previous centuries, it was a full-blooded tyranny; today, it has preserved a symbolic status, enjoyed by monarchs and their followers.

The dreadful irony is that, due to the technological and ideological pollution, in a metropolis like Peking, London or New York, people live and age not being able to engage with the stars above – to echo the stars within one's way to a cosmic being and dignity. Compare the symbolism of the Great Star of Africa with the symbolism manifest in the following breath-taking account in Paul C. Taylor's *Black is Beautiful*:

It is 1790, and you are at a seaport in South America. The port is part of the Dutch colony that has since become the country of Suriname, and it is a vital part, if the amount of traffic you see is any indication. One of the many ships

here has just docked, and the crew is busy hustling its cargo above deck. The cargo is, in point of fact, hustling itself above deck. The ship, it turns out, is a slave vessel, just arrived from the Dutch Gold Coast, in what is now Ghana.

The forty or so people who make their way up from the cargo hold appear much the way you would have expected, had you expected them. They are dark-skinned and slender, and some give the appearance of being quite ill. They are solemn, apparently resigned to their new fates in their new world. Some have difficulty standing, and most are blinking in the sunlight.

These new African Americans surprise you in only one respect. They have stars in their hair. Not real stars, of course. The new arrivals have had their heads shaved, leaving patches of hair shaped like stars and half-moons. Just as you begin to wonder how the ship's crew settled on this way of torturing their captives or entertaining themselves, you receive a second surprise. Not far from where you are standing, a man who seems to be the ship's captain is speaking with a man who seems to have some financial interest in the ship's cargo. The capitalist asks the captain why he cut the niggers' hair like that, and the captain disclaims all responsibility. "They did it themselves," he says, "the one to the other, by the help of a broken bottle and without soap." (Taylor, 2016, p. 1)

6. Divine Madness

Many lives end ahead of time and tend to cause us great sorrow because we think that the deceased never got to live life in full, that is, to have enough joy, fun, and meaning. While certainly true, it seems to me that at least some such premature deaths close up a life that is strangely complete, on account of previously experiencing a profound event or events. For someone who recently had two near-death experiences, such stories put into question the value of living the longest possible life at all costs.

One example is Steve Irwin, the Australian naturalist legend, who was licked/ kissed by the most poisonous snake on the face of the earth – a fierce snake – and who then died at the age of 44, pierced in the chest by a stingray (*Steve Irwin Meets The World's Most Venomous Snakes* | *Real Wild*, 2018).

Another example is the songwriter and actor Victor Tsoi (1962-1990), born in the USSR to a Russian mother and a Korean father. In the history of the global rock culture, the ascent of Tsoi to fame can only be compared to Kurt Cobain's (1967-1994). The 1988 release of *Blood Type*, followed by *A Star Named the Sun* (1989) changed forever not only the energy of Russian rock, but also touched the souls of millions, tired of the old regime, poverty, and war. It was a real cultural revolution led by a humble young man drawing together Taoist anarchism and Russian tragism.

Tsoi died suddenly in a car crash on August 15th '90, having entertained his untimely death in several songs. No death in modern Russian history can be compared with this one in terms of its sweeping cultural impact, with a wave of suicides (over 40) cutting through the Soviet space, and newspapers hailing the poet. On June 24th, however, during the Summer solstice, Tsoi and his band Kino performed their last concert at the Luzhniki Arena, akin to London's Wimbledon. For the first and last time since the Moscow Olympics '80, in unanimous recognition of Tsoi's cultural status, the Olympic fire was lit – for him, and everyone else searching for their way. And so he performed his last songs as an Olympic hero:

And we know it's always been that way That fate loves the one Who lives by his own rules The one who dies young

He remembers neither "yes" nor "no" Remembers neither ranks nor names And capable of reaching the stars Not reckoning it is a dream And shall fall dead, burnt by a star named the Sun

#### 7. Burial

To rehash the timeless dictum from Plato's *Phaedo*, philosophical ageing is a preparation for death; indeed, it is being toward one's death and the final frontier – burial. Ageing philosophically entails not only the pursuit of conditions that would allow one to sense and direct their ageing processes toward their own vision of life, their truth, but it also should influence their own vision of letting go of life, the vision that ends with honouring one's body. Simply put, it is not unnatural to envisage one's own death and to make preparations for leaving one's body behind.

It is not unnatural, at least for a philosopher, and yet if I were to ask my students or friends about such things, they would probably prefer to switch the topic. Why would one brood over such matters? Well, this critical activity may in effect suggest what kind of life one leads.

A paid, private plot at a cemetery and industrial cremation are not for me. My home is in the wild, and so perhaps one night I would wake up in a selfmade earth-shack in the middle of nowhere near the sea, driven by a peculiar inkling to go out, step through the dunes in search for the right, mossy spot under the moonlight. After digging out a perfect small hole, I'd sit in the diamond pose, breathe in and, as Mikhail Bakhtin preaches,<sup>8</sup> take a slow shit, one last, direct connection with the land. Crows and worms can then have my body to celebrate life.

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<sup>8</sup> Read, especially, Chapters 5 and 6 in Bakhtin (1984).

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