

Melancholic Humor, Skepticism and Reflective Nostalgia. Igor' Guberman's Poetics of Paradox

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How can one be homesick for a home
that one never had?

Svetlana Boym

What is freedom? To me freedom is
the Russian language.

Viktorija Tokareva

1. *Igor' Guberman's Gariki: the Hybrid Genre of a Melancholy Joker*

Igor' Mironovič Guberman (b. 1936) is a Soviet-Russian-Jewish-Israeli poet and key figure in contemporary Russian-Jewish literature. Born in Kharkiv, in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, Guberman grew up in the capital (Moscow) and spent five years in Siberian detention and exile, before being 'invited' to quit the USSR in 1988¹. He now lives in Jerusalem. Although Guberman worked for many years as an electrical engineer, he has written verse throughout his life. His humorous quatrains, called '*gariki*', are well-known among Russian readers throughout the world².

From a formal standpoint, the *gariki* are a blend of refined European poetry, the Russian folk-peasant limerick ('*častuška*')³, and the skeptical Yiddish aphorism. The genre is 'paradoxical' insofar as it combines elements of both 'high' and folk art, even overtly demonstrating a circular relationship between them (cf.

¹ Guberman was found guilty of conducting illicit trade in icons. A reliable biography that might offer insight on this charge does not currently exist, although Guberman himself provides some information on the subject in his prose writings and other scattered comments may be found in the memoirs of his friends and other acquaintances.

² Guberman's quatrains are thus named after him, 'Garik' being a familiar and diminutive form of Igor'. Although this name might seem to reflect some narcissism on the author's part, it is more properly understood as indicating an ironic attitude towards his own writing. Indeed, dozens of *gariki* demonstrate that the poet does not take his own literary endeavors too seriously. At present, almost twelve thousand *gariki* have been published in various books, primarily organized in "journals" (*dnevniki*) according to a chronotopic principle: there are *gariki* from prison, from Siberia, from Jerusalem, and so on. A four-volume edition of Guberman's prose appeared in 2009, although the most authoritative edition to date is that published in two volumes in 2010. Later books including the *Seventh* and *Eighth Journals* came out in 2011 and 2013, respectively (cf. the reference list).

³ *Častuški*, found in Russia from the late nineteenth century, are short, rhymed poems comprised of two to six verses, mostly quatrains (cf. Šeptaev 1950: 5 ff.; Kvjatkovskij 1966). In the Soviet era, a large number of obscene *častuški* circulated widely.

Ginzburg 1998: 21). *Gariki* resemble the jocular folk *častuški* in their brevity, in their punch-line-like conclusions, and in their expression of an anti-dramatic and anti-romantic point of view. While *častuški* largely reflect the lyrical structure of folk songs and/or the aphoristic quality of proverbs and sayings (Astaf'eva 1934: 5-18), *gariki* are more complex: these skeptical questions with skeptical quasi-answers reveal an extensive and coherent system of thought that constitutes a variety of the 'existential riddle'. It should be noted that the technically sophisticated *gariki* are quite distinct from the simpler variety of riddles that comprise that "popular genre" *par excellence* (Ginzburg 1998: 29), representing instead a well studied metrical combination of vernacular (even bawdy) Russian speech and sophisticated literary intertextuality⁴. Among the *gariki*'s most frequently recurring topics are Russia and the intricate mirroring of Russian and Jewish identities, God (generally in terms of uncertainty as to His existence), aging (viewed with ironic melancholy and particularly prominent in his most recent collections), women and sex (often viewed ironically as well), and drinking (a specifically Russian way to combat anguish).

Almost all of the *gariki* are elaborated through the prism of a peculiar humorous melancholy, whose paradoxical nature seems to deliberately echo Guberman's worldview, articulating what can be defined as a 'poetics of paradox'. As this paper will demonstrate, a close link exists between Guberman's skeptical humor, his sense of an identity that is discontinuous or split, and the nostalgic mood that permeates his writing⁵. In particular, we will demonstrate here a clear correlation between the poetics of paradox that structure his *gariki* and his condition of 'exile' (first in Soviet Russia, his 'stepmother country', and then in the unfamiliar 'historical forefatherland' of Israel). Guberman's very existence contains the sort of funny-yet-poignant melange of contrasting elements found in his *gariki*: a Jewish background, the Soviet era, Russian culture, and Israeli 'meta-exile'. This melancholic Russian 'bard' of Jewish paradoxicality is also the product of a specific and multifaceted historical context that helped to shape his skeptical and melancholic humor – into a quintessential representation of *reflective nostalgia*.

According to Svetlana Boym (2001: 49-55), "reflective nostalgia" is a form of nostalgic feeling that contrasts with "restorative nostalgia", the latter based

⁴ For a detailed formal description of the *gariki*, together with a review of the very limited (and mostly non-academic) response to Guberman's poetry and prose, see Salmon 2014a.

⁵ It is worth mentioning that English '*humor*' (a loanword from Latin via Old French) originally meant both 'mood' (Italian '*umore*', French '*humeur*', Spanish '*humor*', etc.) and "each of the four chief fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, yellow bile [choler], and black bile [melancholy]) that were thought to determine a person's physical and mental qualities by the relative proportions in which they were present" (cf. the entry for '*humor*' in the Oxford Dictionary 2015 [American and British]). It is significant that 'black bile' has been related to melancholia and 'spleen' to 'bad temper' ("from the earlier belief that the spleen was the seat of such emotions"; cf. the entry '*spleen*': *Ibidem*). The concept of 'mood' is further explored in the introduction to this volume.

on oppositions whose psychological appeal belies their rhetorical and artificial nature: the present is bad, the past is good; old age is bad, youth is good; exile is bad, returning home is good, etc. A predilection for the restorative variety of nostalgia issues from a conservative desire to return to a previous condition or ‘paradise lost’ and thus flee a present moment that is perceived more negatively. It does not matter, as Antonio Prete notes, whether one’s dream of restoration properly constitutes a “mythology” or an “abstraction” (Prete 2008: 84): the restorative attitude offers an idealized and dogmatic escape – from the reflection that is inherent in reflective nostalgia and from the related (even consequent) mental state of limbo or ‘undecidability’. Restorative nostalgia is a means to assertively translate a vague and intimate longing into a concrete sentiment that is both ideologized and goal-directed, whereas reflective nostalgia (cf. Boym 2001: 41-48) is ‘ideology-free’ and objectless or “blind”, an indefinite feeling that something is missing, a *toska* that lacks precise motivation:

Вот человек. Он всем доволен.
И тут берёт его в тиски
потребность в горечи и боли
и жажда грусти и тоски (Guberman 2010a, I: 279)⁶.

Чтоб делался покой для духа тесен,
чтоб дух себя без устали искал,
в уюте и комфорте, словно плесень,
заводится смертельная тоска (*Ivi*, II: 70)⁷.

Я всё живу, как будто жду чего-то.
События? Известий? Благодать?
С утра уже томит меня забота
не просто жить, а слепо ожидать (2013: 155)⁸.

Reflection (or introspection) corrodes any comfortable, self-referential system of values (I vs. You, right vs. wrong) into the feeling of psychological suspension that Karin Johannisson (2011: 20-22) associates with “a border zone”⁹.

⁶ “Ecce homo. He is content with everything. / And then suddenly caught in the grip / of a need for sorrow and pain, / of a thirst for sadness and *toska*”.

Where indicated, we have been able to use the translations of Guberman found in Sokolovskij (2013), although the bulk of the *gariki* cited here have been rendered into unrhymed English verse by Sara Dickinson, Cecilia Pozzi, and Laura Salmon. In the subsequent quotations of *gariki*, we have omitted the author’s name (Guberman).

⁷ “In order that the quarters of the spirit be more intimate / So that the spirit can tirelessly search for itself, / In cosiness and comfort, like mold, / A deathly *toska* is established”.

⁸ “I still live as if waiting for something. / Events? News? Grace? / In early morning I’m already careworn / not simply by living, but by blindly waiting”.

⁹ In the introduction to this volume, we argue that a direct semantic connection exists between *toska* (a form of nostalgia that lacks an object) and the semantic field of *melancholia* (the first definition [1881] of the term ‘*melanxolia*’ in Dal’ [1979, II: 315]

Guberman's *toska* is indeed a melancholic response to the uncanny intuition that the universe is governed by a blind principle of indeterminacy and that no design exists for human happiness. Humans are not the Chosen in a world ruled by logic, but "two-legged petty beings"¹⁰, who can only nostalgically reflect on their delusion, on the happiness they once had. Indeed, the sober unmasking of this delusion is the only existential happiness that humans can hope for:

Чтобы долю горемычную
без печали принимать,
укрепляют люди личную
веру в Бога, душу, мать (2009с: 25)¹¹.

Я скепсисом съеден и дымом пропитан,
забыта весна и растрчено лето,
и бочка иллюзий пуста и разбита,
а жизнь – наслаждение, полное света (2010а, I: 23)¹².

Не по капризу Провидения
мы на тоску осуждены,
тоска у нас – от заблуждения,
что мы для счастья рождены (*Ivi*, II: 446)¹³.

Меня всегда влекло познание,
и я дознался до того,
что счастье – это понимание,
что ты не создан для него (2011: 272)¹⁴.

It is not surprising then that Guberman's nostalgic feeling primarily concerns the loss of familiar reference points for anchoring belief:

Засеребрился сумрак серый,
тоска явилась – тоже серая;
намного б легче жил я с верой –
во что угодно, только веруя (2014а: 496)¹⁵.

being "*zadumčivaja toska*"), suggesting that *melancholia* is the main 'structure of feeling' of reflective nostalgia. *Toska* with no object, in other words, is nothing but the feeling of reflective nostalgia, or melancholia.

¹⁰ "*Dyunogie melkie osoby*" (Guberman 2010а, II: 606).

¹¹ "In order to accept hapless destiny / without sadness, / people strengthen their personal / faith in God, in the soul, and Mom".

¹² "I'm devoured by skepticism and steeped in smoke, / spring is forgotten, summer squandered, / the cask of illusions empty and shattered, / but life is a pleasure, full of light".

¹³ "It's not due to the whim of Providence / that we are condemned to *toska*, / our *toska* comes from the delusion / that we were born for happiness".

¹⁴ "I was always attracted by knowledge / and have learned enough to know / that happiness is understanding / that we're not made for it".

¹⁵ "The gray twilight became silver, / *toska* appeared – equally gray; / I would have lived a lot more easily with faith, / faith in anything, just having some".

In other words, reflection occupies the hole left by faith, replacing clarity with vagueness and “indeterminacy” (Sicher 1995: 34). Lacking an object, *toska* becomes a sort of nonsensical dreaming, a wolfish “howling at the moon”, a ‘waiting for nothing’ and a longing for nowhere.

Как дорожная мысль о ночлеге,
как виденье пустыни – вода,
нас тревожит мечта о побеге
и тоска от незнания – куда (2010a, I: 104)¹⁶.

Хоть живу я благоденно и чинно,
а в затмениях души знаю толк;
настоящая тоска – беспричинна,
от неё так на луну воет волк (*Ivi*, II: 466)¹⁷.

Довольно странным сочетанием
ветвится дух во мне двойной:
с ленивой склонностью к мечтаньям
ужился черный скепсис мой (2011: 202)¹⁸.

Хоть и редки во мне воспарения,
на земле я недаром гошу:
в этом мире, где три измерения,
я четвертое нагло ишу (2013: 300)¹⁹.

Indeed, the noun *toska* and the verb *toskovat'* are used extensively in all of Guberman's collections of *gariki* (sometimes even twice in a single quatrain), where they pertain primarily to the semiotic domain of nostalgic melancholy that lacks an object. The same can be said of other frequently occurring lexemes referring to the same semantic domain, i.e. ‘*skuka*’ (boredom), ‘*unynie*’ (dejection), ‘*tomlenie*’ (languor), ‘*pečal'*’ (sorrow).

In Guberman, vagueness about *toska*'s object provokes in turn a response specific to the concept of paradox itself – an attitude, appropriately paradoxical, of blissful torment:

Тоска, по сути, неуместна,
однако, скрыться не пытаюсь,
она растёт в душе, как тесто,
дрожжами радости питаюсь (2010a, II: 601)²⁰.

¹⁶ “Like a traveler’s thoughts of shelter, / like a desert vision of water, / we are troubled by dreams of escape / and by the *toska* of not knowing where to”.

¹⁷ “Though I live beatifically and in dignity, / I know the use of the soul’s eclipse: / genuine *toska* has no motive, / it is why the wolf howls at the moon”.

¹⁸ “In quite an odd combination / my soul branches in two: / a lazy bent for dreaming / gets along with my dark skepticism”.

¹⁹ “Although I rarely feel exaltation, / I am not a guest on Earth in vain: / in this world of three dimensions, / I insolently search for a fourth”.

²⁰ “*Toska* is essentially out of place / and yet, without trying to hide, / it rises in the soul like dough, / fed by the yeast of joy”.

От улочки старинной городской,
от моря под закатным освещением
вдруг полнишься *божественной тоской*,
невнятным и блаженным ощущением
(2013: 239; emphasis added)²¹.

Guberman's sense of melancholic paradox is expressed primarily by *laughing through tears*, a healing response, as we argue below, to the feeling of alienation widespread among those who inhabit society's 'border zones'. Faced with reality's ambivalence, with its combination of the very sad and the very funny, Guberman expresses a calm and melancholic sense of resignation, warmth and benevolence. His smiles and his tears transcend rhetoric and eventually blend:

В столетии ничтожном и великом,
дивясь его паденьям и успехам,
топчусь между молчанием и криком,
мечусь между стенанием и смехом (2010a, I: 33)²².

На слух – перевернутым эхом
звучит наших жизнью истома:
то стон выливается смехом,
то смех неотличен от стоны (*Ivi*: 459)²³.

Дерзость клоуна, лихость паяца
человеку нельзя не любить,
ибо очень полезно смеяться,
когда хочется плакать и выть (2011: 193)²⁴.

Even when oppressive *toska* drives the poet to respond (in typical Russian fashion) by praying, drinking and writing, he invariably filters his feelings through skepticism or irony, rather than dramatizing them:

Я редко, но тревожу имя Бога:
матери Твоей худой лоскут,
умерить я прошу Тебя *немного*
мою непонимания тоску (2010a, II: 178; emphasis added)²⁵.

Блаженство алкогольного затмения
неведомо *жрецам ума и знания*,

²¹ "From the alley of an ancient city, / from the sea illuminated by sunset / suddenly you're filled with *divine toska*, / with an *unintelligible sensation of bliss*".

²² "In a century insignificant and great, / marveling at its downfalls and triumphs, / I shift between silence and shouting, / am tossed between groans and laughter".

²³ "To the ear, like an reversed echo / sounds the languor of our lives: / now groaning issues forth as laughter, / now laughing and groaning merge".

²⁴ "The clown's impudence, the joker's bravura / can't but inspire our love, / for laughing is useful indeed, / when you'd rather cry and wail".

²⁵ "Though rarely, I sometimes do trouble the Lord's name: / a *poor scrap of Thy matter*; / I beg Thee to go a little easy on / the *toska* of my non-comprehension".

мы пьём от колебаний и сомнения,
от горестной тоски непонимания (*Ivi*: 421; emphasis added)²⁶.

Почти не ведая заранее,
во что соткётся наша речь,
тоску немного понимания
мы в текст пытаемся облечь (*Ivi*: 647)²⁷.

The condition or state of indeterminacy and mental ‘suspension’ seems not a consequence, but rather a source of reflective *toska* and of its tendency to find expression in paradoxicality. *Toska*, says Guberman, is an inevitable and universal component of human sensibility, but it assumes different forms on the basis of different individuals’ own personal ‘stories’:

Конечно, есть тоска собачья
в угрюмой тине наших дней,
но если б жизнь текла иначе,
своя тоска была бы в ней (*Ivi*, I: 106)²⁸.

Если выпал бы жребий иначе
от небрежного сверху броска,
то иные бы ждали удачи
и томила *иная тоска* (2013: 181; emphasis added)²⁹.

An emphasis on paradoxicality is Guberman’s creative response to his own indeterminate identity. When one habitually lives in the peripheral spaces of a physical and/or psychological ‘borderland’, when hybridity is the most essential characteristic of one’s identity, a clear opposition between Self and Other collapses and the categories of you and I, bad and good overlap. The result is not an elevated, ‘serious’ yearning for restoration, but a mood of melancholic ‘suspension’ that constitutes a form of reflective nostalgia. The sense of paradox found in Guberman’s poetics is the aesthetic expression of this mood, a response to the poet’s sense of his ‘fluctuating identity’ – to the compound or hybrid nature of his Russian-Jewish Self. Indeed, the *gariki* resemble the famous ‘Jewish questions’, whose answers are only more questions³⁰.

²⁶ “The beatitude of alcoholic eclipse / is unknown to *the priests of intellect and science*: / we drink out of vacillation and doubt, / from a woeful *toska* of non-comprehension”.

²⁷ “Almost without knowing beforehand / the future weave of our words, / the *toska* of dumb understanding / is what we try to wrap in text”.

²⁸ “Of course, there’s a damnable *toska* / in the gloomy slime of our days, / but if life had flowed differently, / it would still have had its own *toska*”.

²⁹ “Had lots been cast otherwise / due to a careless throw from above, / we’d have met with other successes / and been wearied by *another toska*”.

³⁰ Answering a question with another question is so frequent among Jews that it has become a stock topic in Jewish jokes, such as “Why do you always answer a question with another question?” – “Why not?” (Stolovič 1996: 117), or “Rabbi, why

2. 'Strangers at Home, at Home among Strangers'

In general, individuals who perceive their identity to be unstable or fluctuating (Jewish/Russian/Soviet/Israeli) tend to experience a vague and also somewhat contradictory longing: what is attractive to one component of the hybrid Self is unattractive to another. Such individuals live on the margins of a dominant culture, in a borderland whose fertile soil nourishes skepticism. Here, the awareness of their own complex and compound – or 'hybrid' – identity generates a special variety of 'high' melancholy:

Живя в душном равновесии
и непреклонном своеволии,
меж эйфории и депрессии
держусь высокой меланхолии (2010a, II: 49)³¹.

A constant feeling of melancholy results from the stigma attached to physical and/or psychological 'exile'. In *The Anatomy of Exile*, Paul Tabori (1972: 23-31) underlines its commonsense and literal definition as a condition of estrangement or distance (emigrant, refugee, displaced person, etc.) from a specific space that is now lost. Prete (2008: 83-84) suggests that nostalgia is generated not by the loss of space alone, but by the loss of both time and space. In Boym's conception, reflective *toska* would seem to be characterized also and prevalently by a chronically ambivalent *mood* – the result of an exaggerated preoccupation with one's own compound identity. Although Prete (*Ivi*: 86) states that all humans are in some type of metaphorical "exile", only some experience exile in a particularly tangible and dramatic way, managing to confront the glaring discontinuity between their own longing and reality only by laughing "at their own despair" (Guberman 2010a, II: 125):

Теперь я смиренный старый мерин
и только сам себе опасен:
я даже если в чём уверен,
то с этим тоже не согласен (2011: 164)³².

An emphasis on skepticism and paradox is particularly fostered by the feeling of being an 'exile at home'. 'Exiles at home' are individuals or groups, who live as foreigners in the country of their birth, developing a split identity in a split world. For such exiles, there is no spacetime on earth where this inner sense of diversity might be erased – hence their questing takes the shape

do Jews always answer a question with a question?" – "Do we?" (<<http://visionwiz.net/2011/03/why-do-jews-always-answer-a-question-with-a-question/>>).

³¹ "Living in suffocating equilibrium / and unrelenting arbitrariness, / between euphoria and depression, / I hold on to my elevated melancholia".

³² "Now I'm a tame old gelding, / and dangerous only to myself: / even if I'm sure of something / I don't agree with that either".

of wandering not through actual spacetime, but through their own minds. The component of reflection that is specific to reflective nostalgia results from this process of mental wandering.

The Jews of the Diaspora represent such ‘exiles at home’ *par excellence*. “Permanent exiles” in multiple native countries, they live, as Yuri Slezkine puts it, in a “permanent state of ambivalence” (Slezkine 2004: 47, 36)³³. “The successful peoples of the modern world [...] urban, mobile, literate, articulate, and intellectually sophisticated” (MacDonald 2005: 65-66), such Jews are, in Slezkine’s terms, “Mercurians” who speak the Mercurian “languages of difference” (Slezkine 2004: 19). They are always potentially ready to leave, to find and adapt to new spaces, and yet to preserve their constitutive strangeness wherever they are. The Mercurian identity is thus ‘suspended’: it evolves together with a state of mind or “worldview” characterized by wandering, but it is also “a matter of psychological choice” (MacDonald 2005: 66). In contrast, “Apollonians” – as Slezkine calls the culturally antithetical group against whom these Mercurians are defined – are “rooted in the land and in traditional agrarian cultures, and prize physical strength and warrior values” (*Ibidem*). Whereas Apollonians have a clear sense of belonging to a concrete territory and constituting a stable nation – they can leave immovable property to their heirs – Mercurians tend to cultivate knowledge, an asset that can not be inherited, but is easily transportable in case of flight.

In order to cope with this peculiarly complex ontology, with an identity that is in fact constituted by duality and marginalization, these ‘strangers at home’ came to consider their very state of ‘suspension’ or being ‘in between’ to be a specific, autonomous identity, a solution (*tertium datur*) to an otherwise irresolvable duality. The result is a ‘hybrid’ identity in which the binary opposition between You and I is transformed into ‘melancholic suspension’, the sign and existential state of Mercuriality, whose “*raison d’être*” is not a desire for integration, but precisely “the maintenance of difference, the conscious preservation of the Self and thus of strangeness” (Slezkine 2004: 19):

Когда кругом кишит бездарность,
кладя на жизнь своё клише,
в изгойстве скрыта элитарность,
весьма полезная душе (2010a, I: 206)³⁴.

Against the physical power of the Apollonians, Mercurians wield in their own defense language, intellect, and knowledge, their “weapon of weakness and

³³ Jews are not, of course, the only national group that has been able to preserve its identity for generations while living within a given country in a state of paradoxical ambivalence, but they do comprise the oldest and largest community of such exiles and their enormous literary output represents the cross-cultural phenomenon of ‘hybrid exile literature’ in unsurpassed quantity.

³⁴ “When lack of talent teems all around, / imprinting on life its cliché, / elitism hides as an outcast, / which is extremely good for the soul”.

dependence”: “Hermes needed his wit because Apollo and Zeus were so big and strong” (Slezkine 2004: 29). In the host countries of the Diaspora, the Jewish condition of alien brought with it fear, uncertainty, and a sense of ontological suspension, and encouraged concomitant Jewish-Mercurian tendencies towards mastering the languages of the Others, reflecting on alterity, and renewing and even subverting various cultures:

Между слухов, сказок, мифов,
просто лжи, легенд и мнений
мы враждуем жарче скифов
за несходство заблуждений (2010a, I: 200)³⁵.

Regardless of the particular form that it assumes, Jewish-Mercurian exile appears as intrinsically *disharmonic* (cf. Wex 2005: 23). This is not the case for Apollonians, who in physical exile are often able to maintain a sense of their own identity as they long for a ‘home’ constituted by a stable territorial reference point. Mercurians, however, being peculiarly sensitive to “the immensity of time and the multiplicity of individuals”, inevitably become aware that human existence has no importance at all (Ginzburg 1998: 19), thus experiencing, in Guberman's words, the dangerous wisdom of “their own vacuity and futility” (“*svoej pustoty i naprasnosti*”; Guberman 2013: 326). This state of incertitude and its related inclination for reflection inspires in the Jews of the Diaspora both increasing curiosity towards the Other and partial – and ambivalent – identification with them.

The *gariki* comprise a form of paradoxical humor mixed with skeptical *toska* that mirrors Guberman's own ambivalent self-perception and reflective qualities. They are the artistic expression of a thoughtful and empathic Mercurian mood³⁶, for reflection also means looking at oneself from an outside perspective, i.e. through the eyes of the Other. Guberman's skepticism testifies to an emancipation from both internal and external prejudices, dogmas, and binary oppositions, and consequently enhances new ways of thinking. A direct connection between his mental flexibility and the reflective nature of his social critique is evident. Mercurian nostalgic reflectiveness assumes the shape of a feeling that is suspended between an impulse to become like the Other and a tendency to misrecognize the Self:

Забавно мне моё еврейство
как разных сутей совмещение:
игра, привычка, лицедейство,
и редко – самоощущение (2009c: 29)³⁷.

³⁵ “Amidst rumors, tales, and myths, / amidst nothing but lies, legends, and opinions, / we fight more fiercely than Scythians / for the divergence of our fallacies”.

³⁶ ‘Empathic’ is intended here as a psychological disposition to share emotions *with* others.

³⁷ “My Jewishness is funny to me, / like a mixture of different essences: / play, habit, dissembling, / and rarely – a sense of self”.

Обживая различные страны,
если выпало так по судьбе,
мы сначала их жителям странны,
а чуть позже мы странны себе (2010a, II: 587)³⁸.

If serious Apollonian writers experience a concrete sense of cultural belonging, Mercurians operate in a reality that is paradoxical. Unlike Apollonians, who can believe in their elective advantage over Others, Mercurians have no access to a similarly biased and one-sided ‘truth’. Where Apollonians offer conservative answers, Mercurians pose thorny questions:

В саду идей сейчас уныло,
сад болен скепсисом и сплином,
и лишь мечта славянофила
цветет и пахнет нафталином (*Ivi*, I: 179)³⁹.

В лабиринтах, капканах и каверзах рос
мой текущий сквозь вечность народ;
даже нос у еврея висит, как вопрос,
опрокинутый наоборот (*Ivi*, II: 112)⁴⁰.

Жизнь хороша, но удивительна
такой ли быть она должна?
Неправда людям отвратительна,
а правда – вовсе не нужна (2011: 182)⁴¹.

In point of fact, if skeptical *toska* can be said to have a precise object, it would be a hypothetical ‘fourth dimension’ in which hybrid identity would be regarded as ‘normal’. Indeed, the more stable identity that skepticism produces is an evolutionary precondition for the preservation of one’s ego⁴² and also needed for mental stability. Such stability does not necessarily mean rigidity, however. While the less flexible Apollonian identity is built on exclusion (‘Us vs. Them’), characterized by mistrust of the Other and a desire for unambivalent clarity, Jewish reflective irony provides a basis for empathy and rejects wholly self-referential conceits:

³⁸ “As we try to become integrated / into different nations abroad / early on we seem odd to the natives, / later on find ourselves to be odd” (translated by Sokolovskij 2013).

³⁹ “The garden of ideas is now dreary, / the garden is ill with skepticism and spleen, / and only the Slavophile’s dream / blossoms and smells of mothballs”.

⁴⁰ “Amidst labyrinths, traps, and intrigues, / my people grew, flowing through eternity; / even the Jewish nose hangs like a question mark, turned upside down and backwards”.

⁴¹ “Life is good, yet surprising / should it be like this? / People hate lies / but truth they don’t need at all”.

⁴² The chameleon-like protagonist of Woody Allen’s *Zelig* eloquently illustrates the risks inherent in the Mercurian acquisition of a stable identity.

Развевая нас по всем дорогам,
 Бог дал нам ум, характер, пыл;
 еврей, конечно, избран Богом,
 но для чего – Творец забыл (*Ivi*: 118)⁴³.

В нас есть огонь, и есть металл,
 и дух наш дерзостен в борьбе;
 как мы велики, я читал,
 как мелки – знаю по себе (*Ivi*: 274)⁴⁴.

3. *Jewish Reflective Skepticism and the Pirandellian Mechanism of 'Feeling the Opposite'*

Even though Guberman is generally and erroneously considered a parodist, or poet who jokes, he is actually, as he puts it, a “bright pessimist”:

Ни тучки нет на небе чистом,
 а мне видна она вполне,
 поскольку светлым пессимистом
 я воспитал себя во мне (2010a, II: 598)⁴⁵.

The poet speaks of himself as a “typical tragedian” as well, surprised that his verses “full of skepticism and disbelieving” (Guberman 2009a: 98) often elicit jocular laughter:

“Что в них смешного?” – с ужасом думал я [...]. Отчего друзья всегда так хохотали в застольях? (*Ivi*: 84)⁴⁶.

He also describes himself as a “sad” (*grustnyj*), “sober” (*trezvyj*) or even “despondent optimist” (*otčajannyj optimist*; cf. Guberman 2009c: 17; 2010a, I: 218; 2013: 351) – or not an optimist at all:

Время летит с нарастающим свистом,
 Тают года на планете отпетой;
 я по ошибке слышу оптимистом –
 и не перечу я глупости этой (2013: 336)⁴⁷.

⁴³ “Dispersing us on roads everywhere, / God gave us wit, character, and zeal; / the Jews, of course, are God’s chosen, / but for what – the Creator forgot”.

⁴⁴ “We have in us fire and metal, / and our spirit is bold in fight; / of how great we are I’ve read, / of how petty I know from myself”.

⁴⁵ “There’s no dark cloud in the clear sky, / but I see one perfectly / because I’ve cultivated / a bright pessimist in myself”.

⁴⁶ “What’s funny about them? – I would think with horror [...]. Why did my friends always laugh so much at parties?”

⁴⁷ “Time flies with a rising whistle, / our years on this incorrigible planet wane; / I’m wrongly taken to be an optimist / and I don’t contradict such nonsense”.

Guberman's poetry with its emphasis on paradox stands as a crystalline realization of the reflective humor that Luigi Pirandello described as *umorismo*, opposing it to the rhetorical humor of *comicità*. In his 1908 treatise *On Humor*, Pirandello, who was also quite preoccupied with fluctuating identities (as attested in *The Late Mattia Pascal* and *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*), provides a good description of the empathetic reflective mood, albeit in somewhat different terms (cf. Pirandello 1995). Whereas the rhetorically comic or ironic is essentially conservative, reinforcing vertical hierarchy, paradoxical 'laughing through tears' is rare, subversive, and empathic, even "horizontal". 'Laughing through tears' is not directed against humanity and its shortcomings, but benevolently makes fun of life's absurdity, the sole object of mockery being the incongruity and inconsistency of the human condition⁴⁸. "Horizontal" levity is thus distinguished from the "vertical" mocking (found in jokes, parody, satire, sarcasm, and irony) and predicated on the supposed superiority of the mocker with respect to his or her target (cf. Salmon 2008: 54-57, 97-100). Aimed at individuals or groups that are seen to represent specific faults (ignorance, greed, arrogance, etc.), vertical mocking reflects judgments shared with a culturally dominant (Apollonian) point of view and characterized by binary oppositions: good/evil, right/wrong, smart/stupid, man/woman, wife/lover, healthy/ill, Christian/Jew, heterosexual/homosexual, Self/Other, and so on. Vertical humor thus reinforces in the mocker both prejudice and a sense of moral or physical superiority⁴⁹, while horizontal humor conversely leads toward a sense of solidarity according to the principle that 'trouble shared is trouble halved'. Paradox, by its very nature, is exclusively horizontal and anti-Manichean: it both unmasks the conceptual constraints that urge human consciousness towards the consolation of rigid and naive dualities and hinders the establishment of vertical hierarchies with a clear position for one's self.

According to Pirandello's theoretical model, reflection is at the core of our humorous response to melancholy and 'laughing through tears' a mechanism that he calls "feeling the opposite" (Pirandello 1995: 171-219; Salmon

⁴⁸ In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud speaks of "Jewish skeptical humor" as being perfectly illustrated in the following anecdote: "Two Jews meet in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. 'Where are you going?' asks one. 'To Cracow' was the answer. 'What a liar you are!' broke out the other. 'If you say you are going to Cracow, you want me to believe you are going to Lemberg. But I know you are going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?'" (Freud 1960: 80-81). According to Freud (*Ivi*: 81), such humor is of "the rarest" type, since it does not "attack" anyone or anything, besides the reliability of our cognitive system.

⁴⁹ The more widespread jokes about greedy Jews become, the more greed is associated with Jews, for example, and thus the stereotype is reinforced. Moreover, since the mockery of greed is ostensibly effected by more generous persons, the joke's teller assumes a position of vertical superiority with respect to the derided object, further reinforcing that position. Irony and parody directed at one's self are no exception, superiority arising from the implicit fact that only a condition of self-esteem can allow for self-mocking (cf. Salmon 2008: 72, 97-99).

2008: 74-91). Reflection triggers the exaggerated development of ‘humoral’ sensitivity towards both Self and Other, improving empathy and solidarity. Pirandellian humor is properly a “quality of expression”, the way an author looks at reality, the way objectivity is “subjectivized” (Pirandello 1995: 59, 64). Through humor, the ‘objectivity’ of commonsensical ‘truth’ is suspended and ‘reflection’ becomes ‘refraction’, as in Pirandello’s famous metaphor of the “reversed telescope”⁵⁰. Guberman’s skeptical humor can thus be defined as a stylization (‘humorization’) of melancholy that converts nonsense into shared disbelief:

Народ любой воистину духовен
(а значит – и Создателем ценим)
не духом синагог или часовен,
а смехом над отчаяньем своим (2010а, II: 125)⁵¹.

С разным повстречался я искусством
в годы любованья мирозданием,
лучшее на свете этом грустном
создано тоской и состраданием (*Ivi*: 457)⁵².

Throughout the twentieth century, the paradoxical melancholic mood of Ashkenazi Jewish culture exerted a strong influence on Apollonian culture in the West. ‘Laughing through tears’ became both the way that Jews looked at themselves – through the critical eyes of the Other – and a strategy for opposing the dogmatic ‘seriousness’ of the dominant host culture. Skeptical humor is by no means frequent in either everyday life or literature (Freud 1960: 80-81, Pirandello 1995: 39), since it requires a perspective that is difficult to grasp, that “requires”, in Guberman’s words, “being able to get it” (Guberman 2010c: 11):

Что наша жизнь – трагедия, известно каждому, поскольку каждый знает о неминуемом финале этой пьесы. Но что наша жизнь комедия, понимает и чувствует далеко не любой из ее участников. Мне повезло: я ощущаю оба эти два жанра. Но стенать, скулить и жаловаться – глупо, [...] снижает, мягко говоря, высокую пожизненную трагедию человека до сопливой и слезливой мелодрамы (Guberman 2009b, I: 77)⁵³.

⁵⁰ Cf. the ‘philosophical model’ of Dr. Fileno in the 1911 story *A Character’s Tragedy* (*La tragedia di un personaggio*, Pirandello 2006).

⁵¹ “Any people is truly spiritual / (and hence valued by the Creator) / not for the spirit of its synagogues or chapels, / but for laughing at its own despair”.

⁵² “I met with various kinds of art / in the years when the universe delighted me, / the best of this sad world / is created with *toska* and compassion”.

⁵³ “Everybody knows that our life is a tragedy, since everybody is aware of this play’s inevitable ending. But the fact that our life is a comedy is understood and felt by only very few of its participants. I’ve been lucky: I perceive both of these two genres. But groaning, whining, and complaining stupidly (to put it mildly) degrades the high tragedy of human life to snotty and lachrymose melodrama”.

Guberman expects that the audience for his skeptical humor will be composed of skeptics and humorists as well:

Каков он, идеальный мой читатель?
С отчётливостью вижу я его:
он скептик, неудачник и мечтатель,
и жаль, что не читает ничего (2010а, I: 221)⁵⁴.

His well-disposed reader enters an illogical world where laughing is a response to *toska*, which in turn is the response to cheerfulness:

Зря моя улыбка беспечальная
бесит собутыльников моих:
очень много масок у отчаянья,
смех – отнюдь не худшая из них (*Ivi*: 161)⁵⁵.

В остывшей боли – странная отрада
впоследствии является вдруг нам,
полны тоски отпущенники ада,
и радость их – с печалью пополам (*Ivi*: 526)⁵⁶.

Gariki function as a ‘rule-breaking device’ to subvert the binary logic of Manichean reasoning. Indeed, skeptical humor is a form of subversive cognitive deprogramming that can make sense of ambiguity much like the insights of Zen (Salmon 2008: 91-100; 143-154). Insofar as Mercurian Jews tend to reject dogma, nourish doubt, and invert moments of inconsistent logic, they are perceived by Apollonian culture – which defends the status quo and aches for restoration – as a dangerous threat:

Дух нации во мне почти отсутствовал.
Сторонник лишь духовного деления,
евреем я в тюрьме себя почувствовал
по духу своего сопротивления (2010а, I: 69)⁵⁷.

Я не стыжусь, что ярый скептик,
и на душе не свет, а тьма;
сомненье – лучший антисептик
от загнивания ума (*Ivi*: 213)⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ “Who, after all, is my ideal reader? / I conjure up an image quite distinct: / he is a skeptic, failure, utter dreamer / and, what a pity! does not read a thing” (translated by Sokolovskij 2013).

⁵⁵ “There’s no reason that my cheerful smile / should enrage my drinking buddies: / despair wears many masks, / humor is certainly not the worst of them”.

⁵⁶ “After the pain grows cool, a strange joy / suddenly appears to us – / inmates released from hell are full of *toska*, / their joy and sorrow exist in equal shares”.

⁵⁷ “I never had any ethnic spirit./ As a fan only of sharing spirit, / it was in prison I began to feel I was Jewish / from the spirit of my opposition”.

⁵⁸ “I am not ashamed of being a raging skeptic / of having darkness, rather than light, in my soul: / doubt is the best antiseptic / for decay of the mind”.

С полюса до линии экватора
 всем народам нравятся их танцы,
 а евреи всюду реформаторы,
 потому что всюду иностранцы (*Ivi*: 467)⁵⁹.

Радость – ясноглазая красotka,
 у покоя – стеганный халат,
 у надежды – легкая походка,
 скепсис плоскостоп и хромотат (*Ivi*: 299)⁶⁰.

A reflective, humorous response to feelings of regret, sorrow, melancholia, and nostalgia implies a thorough revision of human binary postulates. Even when nostalgia has an object, as in *'toska po rodine'* ('nostalgia for the homeland'), that object can be approached with humor, reflectiveness, and empathy. In such cases, subjective empathy paradoxically means the demystification, and thus *humanization* of the object itself. A reflective and humorous representation of the *'rodina'* ('homeland'), for example, reveals sober affection 'with eyes wide open'. The process of subjectivizing and humanizing the object also paradoxically makes it available to the Other. Indeed, the more subjective the object of nostalgia, the more universal it becomes. This approach can be epitomized by Dovlatov's words about Russia:

– Матерей не выбирают. Это моя единственная родина. Я люблю Америку, восхищаюсь Америкой, благодарен Америке, но родина моя далеко. Нищая, голодная, безумная и спившаяся! Потерявшая, загубившая и отвергнувшая лучших сыновей! Где уж ей быть доброй, веселой и ласковой?!..

Березы, оказывается растут повсюду. Но разве от этого легче?

Родина – это мы сами. Наши первые игрушки. Перешитые курточки старших братьев. Бутерброды, завернутые в газету. Девочки в строгих коричневых юбках. Мелочь из отцовского кармана. Экзамены, шпаргалки... Нелепые, ужасающие стихи... Мысли о самоубийстве... Стакан "Агдама" в подворотне... Армейская махорка... Дочка, варежки, рейтузы, подвернувшийся задник крошечного ботинка... Косо перечеркнутые строки... Рукописи, милиция, ОВИР... Все, что с нами было, – родина. И все, что было, – останется навсегда (*Dovlatov 1985: 168-169*)⁶¹.

⁵⁹ "From the pole to the equatorial line / their dances are liked by peoples everywhere, / but Jews are everywhere reformers / because they are everywhere foreigners".

⁶⁰ "Joy is a clear-eyed beauty, tranquility wears a shabby housecoat, / hope steps lightly, / skepticism is flat-footed and limping".

⁶¹ "You can't choose your mother. This [Russia] is my one and only homeland. I love America, I admire America, I'm grateful to America, but my homeland is far away. Poor, hungry, crazy, and drunk! Having lost, destroyed, and exiled her best sons! How could she be kind, cheerful, and loving?!

"Birch trees, it turns out, grow everywhere. But does that make it any easier?

"We are our homeland. Our first toys. The altered jackets of our elder brothers. Sandwiches wrapped in newspaper. Girls with severe brown skirts. Some coins from father's

In Guberman's words, "one cannot curse the past, since it coincided with our childhood" (Guberman 2014b: 459).

4. *The Languages of Russian-Jewish Nostalgic Feelings*

As is well known, the Jews lived for many centuries as exiles in the lands of their birth, with no homeland of their own. Until the Zionist movement, 'Zion' was an abstraction, the object of 'ritual nostalgia' (as in the annual Pesach toast 'next year in Jerusalem'), a spiritual concept, rather than an actual geographical destination. In the meantime, the Jews lived in countries that simultaneously were and were not 'their own', in linguistic melting pots, where three or even four languages were often required to function in the different spheres of religious, professional, official and private life⁶². This linguistic melange that echoed inside and outside of Jewish life fostered, on one hand, open-mindedness, creativity, and an appreciation of novelty, and, on the other, distress, disorder, and a sense of split or discontinuous identity. Each of the languages in question was related to a distinct 'space of identity' and any language used by Jews was a vehicle of multifaceted "Jewish thought" (Markish 1998: 282). Such is the case for all "Jewish literatures in another language" (Hetényj 2008: 21), particularly for the writings of the Ashkenazi Jews, for whom Jewishness "was above all the first bifurcation of identity, the first marker of difference" (Hoffman 2008: 240), an expression of contradiction and ambivalence (Gershenson 2008: 176). Indeed, East-European Jewish literatures were largely written in languages that became de facto "mother tongues" only in the twentieth century, even while to some extent remaining 'languages of the Other'.

There is a clear interrelationship among the languages used by Russian Jewish writers, their respective poetics, and the different modalities (restorative or reflective) of nostalgia that inform their work. In Russia especially, the literary production of the Jews – regardless of the language selected – faithfully mirrored a unique and intense longing for belonging, a "perpetually creative, diasporic tension" (Boyarin, Boyarin 1995: 326). Russian-Jewish literature is specifically a "*border phenomenon*, a literature with *dual cultural roots*" (Hetényj 2008: 2; emphasis in the original). That said, the semantically hybrid term

pocket. Examinations, crib notes... awkward, horrible verses... Thoughts of suicide... A glass of Azerbaijani wine in the entryway... Army tobacco... My baby daughter, her mittens, her woolen tights, the crushed back of a tiny shoe... crossed-out lines... Manuscripts, the militia, the Emigration Bureau... Everything that happened to us is our homeland. And everything that happened will forever remain" (translated by S. Dickinson).

⁶² After the third partition of Poland in 1795, for instance, Polish Jews lived in a funny and tragic world where frequent code switching between Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish and Russian was required.

“Russian-Jewish literature” itself has “no unambiguous or universally accepted definition” (*Ivi*: 1) and requires a brief explanation⁶³.

At the beginning of the 1920s, Vasilij L’vov-Rogačevskij (1990: 49) claimed that “the nationality of a literary work is not defined by its language, but by the author’s *dominant mood*, by his longing for a certain people” (emphasis added). This viewpoint was further elaborated by Shimon Markish (1985, 1998), Russian-Jewish literature’s most prominent scholar, whose still useful taxonomy argues that a literary text can be classified as Russian-Jewish if it is: (1) written in Russian, (2) by a Jewish author, who (3) openly displays a Jewish identity, and (4) says something about Jews.

While the earliest examples of Jewish literary writings in Russian were published in the early 1800s, it was only in the second half of that century that an impressive number of journalistic, prose, and poetic works appeared. This efflorescence was one of the direct consequences of the ideological split that occurred among Ashkenazi Jews in the second half of the eighteenth century, leading to Jewish ‘enlightenment’ (the *haskalah*), secular acculturation, and emancipation from Jewish orthodoxy. For ‘enlightened’ Jews (the *maskilim*), such emancipation meant the loss of a stable identity. Having for centuries felt either *‘svoi sredi svoix’* (‘at home among their own’) or *‘čužie sredi čužix’* (‘strangers amidst strangers’), the Jews now became both strangers amidst their own *and* strangers per se:

Застенчив и самонадеян,
всегда с людьми, везде один,
меж русских был я иудеем,
а меж евреев – славянин (2010a, I: 520)⁶⁴.

Я жил, за всё сполна платя,
меня две матери носили –
я был еврейское дитя,
и был я выродок России (2011: 520)⁶⁵.

Prior to Soviet times, Russian-Jewish writers and publicists had used one or more of the three languages at their disposition: Russian, Yiddish, and the newly revived Hebrew (Salmon 1995: 131-156; Hetényi 2008: 14-21). “In Russia, Jewish literature is trilingual” wrote L’vov-Rogačevskij (1990: 37). The choice of language was made for clear ideological and sentimental reasons that reflected the writer’s views on hope and disappointment, faith and skepticism, dreams and caution – in short, his or her inclination towards two opposing, but equally restorative myths, that of Jerusalem and that of Petersburg. With few exceptions, Yiddish was the language of exile and popular (mostly oral) tradi-

⁶³ Some scholars (e.g. Shreyer 2007) prefer to invert these qualifiers to speak of “Jewish-Russian” literature.

⁶⁴ “Bashful, yet conceited, / always with others, yet everywhere alone, / among Russians I was a Jew, / but among Jews a Slav”.

⁶⁵ “I lived paying in full for everything, / carried by two mothers, / I was a Jewish baby, / and Russia’s degenerate son”.

tion⁶⁶, Hebrew the language of Jewish nationalism and/or religion, and Russian the secular language of assimilation. The language of the Jews' "Apollonian neighbors", Russian had the status of "Apollonian language" (Slezkine 2004: 19 ff.), for native speakers of Yiddish, and the choice to become a writer in Russian was an act of "self-alienation" (Sicher 1995: 34) that indicated a Jewish author's yearning to become a fully-fledged *Russian* citizen and to embrace Russia as Motherland⁶⁷. From its very origins, Russian-Jewish literature was thus, on one hand, artificial and biased ("it either supports or blames Jewish people"; L'vov-Rogačevskij 1990: 47), and, on the other, a rich amalgam of topics, linguistic features, and techniques:

To make an application of the notion of double-voicing to the Jew writing in Russian, a language not 'one's own', we might say that the Jew writing in Russian was so hypersensitive to the valuation of himself as Other that he sought to appropriate Russian cultural texts as his own and to attenuate the difference of his discourse from that of the Other (Sicher 1995: 33).

At the same time, the Yiddish used in the ghetto of the Pale was an idiom with dual and contradictory significance, a symbol of both exile and home. The echo of a native nowhere, Yiddish in late tsarist Russia was the narrative idiom of "the fundamental absurdity of Jewish existence in the world" (Wex 2006: 6) as well as, eventually, the living memory of a *place outside of space*:

Yiddish had produced an aesthetic in which ideas of beauty and standards of artistic worth are inextricably linked to expressions of longing and pain [...]. Yiddish arose, at least in part, to give voice to a system of opposition and exclusion (*Ivi*: 7, 18)⁶⁸.

As Guberman (with Aleksandr Okun') put it,

Так вот, иврит, как всем совершенно очевидно, – официальный язык Господа Бога. На нем Он диктовал Моисею заповеди, на нем Он говорил с про-

⁶⁶ For many centuries, Ashkenazi schools, which were largely male and doctrinal, offered only Hebrew (for religious purposes), while Yiddish was used for female prayer books, Hasidic tales, and some translations from other European languages. Modern Yiddish literature appeared in the last decades of the nineteenth century and it was officially recognized only in 1908 at the First Yiddish Language Conference in Černovic (Chernovitz). In the revolutionary period, Yiddish was the official language of all the Jewish workers' parties, and after the October Revolution was preferred by the Soviet establishment as the language of Soviet Jewish education (as opposed to 'clerical' Hebrew and 'bourgeois' Russian language; cf. Bemporad 2013: 81 ff.).

⁶⁷ There were also extremely rare cases of Jewish nationalists using Russian to 'convert' assimilationists back to Jewish tradition (cf. Salmon 1995).

⁶⁸ With the exception of a few rich merchants, before April 1917, the Jews of the Russian Empire were required to live outside Russia proper in the Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Moldavian territories of the Jewish Pale of Settlement and had most trades, arts and professions barred to them.

роками, на нем поносил сынов Израилевых и порой жалел их. Все это Он делает на иврите. Но смеется и плачет Господь на идише... (Guberman, Okun' 2009: 131)⁶⁹.

For several decades, Yiddish remained the sole language capable of fully describing Jewish life, the sole means of realizing the incredible potential of Jewish oral communication. It was a “fusion language”, “using components of several languages and melting them in one linguistic system” (Harshav 2008: 995). These borrowed words, which were necessary to designate objects, persons, rites, and customs, and to express idioms, proverbs, and imprecations, made possible the narration of Jewish life in ‘another language’ – an apparent paradox that was actually a logical response to the burdensome dual identity of Russian Jews. In Alice Stone Nakhimovsky’s words:

By choosing to write in Russian and about Jews, a writer is taking on a tradition that runs counter to the kind of unconscious self-identification that others, working in their national literatures, take for granted [...]. If you were going to write about Jews the obvious language was Hebrew or Yiddish; to do so in Russian was to embark on a journey of self-contradiction (Nakhimovsky 1985: 175)⁷⁰.

In Boym’s terms, Yiddish was the idiom of the reflective mood, of intimate nostalgia, of skepticism and melancholy. It had an almost oxymoronic status, being both one’s native tongue, but also the language of one’s Otherness. The structural ambiguity of the Yiddish world influenced Jewish writers, first among them Sholem Aleichem, to lean towards paradoxical humor as a specific response to the difficult condition of permanent exile:

Когда на всех, на всех, на всех
удушье мрака нападает,
на смену слез приходит смех
и нас, как смерть, освобождает (2010а, I: 440)⁷¹.

Искры наших шуток очень разные,
но всегда унынию помеха,
мы шутить особенно горазды,
когда нам по жизни не до смеха (2013: 187)⁷².

⁶⁹ “Thus Hebrew, as is absolutely obvious to all, is the official language of the Lord God. In Hebrew He dictated the commandments to Moses, in Hebrew He spoke with the prophets, scolded the children of Israel, and sometimes pitied them. All this He does in Hebrew. But the Lord laughs and cries in Yiddish...”

⁷⁰ For a useful review of scholarship on Jewish identity, see Gershenson 2008: 175-179.

⁷¹ “When on all and everyone, / the strangle of darkness falls, / laughing takes the place of tears, / and, like death, releases us”.

⁷² “The sparkles of our jokes are very different, / but they always stave off dejection, / we are especially good at joking, / when we don’t feel like laughing”.

In contrast, Jewish literature couched in Russian was a dramatic attempt to erase a Jewish (Mercurian) otherness perceived as ridiculous, to overcome suffering, and to demonstrate that Jews, too, could participate in the ‘serious’ project of the Apollonian nation and its tradition. Literature in revived biblical Hebrew was also ‘serious’: this was the language of the Messianic dream and addressed the rebirth of the Jewish people in the Promised Land. Thus, both Russian and Hebrew were emblems of emancipation from a condition of alterity, from marginalization, and from ridiculous Jewish melancholy; these were ‘higher’, more ‘serious’ languages that lacked empathetic humor – difficult to achieve, after all, in a non-native idiom – but could, at best, allow rhetorical irony. Jewish authors who chose to write in Russian or Hebrew were inclined towards restorative nostalgia: they dreamed of a concrete Fatherland (Russia or Zion), of a strong Apollonian identity (Russian or Hebrew), and of a stable cultural point of reference (‘official’ Russian or Judaic culture). Also specific to Russian-Jewish literature was a particular critical gaze upon the ‘world of the Fathers’ or *shtetl*, a gaze full of alienation.

In the era of the Great Pogroms in the Russian Empire’s southwest territories during the last few decades of the nineteenth century, Jews suffered unprecedented physical and psychological violence. “Emigration had become an integral part of the life of Russian Jews” (Hetényi 2008: 117) and America and Palestine safe havens. Palestine was also the chronotopic setting for Russian-Jewish restorative nostalgia, the chief feeling at that time (cf. Salmon 1995). Restorative nostalgia took various forms: there was a more ‘passive’ religious nostalgia oriented towards the past (the ‘pure’, dying *shtetl*), and two ‘active’ nostalgic yearnings, one for a renewed future Zion, the other for the promised land of Socialism. Both of these nostalgic feelings aimed at the restoration of a past when, presumably, humanity had lived in a state of freedom, brotherhood, and justice; they also aimed at the transformation of “Mercurians into Apollonians” (Slezkine 2004: 269). In this context, melancholy was produced by the knowledge that the Jewish love for Russia would never be reciprocated:

Еврейам придется жестоко платить
за то, что посмели когда-то
дух русского бунта собой воплотить
размашистей старшего брата (2010a, I: 433)⁷³.

Любя всей душой беззаветно
ту землю, в которую врос –
чего ж не любим я ответно? –
извечный еврейский вопрос (2014c: 442)⁷⁴.

⁷³ “The Jews will pay a very heavy price / for having dared in the past / to embody the spirit of the Russian struggle / more boldly than their elder Russian brothers”.

⁷⁴ “Loving selflessly with all my heart, / the land where I grew up, / why am I not loved in return? / – the primeval Jewish question”.

The Jews who remained in Russia were assimilated to become both Russian and Soviet. Similarly, the Russian culture and language assimilated Jewish *toska*: Russian became the language of mercuriality and hybridity, and Russia's long-neglected humorous tradition was reinvigorated⁷⁵.

5. *Three in One: Jewish, Russian, Soviet Identity*

When the Pale of Settlement was abolished after the February Revolution and Russia's 'two capitals' opened to the Jews, hundreds of thousands of people from shtetls in the Empire's west and south arrived in Petrograd and Moscow. They started a new life, one finally shared with their Russian neighbors (cf. Salmon 2012: 151-154). Gradually, Russian became the main language of the Jews, as they finalized their "eager conversion to the Pushkin faith" (Slezkine 2004: 127). While Yiddish was spoken primarily by parents and grandparents (children born in the 1920s who attended Soviet schools could understand Yiddish better than they could actively use it), it continued to reverberate inside and outside of Jewish life. In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, Jewish and Russian literature and culture were already difficult to clearly distinguish – a stunning cultural hybridization had begun in which Yiddish culture was Russified, and Russian culture 'Jewished':

Не зря среди чужих едим и пьём,
немедля мы занятие находим:
с которым населением живём,
того мы на еврейский переводим (2011: 154)⁷⁶.

Such mutual hybridization was made possible by oral exchanges between Jews and Russians in the shared urban spaces of Soviet daily life. Among these was the communal apartment that "absorbed cultural elements from the surrounding languages, folklore, and verbal behavior", encouraging "an essential multilingualism that enabled the functioning of the Jews in a bifurcated existential situation" (Harshav 2008: 994)⁷⁷.

⁷⁵ Čechov, the most important prerevolutionary Russian writer to perform the melancholic 'humorization' of Russian literature, was quite influenced by Jewish culture (despite his explicit views of Jews and the Jewish question in different periods of his life). On the significance of Čechov's familiarity and involvement with the Jewish world (his various Jewish acquaintances included Sholem Aleichem), see Bartov 2010.

⁷⁶ "Not for nothing do we eat and drink among strangers, / quickly finding some task to fulfill: / with whatever people we live, / we translate them into Jewish".

⁷⁷ In the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union, the percentage of Jewish males who married non-Jewish women increased from 17.4 to 42.3 percent between 1924 and 1936 (cf. Slezkine 2004: 179).

Сколько эмигрантов ночью синей
спорят, и до света свет не тухнет;
как они тоскуют по России,
сидя на своих московских кухнях! (2010a, I: 369)⁷⁸.

After the Revolution, when everything “became so endlessly complicated” (Hetényi 2008: 33), Jews broke with “old Russian-Jewish literature” (Sicher 1995: XX). In the new era of Socialism, Soviet state policy required all writers to firmly express their ‘Soviet identity’ and Jewish identity thus officially became an outmoded concept. Because of the Soviet hostility towards religion, the overt expression of a specifically Jewish identity was a provocative and dangerous action. As a result, Jewish authors lost any direct link with their Jewish cultural identity and its ritual life, as they adopted the last surviving religion, the ‘Puškin faith’.

During the Soviet era, Russian tears became Jewish and vice versa. In Vladimir Vysockij’s *Ballad of Childhood* (*Ballada o detstve*), the Russian Evdokim Kirillič says to Disja Mojseevna, the Jewish woman with whom he shares a communal apartment: “*Ech, Dis’ka, my odna sem’ja [...], Vy tože postradavšie, a značit obrusevšie*” (Vysockij 2010: 434)⁷⁹. Soviet Russian and Soviet Russian-Jewish identity also shared ‘laughing through tears’ in its different manifestations. Indeed, the beginning of the Soviet period saw a minor stream of unofficial humorous genres – in addition to the serious literature that was supported by the Bolsheviks – such as the feuilleton, the riddle, the limerick, the folk-song, and various expressions of the absurd that existed on the margins of the ‘great literature’. If conversion to the ‘Puškin faith’ represented Jewish full immersion in the Russian verbal heritage, the major representatives of the ‘laughing-through-tears tradition’ in Russian – e.g. Sholem Aleichem, Isaak Babel’, Daniil Xarms, Sergej Dovlatov, etc. – reflect a joint Russian and Russian-Jewish verbal heritage. Indeed, the Soviet ‘laughing-through-tears tradition’ stands as the most significant result of Russian-Jewish cultural hybridity. As Dovlatov (1999a: 269) aptly noted:

The ability to mock, even maliciously, even with derision towards themselves, is the wonderful, high-minded feature of the ineradicable Jewish people [...]. Jews returned to Russian verbal art the forgotten predilections – easiness, elegance, total humor. That is exactly how – would you believe it? – *The Little House in Kolomna* was written. And even more so *Count Nulin*⁸⁰.

In a remarkable paper, Efim Etkind (1985) states that Soviet literary criticism neglected the evident, but “embarrassing” fact of Russian/Jewish kinship. A large number of well-known Soviet writers were Jews from Jewish fami-

⁷⁸ “How many emigrants in the dark blue night / argue and don’t turn off the lights before dawn; / how they long for Russia, / sitting in their Moscow kitchens!”

⁷⁹ “Oh, Dis’ka, we’re a single family [...], You’ve suffered too, which means you’re Russified”. On this song see also M.A. Curletto’s article in this volume.

⁸⁰ Translated by S. Dickinson.

lies, who had received a Jewish upbringing and education; these included Osip Mandel'shtam, Vera Inber, Isaak Babel', I. Lunc, I. Utkin, Viktor Šklovskij, and Jurij Tynjanov (*Ivi*: 205), but the list could be extended⁸¹. Much as the Hebrew Bible had a special influence on classical Russian poetry (Etkind E. 1985: 202), so did neo-Jewish culture influence Soviet poetry, and while the scale was comparatively modest, a “marginal sounding of the Jewish note” (*Ivi*: 204) was not unusual⁸². The first Soviet decade witnessed the birth of a sort of ‘Russian Yiddish’, which included a few real Jewish expressions or lexical items, together with the typical intonations of Yiddish humor, “joining together the funny and the sad, the droll and the tragic” (*Ivi*: 205)⁸³.

Stalin's violent persecutions also influenced the decisive replacement of Yiddish with Russian. Even references to the shtetl, a theme which inspired Jewish writers with a contradictory mix of “nostalgia and repulsion” (Gershenson 2008: 178), found its expression in the Russian language, enriching the musical scale of Russian poetry with a Jewish melancholic note:

Мне ответил бы кто-нибудь пусть,
чтоб вернуть мой душевный уют:
почему про славянскую грусть
лучше прочих евреи поют? (2011: 241)⁸⁴.

Due to Stalinist repression, and although appreciated by the Soviet intelligentsia, Jewish skepticism and paradoxicality found no support in official Soviet ideology, which was characterized by seriousness and increasing dogmatism as well as a quasi-religious set of beliefs, axiomatic myths, and rules. If the Soviet authorities were ready to accept humor structured on a binary principle (jokes are always widespread in dictatorships), they could not admit doubts and question marks. Soviet Jews became increasingly adept at using encoded subtexts as their verbal skills grew stronger. Equally active in both underground and official culture, the Russian Jew became, at least in the popular Soviet imagination, the

⁸¹ Indeed, almost all of the surnames found in Walter Benjamin's 1926-1927 *Moscow Diary* – whether from the realm of everyday life, art, or science – are Jewish (Benjamin 1986). In Bartov's words: “Beginning with the end of the nineteenth century and over the course of the twentieth, many Jewish names entered Russian literature; [the Jewish writers] wrote in Russian and were the bearers of Russian culture. A list of the Jewish names found in different areas of Russian culture would go beyond a single page” (Bartov 2010).

⁸² Authors such as M. Svetlov, S. Marshak, Il'ja Erenburg, and I. Sel'vinsky were often not permitted to publish their poetry (Etkind E. 1985: 202).

⁸³ Among his frequent references to the topic of Jews in Moscow, Walter Benjamin (*Ivi*: 40, 110) twice mentions adults speaking Yiddish in daily life and notes, for instance, the performance of Yiddish songs after a meal: “They sang communist adaptations (I don't believe they were intended as parodies) of Yiddish songs. Except for Asja [Benjamin's friend], everybody in the room was certainly Jewish” (*Ivi*: 45).

⁸⁴ “Would somebody please answer me, / to give me back my peace of mind: / why of Slavic sadness / do Jews sing better than the others?”

paradigmatic representative of the Soviet intellectual (Gershenson 2008: 177), “paving the way” for the hybridization of Russian culture⁸⁵:

Напористо, безудержно и страстно –
повсюду, где живое колыхание, –
в российское духовное пространство
вплетается еврейское дыхание (2010а, II: 429)⁸⁶.

Питомцы столетия шумного,
калечены общей бедой,
мы – дети романа безумного
России с еврейской ордой (2011: 163)⁸⁷.

Although not ‘ethnically Russian’, Russian Jews were, from an ideological and cultural standpoint, hyper-Russified and they became deeply emotionally involved in Russian cultural and ideological life. As Slezkine (2004: 141) has put it, “Few passions are as bitter, ardent, and hopeless as the love of repentant Mercurians for their Apollonian neighbors”. In Guberman’s words:

Как ни обливали грязной сплетней,
как бы нас хулой ни поносили,
нет любви горчей и безответней,
чем любовь еврейская к России (2011: 190)⁸⁸.

Both fully Russian and fully Jewish (and thus neither one nor the other), Soviet Jews have a “double foundation” (Markish 1998: 277) that “at the aesthetic and poetic levels provides the keenness and accuracy of an unprecedented binocular vision”:

Один еврей другого не мудрей,
но разный в них запал и динамит,
еврей в России больше, чем еврей,
поскольку он еще антисемит (2010а, II: 115)⁸⁹.

Although Russian-Jewish literature was able to aesthetically influence Soviet culture, the ‘implantation’ of Jewish cultural seeds was met by Russian writers with aggressive disdain throughout the twentieth century (Guberman

⁸⁵ Dvlatov’s *Marš odinokix* (*The March of the Lonely*) contains the following joke: “Skažite, Vy – evrej?” “Net, prosto u menja intelligentnoe lico” (“Are you a Jew?” “No, I just have the face of an *intelligent*”; Dvlatov 1983: 30).

⁸⁶ “Stubbornly, impetuously, and passionately, / wherever there is a vital oscillation / in the space of Russian spirituality, / you’ll find the interweave of Jewish breathing”.

⁸⁷ “We are the nurslings of a calamitous century, / crippled by a general misfortune, / children of the crazy love affair / between Russia and the Jewish horde”.

⁸⁸ “No matter how they flung mud at us, / no matter how they reviled us, / there is no more bitter and unrequited love / than the Jewish love for Russia”.

⁸⁹ “One Jew is no smarter than any other, / but they differ by fuses and dynamite; / In Russia a Jew is more than a Jew, / for he’s also an anti-Semite”.

2009b: 257-261). The relationship between Russians and Jews became more complex in the last two decades of the Soviet era, when massive Jewish emigration to Israel and to the United States began. Most of the new ‘exiles in exile’ (meta-exiles) quit the USSR voluntarily for ideological or personal reasons, but a significant part of the Jewish literary intelligentsia was forced to expatriate. There was no choice or, rather, it was a ridiculous choice: “I easily chose between New York and prison...”, declared, for instance, Sergej Dovlatov (1999b: 384). This was also the case of Igor’ Guberman, who left Russia “with grief” (“*s goreč’ju*”; Guberman 2011: 227):

Уж очень, очевидно, стали широко ходить стишки по рукам, и не смогло больше терпеть всевидящее око [...]. Вдруг позвали нас с женой в тот памятный всем отдел виз и регистраций [...] и красивая строгая чиновница с благородной лаконичностью произнесла: “Министерство внутренних дел приняло решение о вашем выезде.

Господи, сколько людей мечтало, чтобы за них вот так решили все сомнения, устранив проклятую занозу вольного выбора! В семидесятые годы наблюдал я много евреев, мечтающих не ехать, а пожизненно бороться за отъезд [...]. Но рассеянный взор фортуны пал на нас, хоть, видит Бог, я не просил об этом (Guberman 2009a: 395)⁹⁰.

The condition of being ‘strangers at home’ over the past two centuries has led to the recurrence of *toska* in Russian-Jewish culture, restorative and reflective nostalgia affecting the literary mood, style, and genre of Russian-Jewish texts. The general pattern would appear to be that the stronger the dream of a radiant future or pride for a glorious past, the more an author is prone to gravity, romanticism, and rhetorical dramatization (cf. Salmon 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014a, 2014b), while the stronger he or she feels undecided or ‘suspended’, the more he or she is prone to reflective, melancholic humor:

Мне кажется, она уже близка
расплата для застрявших здесь, как дома:
всех мучает неясности тоска,
а ясность не бывает без погрома (2010a, II: 84)⁹¹.

⁹⁰ “It became very, very evident that my verses had begun to circulate extensively passing from hand to hand, and the all-seeing eye could no longer tolerate it [...]. Suddenly my wife and I were invited to that department of visas and registrations that all remember [...] and the officer, an attractive and severe woman, declared with noble succinctness: ‘The Ministry of Internal Affairs has determined that you will leave’”.

“Lord! How many people have dreamt that all their doubts would thus be resolved by others, removing the damned splinter of free choice! In the seventies I saw many Jews who dreamt not of emigration, but of a life-long struggle for permission to emigrate [...]. But the absent-minded gaze of fortune fell on us, though, God knows, I didn’t ask for it”.

⁹¹ “It seems to me that very soon the reckoning will come / for the people stuck here [in Israel] as if at home; / all are tormented by the *toska* of uncertainty, / but you can’t have certainty without pogroms”.

Наш разум лишь смехом полощется
от глупости, скверны и пакости,
а смеха лишённое общество
скудеет в клиническом пафосе (*Ivi*: 235)⁹².

Влекусь душой к идее некой,
где всей судьбы видна картина:
не вышло если стать Сенекой,
то оставайся Буратино (2011: 221)⁹³.

6. *The Holy Borderland*

Once Russian Jews emigrated to Israel, they were not just psychologically, but also socially and linguistically ‘strangers at home’⁹⁴. Having been Jews in Russia, in Israel they paradoxically became Russians:

Изверившись в блаженном общем рае,
но прежние мечтания любя,
евреи эмигрируют в Израиль,
чтоб русскими почувствовать себя (2010а, I: 380)⁹⁵.

Without either linguistic liberty or familiar cultural reference points, these émigrés became ‘strangers’ both to relatives left behind in Russia and to their own children, who grew up as Israelis, rapidly forgetting Russia – and sometimes the Russian language as well. It was in this ‘meta-exile’ that Guberman began to discover the strength of his bond with the Soviet Union, precisely in the era when that country was itself disappearing:

Иные на Руси цветут соцветия,
повсюду перемены и новации,
а я – из очень прошлого столетия,
по сути – из другой цивилизации (2009с: 20)⁹⁶.

⁹² “Only laughter can rinse our mind / of stupidity, filth, and villainy, / while a society deprived of humor / shrivels in clinical pathos”.

⁹³ “I’m attracted to a certain idea / in which fate’s entire picture is evident: / if you didn’t get to be a Seneca, / then remain a Pinocchio”.

⁹⁴ Exiles from Russia to Israel could try to integrate into Israeli society, and sometimes did manage to partially adapt to the very different way of life, climate, and socio-political context (exchanging the world’s most expansive country for a microscopic territory beset by enemies).

⁹⁵ “Having lost their faith in blissful communal paradise, / but loving still their earlier dreams, / Jews emigrate to Israel, / so as to feel Russian”.

⁹⁶ “Different blossoms are now flowering in Russia, / everywhere changes and innovations, / but I come from a very past era, / in point of fact, from another civilization”.

На сердце – странные колючки:
 прошли ведь вовсе не века,
 но вот в Россию едут внучки,
 уже не зная языка (*Ivi*: 136)⁹⁷.

Soviet Russia became a literary chronotope, the object of the emigré's paradoxical new *toska*, while post-Soviet Russia was an altogether alien place. An affective attachment to Russia was constituted by memory alone:

Стало скучно в нашем крае,
 не с кем лясы поточить,
 все уехали в Израиль
 ностальгией сплин лечить (2010a, I: 422)⁹⁸.

Забавно туда приезжать, как домой,
 и жить за незримой межой;
 Россия осталась до боли родной
 и стала заметно чужой (*Ivi*, II: 257)⁹⁹.

Guberman's life acquired new paradoxical features in emigration. The most onerous of these concerned the linguistic sphere, since language was not only a marker of his identity, but also the means for his professional activity. For almost all of the Russian Jews who emigrated to Israel after the 1970s, Hebrew remained a foreign language. In this 'impasse' (Sicher 1995: 28), Russian language and culture thus became the emblem of a new split identity (cf. *Ivi*: XVI) and the USSR, a lamented and long-lost hell, the object of an ambivalent *toska*. To Soviet exiles, who were neither religious nor Zionists, as was the case with Guberman, Israel could to some extent become a 'homeland', but not an intimately felt or by any means "literary homeland" (*Ivi*: XVII). For Igor' Guberman, nostalgia again assumed skeptical, melancholic and illogical form as illustrated by his yearning for bygone troubles:

Всю свою жизнь (как и сейчас) я всей душой любил Россию, но, разумеется, странною любовью (Guberman 2009a: 435)¹⁰⁰.

Тоска былых невзгод, утрат, метаний
 с годами не низводится к нулю,
 и сладостная боль воспоминаний
 нас часто посещает во хмелю (2014c: 440)¹⁰¹.

⁹⁷ "There are odd thorns in my heart: / it's not as if centuries have gone by, / but off my grandchildren go to Russia, / already not knowing the language".

⁹⁸ "It got boring in our land, / no one to jabber with, / everyone had left for Israel / to heal spleen with nostalgia".

⁹⁹ "It's funny to arrive there, as if coming home, / and to live behind an invisible boundary. / Russia has remained so painfully mine, / and has become so notably Other".

¹⁰⁰ "I have loved Russia all my life (and still do) with all my heart, but, obviously, it is a strange love".

¹⁰¹ "*Toska* for past afflictions, losses, bewilderment / has not, over the years, been reduced to null, / and the sweet pain of memories / often visits us in drunkenness".

In *The Book of Wanderings (Kniga stranstvija)*, Guberman describes the fulfillment of a request made by an old Russian Jew who had asked his daughter to divide his ashes between Petersburg and the Judea Desert in a humorous, but poignant image of the Russian-Jewish split identity:

На склоне возле могилы пророка Самуила такое место отыскалось. Дочь вынула из сумочки старый школьный пенал, мы вытрясли из него горсть серого праха, ветер аккуратно унес его, развеивал по пустыне. Мы курили и молчали. Так советский физик разделил себя посмертно, чтобы обозначить поровну свою любовь и причастность (Guberman 2009b: 263)¹⁰².

Such a profound division of identity triggered in its subject either of two opposite reactions – denial or acceptance – both fraught with *toska*. If the former implies a yearning to become the Other, the latter suggests a humorous and wistful yearning for relativity, suspension, and unrealized potential (as in fantastic ‘fourth dimensions’ or “birches sporting branches of oranges”). An old Soviet joke summarizes this paradox quite well. A Soviet Jew emigrates to Israel, but after a few weeks regrets the decision and heads back to the USSR; he then once again returns to Israel, then back to Russia, and so on, several times. When finally asked by the increasingly impatient authorities in both Russia and Israel in which context he ultimately feels better, the Jew replies: “I feel better in the plane”¹⁰³. His paradoxical nostalgia is directed at the borderland itself, an ‘in-between’ territory or no-man’s land, a nowhere, which is also perhaps everywhere:

В душе у всех теперь надрыв:
без капли жалости эпоха
всех обокрала, вдруг открыв,
что где нас нет, там тоже плохо (2010a, II: 107)¹⁰⁴.

Еврей тоскует не о прозе
болот с унылыми осинами,
еврей мечтает о берёзе,
несущей ветки с апельсинами (*Ivi*, II: 662)¹⁰⁵.

Тоска, тревога, пустота...
Зовёт безмолвная дорога

¹⁰² “On a slope beside Prophet Samuel’s grave we found a good place. His daughter took out of her handbag an old school pencil case, we shook out of it a handful of gray ashes: the wind neatly carried them off and scattered them over the desert. We smoked in silence. This is how a Soviet physicist divided himself up after death in order to equally commemorate his love and the fact of his belonging”.

¹⁰³ A slightly different version of this joke appears in Leonid Stolovič’s famous collection of Russian-Jewish humor (Stolovič 1996: 184-185).

¹⁰⁴ “All of us now have anguished hearts: / without a shred of mercy the age / has robbed everyone by suddenly revealing / that everywhere else is just as bad”.

¹⁰⁵ “Jews long not for prose / of bogs and downcast aspens, / Jews dream of birches, / sporting branches of oranges”.

в иные выбратья места...
Там пустота, тоска, тревога (2013: 265)¹⁰⁶.

A feeling of nostalgia towards the contradictory concept of ‘inferno/paradise lost’ is both the cause and the effect of Guberman’s love for Russia. Russia itself is represented as the ‘land of paradoxes’, which haunts the mind day and night (Guberman 2010a, II: 8). Whatever he sings in *gariki* or states in prose about Russia contains apparent inconsistencies and contradictions:

Россию всё же любит Бог:
в ней гены живости упорны,
а там, где Хармс явиться мог,
абсурд и хаос жизнетворны (2009с: 21)¹⁰⁷.

В России слезы светятся сквозь смех,
Россию Бог безумием карал,
России послужили больше всех те,
кто ее сильнее презирал (2010a, I: 20)¹⁰⁸.

Я скучаю по тухло-застойной
пошлой жизни и подлой морали,
где, тоскуя о жизни достойной,
мы душой и умом воспаряли (*Ivi*, II: 114)¹⁰⁹.

В российском климате испорченном
на всех делах лежит в финале
тоска о чём-то незаконченном,
чего ещё не начинали (*Ivi*: 727)¹¹⁰.

Exiled from a nonsensical Russia to the new – serious, nationalist, and Apollonian – Jewish state, Guberman discovered that his feelings were affected by multiple internal contradictions, leading him to become a nostalgic “disabled veteran [*invalid*] of Russian culture” (*Ivi*: 22):

Люблю российский спор подлунный,
его цитат бенгальский пламень,
его идей узор чугунный,
его судеб могильный камень (*Ivi*: 9)¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁶ “*Toska*, anxiety, emptiness... / A silent path is calling me / to strike out for other places... / Where I’ll find emptiness, *toska*, anxiety”.

¹⁰⁷ “God loves Russia anyway: / it has the stubborn genes of vivaciousness; / in a place that could have produced Daniil Xarms, / nonsense and chaos generate life”.

¹⁰⁸ “In Russia tears shine through laughter, / Russia was punished by God with madness, / Russia was best served by those / who most despised it”.

¹⁰⁹ “I miss the foul and stagnant / vulgar life and its vile ethics, / when, we longed for a life that was worthier, / and our hearts and minds soared”.

¹¹⁰ “In the ruined Russian climate, / all matters have this finale: / *toska* for something unfinished, / for something yet unbegun”.

¹¹¹ “I love the sublunary Russian quarrel, / the Bengal flare of its quotations, / the cast-iron tracery of its ideas, / the gravestone of its destinies”.

Навидевшись америк и европ,
вернулся я в мой дом, душе любезный,
и стал сильнее любить российский трёп,
распахнутый, густой и бесполезный (2013: 220)¹¹².

From the “island” (Jerusalem) of his exile, Guberman feels the tedium of prosperity:

Уже настолько дух наш косный
с Россией связан неразлучно,
что жить нам тягостно и постно
повсюду, где благополучно (*Ivi*: 257)¹¹³.

Меня оттуда съехать попросили,
но я сосуд русского сознания
и часто вспоминаю о России,
намазывая маслом хлеб изгнания (*Ivi*: 519)¹¹⁴.

Живу, как будто я на острове,
и все любимое – со мной,
и чувствую блаженство острое
от легкой скуки островной (2011: 192)¹¹⁵.

In meta-exile, the poet finds that his real, one and only homeland is neither a time nor a place, but the Russian language, the very essence of his identity. Inseparable from experience, emotions, and perception, language constitutes the ontological core of the Self: “In the end, I feel at home in only one language”, corroborates Norman Manea (2008: 4). Hence, Russia is, first and foremost, the ‘lost paradise’ of Guberman’s native tongue:

Я пристегнут цепью и замком
к речи, мне с рождения родной:
я владею русским языком
мнее, чем он владеет мной (2010a, II: 36)¹¹⁶.

Я уезжал, с судьбой не споря,
но в благодетельной разлуке,

¹¹² “After visiting americas and europes, / I returned to the home so dear to my soul, / and began to love even more / the broad, dense, and useless Russian baloney”.

¹¹³ “Our inert soul has been so / indissolubly bound with Russia / that our lives are heavy and dreary / wherever we find prosperity”.

¹¹⁴ “They asked me to move out of there, / but I am a vessel of Russian consciousness, / And often think of Russia, / buttering my bread of exile”.

¹¹⁵ “I live as if on an island / and all that I love is here with me. / Yet I feel bliss sharpened / by light island boredom”.

¹¹⁶ “I’m chained and padlocked / to the language that has been mine since birth: / I have mastered Russian even less / than it has mastered me”.

как раковина – рокот моря,
храню я русской речи звуки (*Ivi*: 114)¹¹⁷.

Russia is also the place of memory and intimacy, where the Russian language reverberates on all sides, be it in Siberia or in a Moscow kitchen:

На кухне или на лесоповале,
куда бы судьбы нас ни заносили,
мы все о том же самом толковали –
о Боге, о евреях, о России (*Ivi*: 14)¹¹⁸.

Всего одна в душе утрата,
но возместить её нельзя:
Россия, полночь, кухня чья-то
и чушь несущие друзья (*Ivi*: 705)¹¹⁹.

Thus, Russian today assumes the function of Yiddish in the past, giving voice to the nostalgic sounds of the exiled. If the Lord laughs and cries in Yiddish, those exiled from Russia to Zion laugh and cry in Russian:

Горжусь, что в мировом переполохе,
в метаниях от буйности к тоске –
сознание свихнувшейся эпохи
безумствует на русском языке (*Ivi*, I: 350)¹²⁰.

7. Guberman's 'Toska for Existence'

Guberman's melancholy is mitigated by the process of reflection itself. Through reason, he gains distance and the resulting *ostranenie* facilitates his empathic approach to all kinds of nonsense. Unlike tragedy, skeptical humor is not cathartic, but represents a form of emancipation (or even abdication) from drama and tragedy, an acceptance both cognitive and affective of the funny-yet-poignant paradoxes of human existence. Reflective *toska* is paradoxical, a "toska of existence (*suščestvovanija*)" directly connected to skeptical disillusionment:

Сполна я осознал ещё юнцом
трагедию земного проживания

¹¹⁷ "I left, without contesting fate, / but in the beneficence of distance, / as a shell holds the murmur of the sea, / I retain the sounds of Russian speech".

¹¹⁸ "In the kitchen or felling trees, / wherever fate took us, / we always talked about the same thing / about God, Jews, and Russia".

¹¹⁹ "There is only one loss in my heart, / and no chance of compensation for it: / Russia, midnight, someone's kitchen, / and friends talking rubbish".

¹²⁰ "I'm proud that in the world's tumult, / in the bouncing from turbulence to *toska*, / the conscience of this age gone mad / does its raving in Russian".

с кошмарным и заведомым концом,
со счастьем и тоской существования (*Ivi*, II: 435)¹²¹.

Забавные печали нас измучили,
былые сокрушая упования:
не знали мы, что при благополучии
угрюмее тоска существования (*Ivi*: 563)¹²².

Guberman's writing has always been accompanied by nostalgic feeling that, despite its persistence, has never been restorative or dogmatic. In the context of exile or meta-exile to the Apollonian 'Forefatherland' of Israel, his poetics have remained as skeptical as ever. Whatever his political views and regardless of his obvious affection for Israel, the poet looks at any religious orthodoxy or dogmatic ideology with marked diffidence, precisely because his general ontological mood conflicts with the assumption of such a cognitive position. In both prose and verse, he also repeatedly rejects any form of blind nationalism:

С душою, раздвоенной, как копыто,
обеим чужероден я отчизнам – еврей,
где гоношат антисемиты,
и русский, где грешат сионизмом (*Ivi*: 205)¹²³.

Тонул в игре, эпикурействе,
любовях, книгах и труде,
но утопить себя в еврействе
решусь не раньше, чем в воде (*Ivi*: 441)¹²⁴.

Skepticism, the poet suggests, is the direct result of a discontinuity between dreams and reality, and allows one to substitute false beliefs or illusions with the comparatively liberating feeling of sober melancholy:

За периодом хмеля и пафоса,
после взрыва восторга
и резвости неминуема долгая пауза –
время скепсиса, горечи, трезвости (*Ivi*, I: 91)¹²⁵.

¹²¹ "Even as a boy I fully realized / the tragedy of living on earth / with a nightmarish and well-known ending, / with the happiness and *toska* of existence".

¹²² "Amusing sorrows tormented us, / destroying our former beliefs: / we did not know that in prosperity / the *toska* of existence is gloomier".

¹²³ "With my soul split like a hoof, / I'm alien to both my fatherlands, / I'm Jewish when anti-Semites are at work, / and Russian when the sin is Zionism".

¹²⁴ "I was drowning in games, in hedonism, / in loves, books, and work, / but sooner than drown myself in Judaism, / I'd do so in water".

¹²⁵ "After a period of drunkenness and pathos, / after a burst of enthusiasm / even zeal inevitably needs a long break – / a time of skepticism, grief, sobriety".

8. *The Melancholic God of Skeptical Judaism*

The ‘fluctuating Jew’ – depicted in the Soviet joke about the ‘flying Jew’ as well as in a series of masterpieces by Marc Chagall – symbolizes the coupling of a state of suspension with persistent melancholy. Such melancholic suspension is an enduring phenomenon in the history of Jewish cognitive and emotive experience. Although Jewish tradition also includes a Rabbinical branch of cognitive inflexibility (the heritage of Shammai)¹²⁶, skepticism is an ancient component of traditional Jewish exegesis as well – and it reflects the condition of exile itself as well as an elemental Judaic aversion to dogmatism. The roots of melancholic Ashkenazi humor thus seem to be of a piece with the ancient tradition of skeptical Judaism¹²⁷.

As Giuseppe Veltri points out, the Talmud itself uses irony in interpreting the Torah, occasionally making fun of the ‘written Torah’, as in the case of the Qohelet’s pessimism (Veltri 2013: 725). Here, God Himself can be considered a student of the Talmud, his arguments bested in discussions with rabbinical scholars (*Ivi*: 726). Such an idea of God renders Judaism and the Judaic God substantially different from the Christian religious model:

Only Christianity has dogmas and moral authorities, which invoke the authority of God and his representatives. Judaism does not [...]. So the question still remains unanswered: do/did the Jews believe in God? In response to difficult questions people often answer with a counter-question: does/did God for his part believe in the Jews? [...]

Halakhah [the Jewish enlightenment, L.S.] is decided day by day, and the only norm is everyday existence. The rabbi is not a dogmatist who determines truth for future generations. Rather, he negotiates between past and present. And if he does not do his job well, he is fired. So God as an authority plays no role [...]. In sum, between God and the Jewish people, in history and the present, there is a loving, skeptical, but constructive and mutual mistrust (*Ivi*: 726, 731, 732).

Guberman seems a worthy heir of both ancient (Hebrew) and modern (Ashkenazi) skeptical traditions, his latest collections of *gariki* (2011-2014) giving ever more evidence of this philosophical framework. God paradoxically responds to humanity with benevolent mocking, sometimes even expressing himself in seemingly trivial language – albeit in an entirely non-trivial way:

Найдя предлог для диалога,
– как Ты сварил такой бульон? –

¹²⁶ In the middle of the first century BCE, Hillel and Shammai led the Sanhedrin and founded two respective and antagonistic religious schools (or ‘houses’), the distinction between them was similar to “the difference between liberals and conservatives in America today” (Wyllen 1989: 166).

¹²⁷ Several *gariki* even contain evident gibes at Jewish orthodoxy and at religious hypocrisy.

спрошу я вежливо у Бога.
– По пьянке, – грустно скажет Он (2010а, I: 272)¹²⁸.

Всеведущ, вездесущ и всемогущ,
окутан голубыми небесами,
Господь на нас глядит из райских кущ
и думает: разьебывайтесь сами (*Ivi*: 181)¹²⁹.

Бог в игре с людьми так несерьезен,
а порой и на руку нечист,
что похоже – не религиозен,
а возможно – даже атеист (*Ivi*, II: 92)¹³⁰.

Напрасен хор людских прошений,
не надо слишком уповать,
ведь Бог настолько совершенен,
что может не существовать (2011: 199)¹³¹.

Jews can amicably joke with their sole God because they created Him at least as much as He created them:

Про наше высшее избрание
мы не отпетые врали,
хотя нас Бог избрал не ранее,
чем мы Его изобрели (*Ivi*: 146)¹³².

Не зря себе создали Бога двуногие –
под Богом легко и приятно.
Что Бог существует, уверены многие
и даже Он сам, вероятно (2013: 200)¹³³.

Where God is concerned, Guberman's skepticism is particularly evident. By emphasizing the profound inconsistency implied by standard, trivializing conceptions of the Lord, Guberman subverts the reader's logical expectations: in His supreme imperfection, God deserves our empathy and benevolence. Here again, the *gariki* trigger a feeling of skeptical melancholy:

¹²⁸ “When I have a pretext for dialogue, / ‘How ever didst Thou make such a broth?’ / I’ll politely ask the Lord. / ‘I was on a drunk’, he will sadly reply”.

¹²⁹ “Omniscient, ubiquitous, and omnipotent, / wrapped in the blue skies, / the Lord looks down at us from the heavenly foliage / and thinks: unfuck yourselves without me”.

¹³⁰ “In playing with people, God is so shallow, / and sometimes also light-fingered, / that He would seem not to be religious, / It may even be that He’s an atheist”.

¹³¹ “The choir of human prayer is futile, / there’s no need for too much trust, / after all, God is so perfect / that He can even non-exist”.

¹³² “About being chosen from above / we weren’t inveterately lying / although God did not choose us before / we invented Him”.

¹³³ “Not by chance did the bipeds create God: / with God all is easy and pleasant. / Many people are sure that God exists / and He’s probably sure, too”.

Версии, гипотезы, теории
спорят о минувшем заразительно,
истинную правду об истории
знает только Бог. Но приблизительно (*Ivi*: 199)¹³⁴.

На старости пришло благополучие,
Живу я в обеспеченности даже;
Ты, Господи, прости меня при случае,
И я – клянусь – прошу Тебя тогда же (*Ivi*: 331)¹³⁵.

In Guberman's cosmogony, God is depicted in full hybridity. He has at least three contradictory hypostases, ranging from the empathic and powerless, to the powerful and indifferent, to the guiltless and absent:

Не знаю, чья в тоске моей вина;
в окне застыла плоская луна;
и кажется, что правит мирозданием лицо,
не замутиённое сознанием (2010а, II: 396)¹³⁶.

Господь, создатель мироздания,
все знал и делал навсегда,
не знал Он только сострадания,
и в этом – главная беда (2011: 227)¹³⁷.

Не имея к Богу доступа
И ввиду его отсутствия
Крайне глупо ждать от Господа
милосердного сочувствия (2013: 317)¹³⁸.

Moreover, Guberman's God, who rarely seems interested in human matters, not only reacts to the evolution of His own creation with human-like disappointment, but also personally declares his disapproval for planet Earth in an incongruously offhand and humorous style¹³⁹:

¹³⁴ "Different versions, hypotheses, theories / argue contagiously about the past – / the genuine truth about history / is known only by God. Roughly".

¹³⁵ "In my old age it turns out I've become prosperous, / and even manage to live without a care; / You, Lord, forgive me for that if you need to, / and then I swear I'll forgive You, too".

¹³⁶ "I don't know who is to blame for my *toska*; / outside the window a flat moon has congealed, / and it seems the universe is governed by someone, / who is untroubled by cognizance".

¹³⁷ "The Lord, the creator of the universe, / knew and created everything for evermore, / the only thing He didn't know was compassion / and *that* is our primary misfortune".

¹³⁸ "Having no access to God / and seeing how He's absent, / it's very stupid to expect from Him / merciful compassion".

¹³⁹ On Guberman's poetic use of obscene words, see Vol'skaja 2003 and Salmon 2014a.

Творец не лишен интереса,
 глядит он и думает: бя,
 убойная сила прогресса
 растет на планете Земля (*Ivi*: 340)¹⁴⁰.

This skeptical Jewish God is a symbol of the paradoxical, funny-yet-poi-
 gnant *toska* of the exiles for a metaphysical, hence unrealizable homeland, for
 what Jankélévitch (1974: 360) has called “la localization symbolique et méta-
 phorique d’un désir indéterminé”. A supreme representation of lack, loss, and/
 or distance, this celestial homeland is as hybrid as God is. God represents our
 longing for Him, a nostalgic reflection of His longing for us:

Мы пустоту в себе однажды
 вдруг странной чувствуем пропажей;
 тоска по Богу – злая жажда,
 творец кошмаров и миражей (2010а, I: 363)¹⁴¹.

Подвержен творческой тоске,
 Господь не чужд земного зелья,
 и наша жизнь на волоске висит
 в часы Его похмелья (*Ivi*, II: 432)¹⁴².

Max Horkheimer (1985: 387) said that what matters in Judaism is not what
 God is like, but rather what we, human beings, are like. Judaic skeptical *toska*
 is thus a perception of each individual’s ethical responsibility towards his or
 her own intrinsic nature and towards the nature of others. Through contrast,
 Guberman illustrates the intrinsic gap between metaphysical ethics, which im-
 plies passive subordination to external dogmas, and skeptical ethics which vi-
 tally contributes to the moral struggle within each of us. Such is the position
 expressed by Bashevis Singer’s Magician of Lublin: “If there is no God, man
 must behave like God” (Singer 2010: 229), a comment that does not illustrate
 would-be Jewish megalomania, but simultaneously asserts skeptical awareness
 and a sense of responsibility before God’s absence. In other words, by consider-
 ing God’s inexistence or even distance, humans can show Him their indulgence:

Я жил весьма, совсем, отнюдь не строго,
 но строго за своей следил судьбой,
 боялся потому что я не Бога,
 а тягостной вражды с самим собой (2011: 174)¹⁴³.

¹⁴⁰ “Not without some interest, the Creator / looks down and thinks: shit, / the de-
 structive power of progress / is really growing on planet Earth”.

¹⁴¹ “Emptiness we one day / suddenly perceive within, like a strange loss; / *toska*
 for God is a nasty thirst, / the creator of nightmares and mirages”.

¹⁴² “When subject to creative *toska*, / the Lord doesn’t deny Himself an earthly
 drink, / and our life hangs by a thread / in the hours of His hangover”.

¹⁴³ “I lived quite, completely, entirely casually, / but carefully paid attention to my
 fate, / not that I was afraid of God, / just of onerous enmity with myself”.

Хоть Бога я душой не принимаю,
однако в силу этого плебейства
с Него я и ответственность снимаю
за все многовековые злодеяния (2013: 272)¹⁴⁴.

Ни вслух, ни про себя я не молюсь
и не творю поклонов менуэт,
лишь изредка шепчу я, тертый гусь:
“Спасибо, если даже Тебя нет!” (2014а: 504)¹⁴⁵.

The Freudian intuition that two opposing drives paradoxically govern the human psyche (love/life vs. death) finds its voice at the close of Singer’s novel *Family Moskat*, where the primary object of Jewish longing is nothing less than death itself: “Death is the Messiah. That’s the real truth” (Singer 2000: 611).

9. *Demystifying Toska – Skepticism's Toska for Humanity*

As we have seen, skeptical humor, the humorous variety of reflective *toska*, undramatizes whatever seems to humans irreparably ‘serious’, including nostalgia itself. Guberman’s thought thus avoids rhetorical or romantic appeal to appear before the reader in all its humaneness. His *gariki* both result from and foster an easy, benevolent gaze at ‘life as it is’, lending a sense of dignity to existential experience. In a universe governed by an inconsistent God, on a planet inhabited by inconsistent beings, in chaos that is governed by chance and necessity, verbal humor and drinking are the only responses that Guberman, a mournful optimist, has to combat *toska*. Life is so heavy that it deserves lightness:

Нельзя длительно страдать,
нет пользы в бесконечном сокрушении.
Совсем не в легкой жизни благодать,
а в легком к этой жизни отношении (2011: 226)¹⁴⁶.

Я не искал чинов и званий,
но очень часто, слава Богу,
тоску несбывшихся желаний
менял на сбывшихся изжогу (2010а, II: 383)¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁴ “Although I do not accept God in my soul, / I do, however, in view of this petty fact, / relieve Him of any responsibility / for all those centuries of evildoing”.

¹⁴⁵ “I don’t pray either aloud or to myself, / nor do I perform minuets of bowing, / I only whisper rarely, old goose that I am: / ‘Thank you, even if for only not-existing’”.

¹⁴⁶ “You can’t go on suffering for too long, / there’s no advantage to endless distress. / Beatitude is not the result of an easy life, / but of living easily with the life you have”.

¹⁴⁷ “I wasn’t looking for ranks and titles, / but quite often, thank God, / I replaced the *toska* of unrealized dreams / with the real burning of hangovers”.

Это счастье – дворец возводить на песке,
не бояться тюрьмы и сумы,
предаться любви, отдаваться тоске,
пировать в эпицентре чумы (2013: 131)¹⁴⁸

The *gariki* may be seen to contain an aesthetic and speculative ‘completeness’ that represents an entire philosophical system based on the insight that overcoming *toska*, identity hybridity, and suspension means accepting *toska*, hybridity and suspension, and on the expression of this acceptance in art. Poetry itself becomes the stylization of chaos, rather than a means to achieve fame or status. For Guberman, accepting *toska* means transcoding it into Russian-Jewish paradoxicality – and thus reinvigorating all the humorous resources of his beloved mother tongue. The more refined his verse technique, the stronger the element of playfulness.

The concept of an opposition between “*jazykovej optimism*” (“linguistic optimism”) and “*spiritual'nyj pessimizm*” (“spiritual pessimism”) that Efim Etkind developed in his studies of Puškin (cf. Etkind A. 2005: 12), applies perfectly to the *gariki*. Puškin’s optimism lies in the fact that his verses, however sad they may be, nonetheless manage to persuade us that sadness can be expressed and hence that the strength of language is the primary means of psychological endurance and resistance. “Spiritual pessimism” conversely expresses a mistrust of language and is thus a form of ideological conservatism.

Guberman’s worldview demystifies and ‘humorizes’ everything, particularly those objects that are typical of human mystification. His verses propose an approach to life without either self-deception or despair, replacing these with humor and skeptical melancholia, in short, a form of ethical, ironic, and melancholic heroism:

На собственном горбу и на чужом
я вынянчил понятие простое:
бессмысленно идти на танк с ножом,
но если очень хочется, то стоит (2010a, I: 263)¹⁴⁹.

Если уж несет тебя течение судьбы против твоей воли, то плыви по нему и получай удовольствие (2009a: 44)¹⁵⁰.

Though such reflectiveness is onerous, it is the direct consequence of accepting the poignant and counterintuitive logic of “chance and necessity” (in

¹⁴⁸ “Happiness is building a castle in the sand, / with no fear of either prison or poverty, / indulging in love, surrendering to *toska*, / continuing to feast in the epicenter of the plague”.

¹⁴⁹ “From my own bitter experience and those of others, / I’ve extracted this simple idea: / it makes no sense to attack a tank with a knife, / but if you really want to, then it’s worth it”.

¹⁵⁰ “If the current of destiny carries you against your will, then float along and enjoy it”.

Jacques Monod’s famous formulation). Once we accept the logic of the universe – which at first seems senseless to us – we can change our perspective and look at things from an estranged (*ostranennoe*) position. *Gariki* express the poignancy of knowledge and the pleasure of de-dramatization:

Поскольку мыслю я несложно,
То принял с возрастом решение:
Улучшить мир нельзя, но можно
К нему улучшить отношение (2013: 345)¹⁵¹.

In the words of Volková (2008: 175), “if it does not break us, exile paradoxically makes us more humane”. As Guberman puts it:

У самого кромешного предела
и даже за него теснимый веком,
я делал историческое дело –
упрямо оставался человеком (2010а, II: 136)¹⁵².

¹⁵¹ “Since I think simply, / I made a decision as I grew older: / it’s impossible to make the world better, / but one can improve his approach to it”.

¹⁵² “When I reached the utter limit, / and had even gone beyond, pushed by the era, / I performed a historical feat – / and stubbornly remained human”.

Резюме

Лаура Сальмон

Меланхолический юмор и задумчивая тоска. Поэтика парадоксальности Игоря Губермана

Поэтическое творчество Игоря Губермана, составленное из тысяч четверостиший (так наз. ‘гариков’), отражает гибридный жанр, находящийся на стыке наследия еврейской афористической традиции, русского устного фольклора и классической русской поэзии. Тема тоски является в ‘гариках’ ключевой, хотя она сугубо далека от ‘реставрирующей ностальгии’ в понятии С. Бойм (2001). Напротив, губермановская тоска – чувство задумчивое, меланхолическое, парадоксальное. Оно выражает ту особенную скептическую специфику, которая характеризует ашкеназский парадоксальный юмор, целью которого является не осмеяние недостатков людей, а доброжелательный смех над жизненным, болезненным абсурдом, над грустью человеческого существования. Подобный меланхолический и парадоксальный юмор позволяет поэту смотреть на жизнь, на себя, даже на самого Бога со снисходительной ‘улыбкой разума’, принципиально лишенной всякой надменности или чувства высокомерия. В отличие от поверхностного восприятия широкой публики, Губерман – тончайший меланхолик, глубокий скептик, смеющийся сквозь слезы. Ибо так учит русско-еврейская традиция, глубоко проникающая в российскую словесность: когда слишком грустно на душе, остается лишь смех.