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ARTICLE

Literary Insanity and Psychiatric Literacy: Youth, Mental Health, and Contemporary Russian Fiction

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Abstract

In the first post-Soviet decade, Russian mental health professionals sounded the alarm about a looming psychiatric crisis affecting the nation's youth. Some twenty years later, a spate of literary works seemingly marked the fictional apotheosis of these anxieties. Although critics have identified and reflected upon the significance of the "insanity cluster" in prose published around 2017, the youth of the protagonists has remained largely unconsidered. This essay focuses on three literary works that emerged at the intersection of two recent turns in contemporary Russian culture: the adolescent and the psychotherapeutic. These works featuring young, psychologically disturbed protagonists emphasize the corporeal aspects of mental illness. The characters strive to overcome the psyche or soul through empirically observable, bodily phenomena, such as violence against themselves and others, or sexual promiscuity. All three works unmask the harmful consequences of externalizing psychic abnormalities, of their teenage heroes' belief that scarring one's own body or that of another sentient being can ameliorate the symptoms of schizophrenia or other mental disturbances. With their complex and nuanced literary exploration of the interplay between "consciousness" and "flesh," the three novels provide a fictional retort to narrowly mechanistic understandings of the psychology and behavior of youth.

In the first post-Soviet decade and the early Putin years, many Russian mental health professionals sounded the alarm about a looming psychiatric crisis among the nation's youth. Citing shocking statistics about the incidence of psychiatric disturbance among young people, they conjured up fears of a nation about to be left undefended by its mentally unstable soldiers.¹ Some twenty years later, during Putin's third presidential term, a spate of literary works seemingly marked the fictional apotheosis of these anxieties. Teenage schizophrenics and pyromaniacs, suicidal plotters, and puppy torturers suddenly dotted the Russian fictional landscape. Russian critics have identified and reflected upon

¹ A. A. Severny and A.Y. Smirnov, "Current Situation in Mental Health Care for Children in Russia," *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 6:1 (1997): 51; Galina Stolyarova, "Russia: Mental Illness on the Rise as Economic, Social Instability Grow," *RadioFree Europe/Radio Liberty* (July 2, 2001), <https://www.rferl.org/a/1096839.html>. See the discussion in Julie V. Brown, "Afterword," in *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, ed. Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (Toronto, 2007), 289.

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the significance of this “insanity cluster” in prose published in or around 2017.² Anna Zhuchkova, for example, asserts that insanity (*bezumie*) has become the “new aesthetics” of contemporary Russian literature, part of a larger shift away from history and ideology toward existential, internal explorations among prominent novelists.³ Largely absent from this discussion, however, is one significant detail: many of these psychologically disturbed protagonists are unusually—at least for Russian literature—young.⁴

In turning to the youthful protagonist, this recent Russian fiction coalesces with a broader trend in international cultural production, which has recently experienced what Geoffrey Maguire and Rachel Randall term the “adolescent turn.”⁵ The Russian authors discussed in this essay, like many of their counterparts in Latin America, Western Europe, and elsewhere, mobilize the “aesthetic and ideological potentiality” of adolescence to excavate the fissures of contemporary Russian society. The protagonists featured in the literary insanity cluster may be characterized as “teen focalizers,” as fictional creations used to analyze society that place anxieties about the future in stark relief.⁶ The rhetorical force of the teen focalizer is heightened by the intense sacralization of the child that has been a prominent feature of Russian mass culture during Putin’s third and fourth terms.⁷ This idealized, innocent child exists alongside the increasing militarization of childhood and youth, as seen in organizations like the Youth Army, established in 2015, where children learn military discipline and weapons-handling as they prepare to become the nation’s future defenders. At the same time, stigmatization of those youths who do not fit either the sacralized or the militarized ideal has intensified, particularly since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The insanity cluster in Russian prose published around 2017 also appeared against the backdrop of what anthropologist Tomas Matza refers to as the “psychotherapeutic turn” that unfolded in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Representing a notable shift away from the Soviet “biomedical materialist” approach to mental health—informed by the physiological model of Ivan Pavlov that had predominated since the 1930s—new forms of talk-based modalities began to proliferate in the 1990s.⁸ As Russians flocked to these new talk therapies, a veritable psychology boom swept the nation.⁹ This surge manifested itself in the media landscape and in a book marketplace flooded with new titles offering psychological advice from a variety of self-appointed experts. The notion that psychotherapy is an integral part of life, like “daily hygiene,” took hold.¹⁰ This “therapeutic culture” infused

² Other examples include Aleksei Sal’nikov’s *Petrovy v grupe i vokrug nego*, recipient of the National Bestseller prize in 2018, about a family that experiences flu-induced hallucinations. For a detailed overview see Anna Zhuchkova, “Ubit’ nel’zia liubit’ ne dlia vsek! Tol’ko dlia sumasshedshikh,” *Oktiabr’*, 2018, no. 3, <https://magazines.gorky.media/october/2018/3/ubit-nelzya-lyubit.html>.

³ Zhuchkova, “Ubit’ nel’zia liubit’”; and idem, “Novyi russkii roman: ot ideologii k psikhologii,” *Voprosy literatury*, 2018, no. 3:41–61.

⁴ Zhuchkova does mention that many of these recent novels are about “a child’s pain” but without developing the observation further (“Novyi russkii roman,” 51). Oliver Ready identifies the “impaired child” as a theme in recent Russian prose, but he refers to intellectual disabilities rather than to psychological abnormalities. See Ready, *Persisting in Folly: Russian Writers in Search of Wisdom, 1963–2013* (Oxford, 2017), 355. Sasha Sokolov’s late-Soviet novel *A School for Fools* (*Shkola dlia durakov*, 1976), narrated by an adolescent boy who lives in a mental institution, represents a notable exception. However, as José Vergara argues, even though the work is “narrated by a mentally handicapped hero, the psychology ... is of less import than its linguistic experimentation,” in contrast to the novels discussed in this essay. See Vergara, “The Embodied Language of Sasha Sokolov’s *A School for Fools*,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 97:3 (2019): 443.

⁵ Geoffrey Maguire and Rachel Randall, “Introduction: Visualising Adolescence in Contemporary Latin American Cinema – Gender, Class and Politics,” in *New Visions of Adolescence in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, ed. Maguire and Randall (New York, 2018), 23. For more on how the “adolescent turn” has manifested in contemporary Russian cultural production see Jenny Kaminer, *Haunted Dreams: Fantasies of Adolescence in Post-Soviet Culture* (Ithaca, 2022).

⁶ Carolina Rocha and Georgia Seminet, “Introduction,” in *Representing History, Class, and Gender in Spain and Latin America: Children and Adolescents in Film*, ed. Rocha and Seminet (New York, 2012), 4.

⁷ Ilya Kukulin, “A Military Upbringing: The Politics of Childhood, Adolescent Social Activity, and Cultural Representations in Russia in the 2010s–2020s,” in *Historical and Cultural Transformations of Russian Childhood: Myths and Realities*, ed. Marina Balina et al. (New York, 2022), 269.

⁸ Tomas Matza, *Shock Therapy: Psychology, Precarity, and Well-Being in Postsocialist Russia* (Durham, NC, 2018), 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xix.

¹⁰ Olga Isupova, “Learning, Performance, Fatigue and Regret: Tales of Motherhood on Russian Social Media in the 2010s,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 76:2 (2024): 250.



post-Soviet Russian popular media, which became a “primary site of the psychologization of emotional life.”¹¹ The “rapid move to a psychological culture in the public sphere in the post-Soviet period,” with increasing numbers of people “turning to psychological ways of thought and psychological practice in order to address the daily problems of life,” as Irina Sirotkina and Roger Smith observe, marks a significant social change as well as a milestone in the history of psychology in Russia.¹²

While this new psychological culture was developing, the supposed humanization of psychiatric care was proclaimed a priority.¹³ In response to the abuse of psychiatry for political purposes during the Soviet period, which led to the field’s near-total international isolation, in January 1993 the first Russian law on psychiatric care and patients’ rights protection went into effect. This law was among the measures designed to bring the Russian Federation closer to the key principles of the World Health Organization’s Mental Health Policy.¹⁴ As further evidence of a shift away from the Soviet biomedical approach to mental illness, a social model of psychiatric treatment that integrates new professionals, such as social workers, into the treatment process developed after the 1993 legislation.¹⁵

However, the purported humanization of Russian psychiatry initiated in the 1990s and the infusion of psychological rhetoric into popular culture has not, apparently, translated into a shift in public attitudes toward the mentally ill. Olga Shek’s analysis of the representation of mental illness in twenty-first century Russian mass media coverage reveals skepticism about the mental health reforms of the 1990s, deinstitutionalization in particular. Many observers exhibit fear about the security of the “normal” population if dangerously ill people are not physically separated from them. Mental health professionals support the WHO principles, including the recognition of patients’ rights, as “abstract principles,” but they doubt that these reforms are appropriate for a Russian context. The coverage, as analyzed by Shek, evinces a tendency to portray the mentally ill as “strange, inadequate or dangerous.” The increasing popularity of insanity as a literary theme in recent Russian literature has not, it would seem, been accompanied by a concomitant increase in empathy for the mentally ill.

This essay focuses on three literary works that emerged at the intersection of these two recent turns, the adolescent and the psychological, in contemporary Russian culture. I focus most closely on Anna Kozlova’s controversial novel *F20*, about a teenage girl with schizophrenia, which received the prestigious National Bestseller literary prize in 2017. I also consider two other novels from the recent insanity cluster in Russian prose: Maria Anufrieva’s *Dr. X and His Children* (2017) and Anton Ponzovskii’s *Prince Incognito* (2017). Anufrieva’s work takes place in a psychiatric hospital for children and youth, the residents of which display a wide array of deviant behaviors, from attempted suicide to autoasphyxia to violent attacks on others. The titular Dr. X, a kindly bachelor in his fifties, devotes himself selflessly to his young charges, providing a redemptive counterpoint to the Soviet legacy of punitive psychiatry and the individual doctors who helped implement it.¹⁶ In *Prince Incognito* the plot unfolds on two planes: in a contemporary psychiatric hospital in the Russian provinces, where the search for an in-house arsonist consumes the staff; and in early-twentieth-century Sicily, where a disguised Spanish prince is smuggled aboard a Russian ship. The historical plot eventually melds with the consciousness of the arsonist, who is revealed to be a young man who has not spoken for eleven years.

¹¹ Julia Lerner, “The Changing Meanings of Russian Love: Emotional Socialism and Therapeutic Culture on the Post-Soviet Screen,” *Sexuality & Culture* 19:2 (2015): 352.

¹² Irina Sirotkina and Roger Smith, “Russian Federation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Psychology: Global Perspectives*, ed. David B. Baker (New York, 2012), 439.

¹³ Helen Lavretsky, “The Russian Concept of Schizophrenia: A Review of the Literature,” *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 24:4 (1998): 541.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; Olga Shek, “Mental Healthcare Reforms in Post-Soviet Russia: Negotiating New Ideas and Values” (Ph.D. diss., University of Tampere, 2018), 14; Svetlana V. Kolpakova, “A Journey through Russian Mental Health Care: A Review and Evaluation,” *International Journal of Mental Health* 48:2 (2019): 107.

¹⁵ Kolpakova, “Russian Mental Health Care,” 108.

¹⁶ *Doktor* (dir. Artem Temnikov), a film based on motifs from the novel, was released in 2023. Anufrieva co-wrote the screenplay. On Soviet punitive psychiatry see Rebecca Reich, *State of Madness: Psychiatry, Literature, and Dissent after Stalin* (DeKalb, 2018).



These three works featuring young, psychologically disturbed protagonists emphasize the corporeal and physiological aspects of mental illness. In their fictional portrayals of mental illness, Kozlova, Ponizovskii, and Anufrieva narrate their respective characters' desire to remake the relationship between body and psyche. This fictional desire harks back to the nineteenth-century origins of psychology as a discrete discipline, one separate from philosophy and more firmly grounded in the natural sciences. A critical aspect of this shift involved abandoning the "notion of the soul" and replacing it with "neurophysiological approaches to the study of the mind and behavior."¹⁷ As physiological psychology became institutionalized in the early decades of the twentieth century, the possibility of "interpreting corporeal symptoms as indicative of inner processes" emerged. Correspondingly, what had earlier been referred to metaphorically as "movements of the psyche" could now be "materialized."¹⁸ Russian cultural producers of the first decades of the twentieth century responded to these neurophysiological techniques for detecting somatic signs of psychological experiences. As Ana Hedberg Olenina details, literary theorists, filmmakers, and visual artists "interrogat[ed] the claim that somatic indices provide privileged access to psychological processes."¹⁹ The history of Soviet psychiatric care was similarly characterized by a tension between "materialist conceptions of the brain" and "subjectivist conceptions of the mind or psyche."²⁰ With the declaration of Pavlov's physiological psychology as the key to understanding human behavior, the "mind-body problem was supposedly solved" during the Stalin period.²¹ Nonetheless, discursive shifts within Soviet biopolitics—from the dominance of the biomedical approach to mental health care to an acknowledgment of the psyche—continued until the end of the Soviet Union. By the late-Soviet period, the increasing realization that "biology was not enough to understand mental disorder" catalyzed the return of the psyche.²²

The three novels discussed in this essay evince a literary conception of mental illness that also negotiates the border between approaching the "mind as an empirically accessible part of the body" and conceiving of it as a "metaphysical substance" without a tangible essence.²³ The fictional youth discussed below will strive to overcome the psyche or soul through empirically observable, bodily phenomena, such as violence against themselves and others or sexual promiscuity. At times the border between sexuality and self-harm will blur to the point of invisibility as the "movements of the psyche" are "materialized" in narrative form. All three works, *F20* in particular, depict the harmful consequences of externalizing psychic abnormalities, of their teenage heroes' belief that scarring one's own body or that of another sentient being can ameliorate the symptoms of schizophrenia or other mental disturbances.

In other words, the youthful protagonists in all three works quixotically "seek a place in the world" through their own—or someone else's—"wounds."²⁴ This also evokes the concept of trauma, a word that derives from the Greek for "wound." The emergence of trauma as one of contemporary Western culture's most prominent interpretative categories, and of what Mark Seltzer refers to as "wound culture"—the "public fascination with torn and opened bodies"—occurred roughly contemporaneously with Russia's psychotherapeutic turn.²⁵ Similar to the history of psychology briefly traced above, definitions of trauma have also involved an interplay between physical and mental processes. From the original association with bodily injury, popular understandings of trauma have become more closely

¹⁷ Ana Hedberg Olenina, *Psychomotor Aesthetics: Movement and Affect in Modern Literature and Film* (New York, 2020), xi; Martin A. Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (New Haven, 1998), 20.

¹⁸ Olenina, *Psychomotor Aesthetics*, xii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

²⁰ Matza, *Shock Therapy*, 42.

²¹ David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* (Oxford, 1989), 133.

²² Matza, *Shock Therapy*, 53–55.

²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁴ Dennis Patrick Slattery, *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of Flesh* (Albany, 2000), 15.

²⁵ Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 89 (Spring 1997): 3. For trauma in the Russian context see Sergei Ushakin and Elena Trubina, *Travma: Punky* (Moscow, 2009).



linked with “psychic scars and mental wounds.”²⁶ Accordingly, trauma has become something like a “switch point between bodily and psychic orders,” with the wound occupying an unstable position.²⁷ The fictional depictions of youth and mental illness discussed here can also be understood against this backdrop.

Literarily, these works recall the first post-Soviet decade. The “new aesthetics” of insanity draw, in fact, upon neosentimentalism, a trend that had already gained prominence in the 1990s. A so-called third way, neither postmodernism nor realism, neosentimentalism developed in response to the widespread disillusionment with reason that arose in the wake of the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. As rationality grew suspect, the body became the locus of “unassailable authenticity.”²⁸ Pain, in turn, represented the sole pathway for catalyzing emotional responses. Sadomasochistic corporeality provided a means to reawaken authentic emotionality in literature, as well as in the broader culture.²⁹ In a similar vein, the teenage protagonists in the three works discussed here will attempt to repair their damaged psyches through bodily harm. Seemingly, these three works incorporate neosentimentalist elements, heeding Vladimir Sorokin’s call for more corporeality in Russian literature.³⁰ However, they ultimately reject the body as a site for transcendence, as a gateway to overcoming the torments of schizophrenia or other mental disturbances.

In interweaving female physiology and mental illness, Kozlova in particular continues a literary exploration begun by such female Russian authors as Nina Sadur, also associated with neosentimentalism, in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years. In her prose and drama—and especially in the novel *The Garden* (1997)—Sadur links “women’s madness explicitly to female body imagery,” employing the madwoman as a conduit for unmasking the absurdity of supposedly “‘natural’ ways of representing or understanding woman.”³¹ Sadur’s focus, however, remains primarily on the mature, rather than the developing, female body: childbirth and its physical aftermath; lactation; motherhood, which is “construed as bodily pain”; and menopause.³² The prominence of the specifically *pubescent* female body in *F20*’s narrative of mental illness sets it apart from the works of the older generation of Russian female authors who, beginning in the 1990s, created fictional women who “regained their bodies and the expressive potential of their flesh.”³³

In exploring the nexus of adolescent corporeality and mental disturbance, these works also provide fictional commentary on what it means to come of age against the backdrop of the psychotherapeutic turn, which has penetrated Russian state institutions, including those focused on children. Since 1991 the interiority of the child has become a key battleground in the quest for social status and financial advantage, and children’s psychological services have expanded accordingly.³⁴ The “movements of the psyche” of the child are valuable because, amid the infusion of capitalist values into contemporary Russian life, the “very notion of success” has been redefined and requires “new ways of thinking and being.”³⁵ Under neoliberal ideology, “psychological well-being becomes an indicator of a society’s

²⁶ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London, 2013), 3.

²⁷ Seltzer, “Wound Culture,” 5.

²⁸ Mark Lipovetsky, “Literature on the Margins: Russian Fiction in the Nineties,” *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 24:1 (2000): 158.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁰ Sorokin as cited in Mark Lipovetsky, “Flesh/Flashing Discourse: Sorokin’s Master Trope,” in *Vladimir Sorokin’s Languages*, ed. Tine Roesen and Dirk Uffelman (Bergen, 2013), 26.

³¹ Karin Sarsenov, “Sadur and Madness: Problems of Representation,” in *The Oeuvre of Nina Sadur*, ed. H. Goscolo et al. (Pittsburgh, 2005), 85, 86.

³² *Ibid.*, 85.

³³ Helena Goscolo, *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and after Glasnost* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 95. Svetlana Vasilenko’s novella *Little Fool* (*Durochka*, 1998), does feature a deaf-mute thirteen-year-old girl—a female holy fool—as its titular heroine. However, the work concludes with the rather literal transcendence of the body: the girl ascends to the sky after giving birth to the sun.

³⁴ Matza, *Shock Therapy*, 74, 71.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.



level of development.” Accordingly, the happiness of the child, regarded primarily as a mother’s responsibility, is defined in psychological terms.³⁶

Matza examines how the psychotherapeutic turn specifically affected the provision of psychological services for children, focusing on disparate approaches and outcomes for private versus for public institutions in St. Petersburg. For the children of the elites, these services resemble “finishing schools for a neoliberal age,” where privileged youth could be molded into the “self-managing and autonomous” subject that would ensure their future success.³⁷ For children reliant upon state services, however, the earlier period of humanization of psychological care in the 1990s was followed by “modernization” during the Putin years. This entailed an attendant shift in therapeutic methods, away from a holistic approach focused on emotional well-being toward a singular orientation on thinking and cognition. In this conception, the “imperfect child” is viewed as something like a malfunctioning machine that the “mechanic” (that is, the psychologist) must repair and restore to proper working order.³⁸ With their complex and nuanced literary exploration of the interplay between body and psyche, the three novels analyzed here provide a fictional retort to this narrowly mechanistic understanding of the psychology and behavior of youth.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND FLESH

Kozlova’s novella *F20*, about a teenage girl with schizophrenia, provides provocative and productive material for exploring the intersection of adolescence and psychological culture in contemporary Russian culture. The title refers to the diagnostic code for schizophrenia. In an interview the author describes becoming inspired to write *F20* after immersing herself in an internet forum for schizophrenics and reading “between 20 and 40 individual stories each night, practically like a novel.”³⁹ Thus, she became a passive participant in a “community of loss,” a silent member of the “imagined audience . . . for narratives of trauma,” which, in turn, inspired the fictional exploration undertaken in the novella (FIGURE 1).⁴⁰

The work is narrated from the first-person perspective of its teenage heroine, Iulia, and chronicles both her and her younger sister Anitik’s descent into mental illness. Anitik succumbs first, hearing voices and experiencing a psychotic break that leads to hospitalization at the tender age of eight. Iulia herself quickly follows, although she does not enter the labyrinth of the Russian health system like her sister; instead, Iulia medicates herself with her sister’s drugs, with varying degrees of success. Kozlova portrays the girls as products of a traumatic family life, which clearly contributes to both of their struggles: their neglectful mother and wealthy father separate in a spectacular fashion after the latter sets the family house on fire. Their mother remains mainly indifferent to her parental responsibilities, while the father disappears entirely until the girls are teenagers. During the course of the novella, Iulia, mostly unsupervised and grappling with voices and hallucinations, engages in a variety of risky behaviors, including sexual promiscuity. A climactic event occurs when Iulia’s first true love breaks up with her and later commits suicide. In the aftermath she leaves home, achieves a degree of self-reliance, and tenderly reconciles with her father; the work ends on an uneasily optimistic note, with Iulia having conquered some of her demons and arriving at the fragile realization that life may be worth living, after all.⁴¹

³⁶ Isupova, “Learning, Performance,” 251.

³⁷ Matza, *Shock Therapy*, 110.

³⁸ Ibid., 148. Steven King and Steven J. Taylor, “‘Imperfect Children’ in Historical Perspective,” *Social History of Medicine* 30:4 (2017): 718–26.

³⁹ <https://literaturno.com/interview/anna-kozlova/>. This anecdote evokes the intersection between literature and Russian psychiatry, as it developed in the late-nineteenth century, when Russian psychiatrists often “conceptualized their patients in terms of literary characters.” See Irina Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880–1930* (Baltimore, 2002), 6, 10.

⁴⁰ Sergei Ushakin, “‘Nam etoi bol’iu dyshat’?: O travme, pamiati i soobshchestvakh,” in *Travma: punkty*, 10.

⁴¹ Anna Kozlova, *F20* (Moscow, 2017).

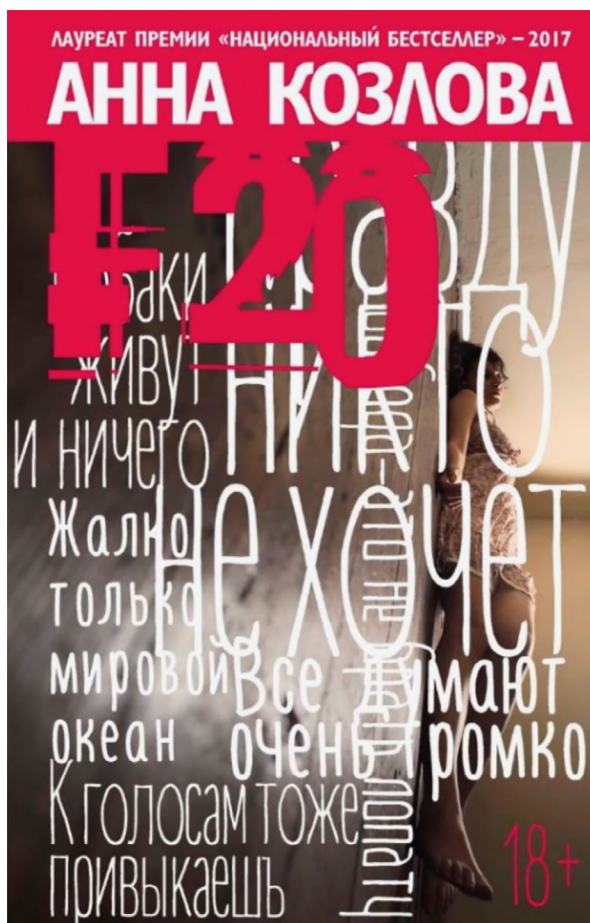


FIGURE 1 Cover of Anna Kozlova, *F20* (Moscow, 2017). Artist E. Salamashenko.

F20 engendered impassioned reactions from Russian critics. As Zhuchkova wittily summarizes, after reading *F20*, “two Russias looked each other in the eye: those who were horrified ... and those who exalted.”⁴² Some single out the novel’s unflinching honesty, as well as Kozlova’s deft and nuanced exploration of teenage psychology.⁴³ Several praise the author for bringing to the page a topic—youth mental illness—that had been shrouded in shame. At the same time *F20* inspired unusually vitriolic responses, as exemplified by a review published in the thick journal *Ural*. In thinly veiled misogynistic terms, the reviewer excoriates Kozlova for a lack of accuracy in depicting mental illness. In support of this conclusion, he even sends the novella to psychologists for “verification.” The psychologists affirm the obvious by confirming that the representation is, in fact, literary and not factual.⁴⁴ The impetus to subject a fictional work to such a process of authentication, however, hints at the work’s resonance. Clearly, *F20*’s literary account of youth and schizophrenia in Russia had touched a nerve.

The novel opens with imagery that seemingly coalesces with a mechanistic conception of mental illness. Iulia describes how, on the “little suitcases” with genes that she and her sister were given, the

⁴² Zhuchkova, “Ubit’ nel’zia liubit’.”

⁴³ <https://gorky.media/reviews/detskij-doktor-skazal-nishtyak/>; <https://baikalinform.ru/chitateb-tolstov/chitateb-tolstov-izdatelbstvo-ripol-klasik-tri-novye-knigi-otechestvennoy-prozy>.

⁴⁴ Aleksandr Kuz’menkov, “Polet nad gnezdom Annushki: Anna Kozlova. *F20*,” *Ural*, 2017, no. 2, available at <https://magazines.gorky.media/ural/2017/2/polyot-nad-gnezdom-annushki.html>.



locks were broken.⁴⁵ This evocative image obliquely suggests criminality, as if someone had tampered with their repository of genetic material and caused destabilizing consequences. The opening lines also suggest that Iulia's story is that of a "previvor," a "potential patient" living with a genetic risk of developing a debilitating illness at some point in the future.⁴⁶ Initially, however, the narrator recounts how this abnormality was able to escape notice (*ne brosalos' v glaza*), also establishing a temporal tension from the novella's very beginning. Previvors, as Elena Fratto explains, craft stories that are "steeped in the contingency of 'risk' and thus shaped by a constantly shifting time horizon."⁴⁷ The reader is prompted to wonder: when will the impure genetic material affect the narrator's development and behavior? How will these violated genes determine her future? When will the hidden become visible and what will be the consequences of this revelation? Will she make the transition from previvor to survivor, from potential to actual patient? This metaphor of the suitcase with the broken lock, placed so prominently in the opening lines of the novel, connects the psychic with the material while also establishing an undercurrent of suspense.

The psychic and the temporal continue to intermingle as the novel unfolds. For example, the girls' mother's boyfriend, Tolik, also succumbs to mental illness, "his physical symptoms mix[ing] with the psychological ones, and no end to his malady could be seen" (p. 45). This description blurs the border between mental and physical while also suggesting that the time horizons of Tolik's ailment extend infinitely forward. The past resembles the present, which bleeds imperceptibly into the "possibly terrible future" that haunts potential patients and profoundly influences how they "engage with temporality."⁴⁸ As first her younger sister and then Iulia herself begin to experience psychotic episodes, as the "terrible future" intimated earlier moves ever closer, Kozlova foregrounds a division between the body and consciousness in her descriptions of this process. For example, Iulia describes how her "self" and her body unexpectedly part ways one evening:

When I returned to my room, I saw myself lying on the bed. ... I understood that I needed to return to myself (*vernut'sia v sebia*) at all costs. I laid down on my body from above, I tried to open my mouth, in order to crawl inside it, I jumped on myself the way that cartoon characters do, but it was all useless. ... "If I can't get back into my body, what will happen?" I thought with despair, "Who will go to school then?" ... The next night it happened again; it started to repeat every night. I left my body and couldn't get back into it. (pp. 28–29)

Her body exhibits its own will, one that resists disembodied Iulia's attempts to overpower it. The nightly repetition of this splitting reinforces the motif of stagnation.

Anufrieva's *Doctor X and His Children* develops a similar conception of youth and mental disturbance. For example, the teenage girl Elata, who lands in the care of Dr. X after attempting suicide, experiences a comparable division between body and self, as narrated in third-person indirect discourse:

She sometimes stopped in surprise ... in horror at the unfathomability of the revelation: she was not she. Some other girl was sitting in the pantry. She can narrate her whole life, day by day, but when she tries to understand how she happened to end up in a strange body, it's as if she stops at the edge of an abyss. The feeling of estrangement from her bodily "I" was distinct and absolute, but short-lived. Afterwards reality

⁴⁵ Kozlova, *F20*, 3. All further citations are to this edition and are noted in the text. All translations are my own.

⁴⁶ Elena Fratto, *Medical Storyworlds: Health, Illness, and Bodies in Russian and European Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2021), 6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.



returned, her consciousness once again connected with her and didn't protest—until the next revelation.⁴⁹

This description of Elata's process of separation from her body suggests its cyclical nature; one "revelation" follows another, with no end in sight. As it had for Iulia, Elata's mental illness creates a negative momentum, one that Anufrieva's character seeks to reverse by attempting suicide. In an earlier passage in the novel, the narration had detailed Elata's imagined answer to Dr. X's inquiry about why she tried to kill herself: "She managed to craft an elegant response ... about how she wanted to bid farewell to her childhood, to make the next step on the path towards death after the first one: birth. With adolescent fervor she decided to take ... the steps all at once, to run and leap over them, like a butterfly."⁵⁰ If we consider these two passages together, Elata's suicide attempt can be understood as a doomed effort to break the circularity of time, one that is predetermined by the repeated cleavage between her body and her incorporeal self.

In her fictional account of how schizophrenia manifests in two young girls, Kozlova similarly conceptualizes the disorder as an unnatural splitting between bodily and psychic space. Iulia eventually decides that the only cure for this cleavage lies in physical pain, recalling the search for emotional authenticity through sadomasochistic corporeality characteristic of neosentimentalism. She is spurred toward this idea by an encounter with Aniotik, recently returned from her first stint in the "nuthouse" (*durdom*). A dead neighbor, the spirit of whom was terrorizing Aniotik, had "stolen" her hand, leaving it numb. But, according to Aniotik, a tussle with Iulia and the accompanying pain reinvigorates her hand, leaving it flooded with sensation once again. The "inescapable pain," as Aniotik describes it, "reunited the two splintered parts: consciousness and flesh (*soznanie i miaso*)" (p. 32). Iulia writes on her own body in an attempt to rectify this broken relationship between "consciousness and flesh" that her sister articulates. *F20*'s depiction of a teenage girl's self-mutilation accords with the conception of the wound as possessing generative properties. In his study of the wounded body in the Western literary imagination, John Patrick Slattery argues that it has often been figured as a portal through which to access higher meaning, as a "corridor into invisible presences that can be imagined only through the flesh."⁵¹ Accordingly, for Iulia self-harm becomes the corridor through which she can reconnect with her psyche. By creating a visible injury to ameliorate psychological distress, she also activates the "uncertainties as to the status of the wound," as either physical or psychical, characteristic of trauma.⁵²

When Iulia begins to carve German words into her heels, she also literalizes the conception of the wound as a "place of dialogue and narrative."⁵³ Pain, unlike other states of consciousness, lacks any "referential content" and thus resists "objectification in language."⁵⁴ Iulia's self-mutilation challenges this resistance of pain to verbal inscription, partially explaining, perhaps, the comfort that it affords her. Self-harm has been theorized as a form of communication that compensates for a lack of emotional vocabulary, a condition termed alexithymia. Those who suffer from alexithymia "lack the capacity to either identify their feelings or describe them to others."⁵⁵ By harming themselves they speak with a "powerful, silent language" that "communicates states of mind," engraving a "narrative on the body itself."⁵⁶

Iulia's body, however, "speaks" in German rather than in her native Russian, rendering her communication cryptic and potentially inaccessible to those around her. Seemingly, she herself is the only

⁴⁹ Mariia Anufrieva, *Doktor X i ego deti* (Moscow, 2020), 132–33. The novel was originally published in the journal *Druzhba narodov*, 2017, no. 7, and is available at <https://magazines.gorky.media/druzhba/2017/7/doktor-h-i-ego-deti.html>.

⁵⁰ Anufrieva, *Doktor X i ego deti*, 62.

⁵¹ Slattery, *Wounded Body*, 17.

⁵² Seltzer, "Wound Culture," 4.

⁵³ Slattery, *Wounded Body*, 13.

⁵⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York, 1985), 5.

⁵⁵ Gwen Adshead, "Written on the Body: Deliberate Self-Harm as Communication," *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* 24:2 (2010): 76.

⁵⁶ Anna Motz, "Introduction," *Managing Self-Harm: Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Anna Motz (New York, 2009), 15.



implied addressee for these wounds. The salubrious properties of the German language had already been identified earlier in the novel:

“I began studying German in the second grade...it became for me a source of support, hope, and a kind of salvation. ... I found reliability in its unwieldiness, a hidden beauty in its discordance, gratification in its fantastical grammar. When I came home from school, I pulled the humongous German-Russian dictionary down from the shelf and spent several hours reading it. I was enchanted by the long words, comprised of several other words, like a skeleton out of bones.” (pp. 18–19)

By carving the German word “*müde*” (*tired*) into her heel, Iulia attempts to render permanent the ephemeral sense of security and optimism that the language inspires in her. The intense beauty of the word on her flesh casts a spell, allowing her “to forget for a few minutes ... about my insomnia, about not being able to get back into my body, about school ... about my whole crappy life.” It permits her to sleep for almost twenty-four hours and prevents her from leaving her body; the pain, as she describes it, “returned me to myself, to my real feelings” (p. 34). Iulia even begins to do her homework again, suggesting that she may reintegrate into the social order. Pain, which restores the severed connection between psyche and soma, becomes her only comfort and facilitates the façade of normalcy that keeps her out of the *durdom*. If “wounds have the capacity to advance our consciousness to new levels of awareness,” then Iulia’s self-mutilation, perversely, allows her to return temporarily to being a previvor, rather than a survivor, of psychosis.⁵⁷ The wounded adolescent body, scarred by foreign words, thus enables not only a restoration between consciousness and flesh but also a fleeting temporal reorientation.

The symbolic significance of Iulia’s attraction to the German language is heightened by the centrality of German research for the development of psychiatry in Russia—in particular, for a physiological, materialist conception of mental illness. It was the German Wilhelm Wundt, known as the father of contemporary psychology, who first maintained that “consciousness was quantifiable” in the middle of the nineteenth century. His conception of the psyche as being “subject to mathematically expressible laws” helped initiate the shift of its study into the realm of the “data-driven natural sciences.”⁵⁸ His student Emil Kraepelin developed a system for classifying psychiatric diseases, establishing a nosological tradition that would heavily influence Russian physiological pioneers such as Ivan Sechenov, whose research would, in turn, serve as a foundation for Pavlov. *F20*’s title clearly recalls this nosological tradition, with its German origins, suggesting the elimination of diagnostic uncertainty and the triumph of objectivity over the murky terrain of the psyche or soul. Developments in Germany compelled Russian psychiatrists to “accept the notion that mental illness was primarily a disease of the brain” and “that there was a somatic (as opposed to a psychological) foundation to brain diseases.”⁵⁹ During the Putin years, publicly funded psychological services for children operated under a similar understanding, with cognitive function the focus of therapeutic interventions designed to repair the “machine in crisis,” that is, the child.⁶⁰ By carving words into her flesh—a manifestly harmful act—Iulia concretizes the notion of a somatic foundation to her affliction. This violence may be interpreted as a pathological longing for the legibility represented by nosology. The German words that Iulia inscribes onto her body are like error codes that can be read and interpreted accordingly. This self-mutilation casts a decidedly skeptical light on the concept of the psychologically troubled child as a malfunctioning machine that has emerged in twenty-first-century Russia.

⁵⁷ Slattery, *Wounded Body*, 16.

⁵⁸ Cate I. Reilly, “Russian Roulette: Speculation and the Medical Humanities in Vsevolod Ivanov’s Novel *Y*,” *Slavic & East European Journal* 66:4 (2022): 519–20.

⁵⁹ Martin A. Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (New Haven, 1998), 10.

⁶⁰ Matza, *Shock Therapy*, 136.



New German words appear on Iulia's feet at crucial moments in the narrative, combining to form a macabre and enigmatic partial haiku: ear, nostalgia, darkness, victim. This self-harm continues to provide comfort until a climactic moment close to the end of the novella. Spurred on by a trio of competing voices, one of which "just wants blood," she chooses a more visible location than her heels, her stomach, for the first time. As described in the following passage, Iulia's loss of innocence occurs not through sexual initiation but through a transformation of the violence she commits against herself:

Before my flesh had inspired my pity, and it was hard for me to plunge a blade into it. It was a drama every time. In order to draw blood, I had to pierce the delicate, smooth skin, to cause pain for the sake of salvation. I sacrificed my innocence in order to survive, but I wasn't innocent anymore. I didn't have any more skin, only fatty pig's meat, arteries, fat veins, through which putrid blood slowly flowed. (p. 212)

Kozlova presents Iulia's coming of age, in part, as this moment when her flesh becomes just flesh, devoid of any connection to consciousness. The grotesque imagery employed in this description emphasizes a body that is merely a body, self-contained and cut off from any psychic space. In other words, a shift in the symbolic meaning of the wound accompanies Iulia's loss of innocence. Earlier in *F20* the pain of self-mutilation had helped Iulia restore the "subtle tissue" linking her to a "larger world of meaning," a connection that the wounded body helps to substantiate.⁶¹ In this climactic scene, however, transcendence is impossible, and the body leads back only to itself, to the dead end of animal-like flesh. The choice of the word "putrid" (*gnilaia*) suggests stagnation and rot, evoking the temporal tension created in the novel's opening description of the genetic suitcase with the broken locks. Unlike the earlier self-mutilation, which had seemingly allowed her to become a previvor rather than a survivor once again, these new wounds promise only stasis and decay.

In *Dr. X and His Children*, several of the young psychiatric patients residing in the hospital also engage in auto-aggressive behaviors in search of solace from their inner demons and past traumas, similarly hoping to find "a place in the world through their wounds."⁶² A conversation between Dr. X and Elata crystallizes this notion. The girl draws a clear distinction between physical and psychological ailments: "A person who is saving a body, that's who fights for their life. They fight with the illness that is interfering with the body. ... But what if the soul hurts? Then the person battles with that which is interfering with the soul: the body."⁶³ The character conceptualizes the body and the psyche in martial terms, as occupying opposing fronts on a battlefield. While initially affirming the interconnectedness of body and soul, this imagery implies that they are ultimately incompatible, engaged in a struggle for survival that allows room for only one victor (FIGURE 2).

Another of Dr. X's adolescent patients, nicknamed "Omen" for his antisocial and violent behavior, enacts a similarly complex relationship between consciousness and flesh. Anufrieva's characterization of Omen's actions accords with the neosentimentalist belief that the "feelings surrounding the life of the body" are singular and unreproducible.⁶⁴ Initially, the novel presents Omen's behavior as inexplicably sadistic and nihilistic; the medical personnel repeatedly refer to him as a sociopath. After first throwing animals off the roof of his apartment building and choking his four-year-old sister, he teaches his fellow adolescent patients how to play the game "dog's high" (*sobachii kaif*): choking up to the point of losing consciousness, in order to induce euphoria.⁶⁵ Towards the novel's end, however, new dimensions to Omen's behavior are introduced. He causes suffering in other sentient beings to

⁶¹ Slattery, *Wounded Body*, 19.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶³ Anufrieva, *Doktor X*, 203.

⁶⁴ Lipovetsky, "Literature on the Margins," 158.

⁶⁵ See <https://www.infox.ru/news/169/45758-podrostki-umiraut-ot-sobacego-kajfa>? A similar episode of choking to the point of unconsciousness occurs in *Prince Incognito*, 208–9.



FIGURE 2 Cover of Mariia Anufrieva, *Doktor X i ego deti* (Moscow, 2020). Artist A. Durasov.

reawaken his own humanity and to arouse empathy, neosentimentalism’s “most elementary humane reaction.” In this system of values, pity stands at the top of the emotional hierarchy, becoming a “synonym for humaneness”—precisely the emotion that Omen attempts to harness in his violence against himself and others.⁶⁶

Through indirect discourse that creates a child’s perspective, the narration describes Omen’s traumatic early years: his violent and alcoholic mother, who is sent to prison for murder; his transfer to a children’s home and then another family; and, most poignantly, his tender love for his neglectful and abusive mother, about whom he fantasizes of escaping to visit in a far-off penal colony. Violence becomes a portal through which he can access maternal affection:

He busied himself by investigating the boundaries of evil, practicing his fantasies and perfecting his cold-bloodedness. ... He sweetly pitied first hamsters and then cats, and this feeling aroused him, it was related to his pity for his mother, its roots extended toward something half-forgotten, childlike. He started choking his little sister too, in order to feel more acutely this arousing pity, which became for him an altar of love.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Lipovetsky, “Literature on the Margins,” 158.

⁶⁷ Anufrieva, *Doktor X*, 226.



While Iulia in *F20* overcomes pity for her body, Omen strives to recapture pity's elusive "sweetness." Significantly, for both characters the presence and absence of empathy are facilitated through acts of violence. Omen's aggressive search for pity recalls the neosentimentalist quest for a "language in which bodily functions can acquire a spiritual meaning."⁶⁸ However, Iulia's overcoming of pity toward herself—the change in the novel's depiction of the symbolism of the wound, as discussed above—forecloses the possibility of a body possessing transcendent meaning, rendering the neosentimentalist desire to merge corporeality and spirituality futile.

A similar motif recurs in Ponizovskii's *Prince Incognito*, which, like *Dr. X*, is set in a psychiatric hospital. While Iulia inscribes German words on her flesh and Omen cuts off breath to stimulate pity, Gasia sets fires as an act of communication. Ponizovskii introduces this idea quite explicitly in the novel's opening lines, which contain the first-person narration of the as-yet-unidentified arsonist:

I flick the lighter. The sheet darkens and a stain appears on the fabric, as if I had dripped ink. ... Like Morse code, like individual letters, words and fiery-red lines, the threads spark. ... I see: fire is speech. It's a fairytale (FIGURE 3).⁶⁹

Fire, an elemental force, is transformed into a recognizable system of language. It acts as a stimulus to the historical narrative, set in Sicily over one hundred years ago, that is interwoven into the novel and is eventually revealed to be the feverish hallucinations of the young Gasia. If Iulia, paradoxically, cuts herself to alleviate pain, Gasia sets fires to ameliorate the "agonizing lack of space" (*muchitel'naia tesnota*) that torments him. Pain, at least initially, helps Iulia close the chasm between body and spirit, and fire serves a similar purpose for Gasia—it helps him breathe, both literally and metaphorically: "I burned my fingers—and I understood that I wasn't hot anymore, wasn't cramped, that I could breathe again," and later, "the inner tightness disappear[s]," after he lights the flames.⁷⁰ Fire ameliorates Gasia's physical sensations of psychological distress—the "inner tightness"—as well as the most explicit manifestation of his condition: the refusal to speak. After eleven years, he breaks his silence.⁷¹ All three of these works "materialize movements of the psyche" by depicting how aggressive behaviors facilitate their young characters' striving for wholeness, by narrating the intricate process through which they search for a place in the world through their own, or someone else's, wounds.

SEXUALITY AND PSYCHOSIS

The idealized child constitutes an integral part of contemporary Russia's conservative gender order, one which is undergirded by an intensive cult of the family as a "sacralized micro-collective." As Ilya Kukulin points out, a key aspect of this process of sacralizing childhood entails the "tabooing of children's exposure to any discussion of sexuality."⁷² In *F20*, however, Kozlova adds sexuality to the symbolic nexus of psychosis and physical pain, clearly challenging such idealization.

As Anitik hears from her fellow patients in the nuthouse, menarche represents a clear line of demarcation in the progression of schizophrenia: "Anitik looked into the future without any particular optimism. The older girls in the hospital had told her that the earlier *shiza* grabs you, the worse the prognosis. Before the bleeds, they said, there's one, two psychotic episodes max; it turns out that Anitik had already overfulfilled the norm." Anitik warns her sister that "as soon as your monthlies start, your head will fly off" (p. 36). In foregrounding menarche as a pivotal turning point in the

⁶⁸ Lipovetsky, "Literature on the Margins," 158.

⁶⁹ Anton Ponizovskii, *Prints inkognito* (Moscow, 2017), 8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 239, 253.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁷² Kukulin, "Military Upbringing," 266.



FIGURE 3 Cover of Anton Ponizovskii, *Prints inkognito* (Moscow, 2017). Artists Pavel Kraminov and Andrei Bondarenko.

development of psychosis, Kozlova's novel accords with the beliefs articulated by some of the earliest practitioners of Russian psychiatry, who viewed its onset simultaneously as a "physical, psychological, and a moral event."⁷³ For both Russian and Western doctors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women's psychiatric illness was believed to have "a physical locus, in the womb," with "hysteria" the diagnosis of choice.⁷⁴ In contemporary cinema, the connection between menstruation, a "dangerous transformation involving enhanced power," and psychosis has featured prominently in horror films such as Brian De Palma's iconic *Carrie* (1976).⁷⁵

For Iulia menstruation stimulates not only physical changes but also a shift in the realm of her imagination, which becomes flooded with elaborate and all-consuming sexual fantasies:

My monthlies started at the age of 13, and with them came unshakeable thoughts about men and what you could do with them. ... I didn't care a lick which men I dreamt about

⁷³ Julie Vail Brown, "Female Sexuality and Madness in Russian Culture: Traditional Values and Psychiatric Theory," *Social Research* (1986): 377.

⁷⁴ Angela Brintlinger, "Writing about Madness: Russian Attitudes toward Psyche and Psychiatry, 1887–1907," in *Madness and the Mad*, 179.

⁷⁵ Chris Richards, "Hard Candy, Revenge, and the 'Aftermath' of Feminism: 'A Teenage Girl Doesn't Do This,'" *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 7 (Summer 2015): 50.



... whomever I met on the street became the first candidate for my fantasies. A boy, an old man, a freak—it all paled next to the realization that each one had a penis. (p. 60)

The sisters stay up all night listening to a sexually themed talk show on the radio and amuse themselves by calling a phone-sex number. Eventually Iulia imagines that she receives a nightly visitor who “takes [her] from behind” (p. 61). When her dead neighbor Sergei pops out of the wall, he solves the mystery by declaring that the mysterious lover had been a demon. Anitik responds to Iulia’s account of her supernatural sexual encounter by repeating her earlier warning that “everything goes off the rails when the monthlies start” (p. 63). This prompts Iulia to acknowledge, for the first time, that she suffers from psychosis. She agrees to begin taking her sister’s medication rather than cutting herself, to seek an amelioration of her psychological symptoms through pharmacology rather than bodily harm.

Iulia’s sexual behavior, however, becomes merely another vehicle for the infliction of physical pain. If, in neosentimentalist prose, adult sexuality is depicted “as a search for dialogue,” then in *F20* Kozlova presents adolescent sex as a futile and punishing monologue.⁷⁶ A few months after the arrival of her “monthlies,” Iulia (along with her sister) are sent to spend the summer in the dacha of their mother’s boyfriend’s mother—a flamboyant woman who passes most days getting drunk with her elderly girlfriends. Iulia promptly befriends the eighteen-year-old grandson, Kostik, of one of the women, a boy “so normal that he bordered on non-existence” (p. 81). Kozlova describes Iulia’s predictable loss of virginity to Kostik with naturalistic language and imagery. She conjures the scene synesthetically, as the boy’s room fills with the “smell of deodorant” and the sound of breathing, while Iulia’s gaze fixes on the “chipped red paint” on her toenails. The normally bland Kostik now flashes his “completely crazy eyes” at Iulia, stopping his thrusting only “when the blood begins to drip” (pp. 82–83). As described from Iulia’s perspective, Kostik, driven mad by sexual desire, now seems akin to a violent attacker. Albeit temporary, Kostik’s derangement establishes a linkage between psychosis, sexuality, and pain that will continue throughout the novella. Iulia’s physical suffering continues even after subsequent attempts, following the well-worn literary pattern of narratives of virginity loss as “stories of disappointment.”⁷⁷ It is in the descriptions of these later sexual encounters that the narration also begins to interweave the corporeal and the immaterial, returning to the wound imagery evoked earlier:

It hurt on the second day, and on the third day too. I felt like I was somehow open. As if my body was a stalk and this stalk was ripping from a wound. Through this wound my whole life was seeping out. I couldn’t do anything about it, the wound wouldn’t heal no matter how much I wanted it to. I understood that I would have to live with it, and that it would hurt from time to time. (p. 85)

As discussed above, Kozlova’s fictional account of schizophrenia in two young girls renders it an unnatural splitting between consciousness and flesh, one that Iulia attempts to make whole through wounding. This description of the aftermath of her loss of virginity creates a similar dynamic. Her body is compared to a trunk or a stalk (*stvol*), suggesting a rootedness to the earth and a material presence. At the same time, this trunk is a vessel for the psyche, for what Iulia refers to as her “life.” Sexual activity causes damage to her flesh, as symbolized by the *stvol*, while her discarnate essence escapes through the ensuing wound. If, in Western literature, “the place where the flesh has been wounded” has often been figured as a fissure through which “the world is let in,” *F20* also presents it as an opening that allows a vital and ineffable part of a teenage girl to disappear.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Lipovetsky, “Literature on the Margins,” 158.

⁷⁷ Jodi McAlister, *The Consummate Virgin: Female Virginity Loss and Love in Anglophone Popular Literatures* (New York, 2020), 69.

⁷⁸ Slattery, *Wounded Body*, 13. The imagery here represents another moment where the concept of trauma as a “switch point between bodily and psychic orders” is invoked (Seltzer, “Wound Culture,” 5). Iulia’s self-destructive sexual behavior, Kozlova suggests, leaves behind both a physical and a psychological wound.



In other words, having sex with Kostik only exacerbates the gap between consciousness and flesh. It is analogous to Iulia's carving of German words on her body, and its salutary properties are equally suspect. Even in later, more pleasure-filled sexual encounters, the separation between body and consciousness that characterizes her psychotic breaks remains: "It was not me who answered him, but my body" (p. 103). Through this detail Kozlova suggests that the romance with Marek, even though initially so intoxicating for Iulia, may be doomed—as his abandonment of her and eventual suicide confirm. In *F20*'s fictional universe, Iulia's sexual activity is as much a symptom of mental illness as her self-mutilation. The psychotic episode that she suffers at the end of the summer, which culminates in her wandering in her nightgown at an unknown railroad station, reinforces this link.

Although Kozlova's naturalistic depiction of teenage sexuality violates the taboo on such depictions that the image of the "sacralized child" compels, the novella ultimately delivers a conservative message. Iulia's sexual experimentation yields no positive outcomes and is embedded into a toxic nexus of pain and psychosis. Once her behavior with men becomes less reckless, she is allowed a modest amount of agency and control over her own fate, and her future appears less perilous. This conservatism is in line with other, female-authored cultural texts in contemporary Russia that punish teenage female sexual transgression, such as Valeriia Gai Germanika's television serial *School*, on which Kozlova worked as a screenwriter, and Nataliia Meshchaninova's 2014 film *The Hope Factory*. The future for teenage girls, *F20* and these works suggest, can only be assured if they eschew sexual precocity and adhere to normative visions of girlhood and young womanhood.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

F20 presents youth schizophrenia as a cleavage between consciousness and flesh, and Kozlova also creates a symbolic nexus that fuses psychosis, physical pain, and sexuality. Additionally, the character of Iulia functions as a teen focalizer, with her fictional trajectory drawing the reader's attention to anxieties about the future.⁷⁹ In the wake of Russia's transition to a market economy, "children's well-being was redefined in a capitalist context," becoming symbolically linked to the future of the nation in new ways.⁸⁰ Against this capitalist backdrop, the conception of childhood shifted away from earlier models, such as the "Rousseauian innocent," the "wicked Hobbesian," or the "builder of socialism." Now, the child was a "bearer of talents to be harnessed ... a creative resource for the nation" and, most importantly, a "person whose time is a career." Child development became hypercommercialized in post-Soviet Russia, with success representing the ultimate goal of commercial psychotherapy targeting children and youth. Mothers in particular were encouraged to "'produce' the best possible child" in terms not only of health but also of educational and professional outcomes.⁸¹ For parents of means, post-Soviet Russia's psychotherapeutic turn entailed investing in the future of their offspring, which could be ensured by cultivating a psychological profile that secures a competitive advantage.⁸²

F20's teenage narrator has seemingly internalized this hyper-focus on her "time as a career." Iulia's imaginings of her future, and the presumed effects of her mental illness upon them, are a recurring motif. Alongside the novella's ultimately conservative treatment of adolescent sexuality, Kozlova pays particular attention to and, indeed, interrogates the heteronormative bent of Iulia's fantasies. Will she be able to conform to traditional visions of Russian womanhood? Or will her schizophrenia compel an involuntary rebellion against those visions? Iulia alternates between desiring familial happiness

⁷⁹ It is the teen focalizer's temporal orientation that highlights *F20*'s divergence from earlier post-Soviet Russian novels that also incorporate insanity as a theme, such as Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev and the Void* (*Chapaev i pustota*, 1996). As Angela Brintlinger argues, these works incorporate the madness of a male protagonist to catalyze a multi-dimensional confrontation with the vestiges of the Soviet legacy. See Brintlinger, "The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past," *Slavic Review* 63:1 (2004): 43–65.

⁸⁰ Matza, *Shock Therapy*, 70.

⁸¹ Isupova, "Learning, Performance," 250.

⁸² Matza, *Shock Therapy*, 93, 92, 101.



and fearing her exclusion from it as a result of her schizophrenia, and rejecting that same ideal. As a small child, Iulia witnesses the traumatic, literal conflagration of her comfortable household, with the stay-at-home mother and the expensive furniture. The narration ironically describes her father's narrow vision of female desires:

Like many men, for some reason he believed that female happiness consisted of limited and very simple things, like what is shown in commercials. Here's a house, here's a kitchen with pretty pans, here are the kids, here's a cocker spaniel, over there are dresses in the closet, perfume on the table. ... Isn't that happiness? (p. 10)

The father's primal rage that literally destroys the family, the narration suggests obliquely, stems from her mother's lack of gratitude for making (his version of) her dreams come true. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Iulia's mother struggles with mental disturbance herself: she falls into deep depressions and neglects her children while staying in bed for days. The novella's opening image, we may recall, consisted of a suitcase of genes with a broken lock. As the girls' mother's illness comes into focus, it becomes clear that it—at least in part—prevents her from fulfilling the narrow expectations of Iulia's father. Since Iulia has inherited those “faulty” genes, her own encounter with those same expectations seems predetermined.

Several years later, as the adolescent Iulia wanders the streets with her younger sister, recently returned from a stint in the psychiatric hospital, she reflects on how circumstances have limited her possibilities: “It suddenly became completely clear to me. I had no future. I had no potentiality. Everything that *shiza* could offer me, I had already seen and already knew. ... I would never meet a man, never fall in love, I couldn't become a mother.” (pp. 97–98). Iulia envisions and defines a desirable future in traditional terms, and schizophrenia is presented as incompatible with the fulfillment of those desires. The phrase “no potentiality” suggests the foreclosing of any possible avenues for growth; schizophrenia means stagnation, with only a doberman for company and solace.

Her romance with Marek, which develops shortly after the previous passage's nadir, initially appears to contradict these gloomy visions. Iulia's feelings for him are presented as genuine and in stark contrast to those inspired by her earlier relationship with Kostik, and Marek seemingly responds in kind. He materializes almost as if on cue, as a retort to Iulia's earlier despair about her exclusion from heteronormative happiness. Marek, however, fails to fulfill these hopes; he abandons Iulia inexplicably and unceremoniously, after she is hospitalized for an infection caused by her self-cutting. In response Iulia resumes her earlier, nihilistic and masochistic approach to sexuality, sleeping with an almost randomly selected neighbor in a “maximally disgusting manner” (p. 145). During their encounter she again imagines how her life will unfold. In the midst of debasing herself, she sees in granular detail a version of the future that she had earlier lamented as unattainable:

We began to move together, through time, through ... supermarket rows with our cart ... through IKEA. ... Sasha began to breathe more heavily, and I saw the black fence of the daycare, and we are fighting about who is going to drop our daughter off that day, and then [his mother] will die, then my mother ... and suddenly everything speeds up. (pp. 151–52)

This vision of family life, of the motherhood she had once grieved as elusive, elicits a strong physical response: “The bottom of my stomach began to pulse, as if blood was running out of a wound” (p. 152). The imagery resonates with the earlier description of the wound that opens up after Iulia's first sexual encounter, through which her “life” escapes. The description of leaping over time also recalls the passage from *Dr. X and His Children* quoted above, where the teenage girl's suicide attempt is presented as an effort to compress the time between birth and death. The banal future that Iulia conjures up stimulates yet another bodily reaction: it activates the scar on her heel containing the German word



“Hure” (“whore”), reinforcing the nexus between physical pain, sexuality, and psychosis interwoven throughout the novella.

The “maximally disgusting” encounter with the unremarkable son of a neighbor causes a pronounced shift in the character of Iulia’s fantasies about her future. Traditional family life—after sex with this “cretin” (*mudila*), as she calls him before fleeing—now seems stultifying. This episode marks the end of Iulia’s risky sexual behavior, thus suggesting that her fantasy catalyzes positive change by shattering the pain/sexuality/psychosis triad. It indicates her liberation from narrow visions of what constitutes female happiness, a repudiation of the definition earlier ascribed to her father.

Eventually, Iulia rejects not only the traditional vision of future familial happiness, but almost all connection with her current, all-female household. Her transformation, which occurs after a months-long depression in the wake of Marek’s suicide, is narrated as a transfiguration of the body, as corporeal liberation. Iulia reflects on her physical inseparability from her younger sister, with whom she had combined into “one schizophrenic mass” and never considered a “separate person.”⁸³ She scrutinizes her body, misshapen after a prolonged period of overeating and lack of activity: “I took off all of my dirty, reeking-of-medication clothing. What was underneath it horrified me. Before I was deficient mentally, I felt this deficiency every day, every second, it forced me to hide from people, because I didn’t see life the way they did. Now I was deficient physically too, and this was completely unbearable” (p. 180). She realizes that schizophrenia, depression, and self-medication have eroded her individuality and deformed her physically. The gap between consciousness and flesh has been overcome, but in a negative sense: the latter is now as broken as the former. These realizations motivate her, first of all, to throw out all of her illicitly obtained medication, and second, to embark on a strict regime of diet and fitness. She begins restoring the body she had previously wounded and neglected. Alongside the tentative reconciliation with her father, these shifts suggest a path toward the overcoming of trauma, in both its psychic and corporeal manifestations.

In order to shore up the boundaries of her individual self, however, she must exit the “schizophrenic bundle” and leave home. Her mother, relieved of the duty to perform the role of the “caring mother,” offers no resistance (p. 183). This scene posits a direct connection between any hope for Iulia’s physical and psychological stability and the severance of ties with her mother and sister. The encounter concludes with Iulia’s farewell to Anitik, who confesses her pregnancy, suggesting that the genetic suitcase with the faulty locks will be passed down to yet another generation. It is a pregnant body that bodes poorly for the future.⁸⁴ By the end of *F20*, Iulia has transcended familial bonds and become the ideal subject—“self-managing and autonomous”—that psychological services for elite Russian children aimed to produce. In extricating herself from her mother and sister, Iulia activates the premise underlying “globally circulating psychological culture”: that “success is a matter of the self.”⁸⁵

LIKE THE CRITIC WHO FELT COMPELLED TO SEND *F20* TO A PSYCHIATRIST FOR VERIFICATION, many of the readers who responded negatively to the novella faulted it for a lack of authenticity. Among those who left reviews on the site *labirint.ru*, for example, one complained that she was attracted to the work because of the schizophrenia theme but was sorely disappointed, because it is just an “artistic invention” and “does not have ANYTHING to do with medicine.” A second lamented that the novella has “nothing in common with the diagnosis” from which it derives its title. A third similarly confessed to being drawn in by the schizophrenia theme, only to encounter instead, regretfully, “underage kids drinking and f***ing.”⁸⁶ In a similar vein, a reviewer on another site commented that even a

⁸³ Kozlova, *F20*, 179. Similarly, in *Prince Incognito*, the patients are described as having “gray, dull, indistinguishable faces, glued together into one monolithic mush” (p. 187).

⁸⁴ For a compelling and more optimistic assessment of the representation of youth in recent Russian fiction, including *F20*, see Mattias Schwartz, “Generation Nothing and Beyond: Childhood and Youth in Contemporary Russian Literature,” in *Historical and Cultural Transformations of Russian Childhood*, 238–56.

⁸⁵ Matza, *Shock Therapy*, 110, 101.

⁸⁶ See <https://www.labirint.ru/reviews/goods/592365/>. *F20* has an aggregate rating of 6.78, which is significantly lower than *Dr. X and His Children* (9.86) or *Prince Incognito* (8.53), although several positive reviews of Kozlova’s novella can also be found on the same site.



“boring medical textbook” could provide more interesting insights into schizophrenia. A second reader summed it up by declaring that, from a medical perspective, “this book is a big zero.”⁸⁷

These responses suggest that at least a portion of the Russian reading public looks to literature for insights into the empirical dimensions of psychiatric illnesses. *F20*'s disappointed readers might have been better served by reading another book published around the same time as the insanity cluster in Russian fiction: *That's Crazy! A Guidebook to Psychiatric Problems for Residents of the Big City*, a work of popular psychology that attracted a significant readership and garnered a prominent prize.⁸⁸ The book's authors, Daria Varlamova and Anton Zainiev, claim to have produced the first book in Russian about psychological disturbances written by former patients themselves. Citing breakthroughs in neurobiology, the authors argue that “our emotions and thoughts are material in the literal sense,” and that “any strange psychic reaction will be reflected on the physical level”—observations that resonate with the fictional motifs traced in this essay.⁸⁹ Referring to their own experiences with clinical depression, Varlamova and Zainiev lament a dearth of scientifically sound information accessible to the general public and the shame that accompanies mental illness in Russian society. Like Kozlova's novella, *That's Crazy!* attempts to illuminate the plight of those “about whom nothing is written, nothing is said,” as it states on *F20*'s back cover. The authors articulate a desire to bring psychological disorders out of the darkness of ignorance and myth and into the light of rationality by improving their readers' “psychiatric literacy.”⁹⁰

The Russian word *putevoditel'* literally means a guidebook, but it also invokes the image of a concrete place toward which one can be directed along a specific path (*put'*). The work's title presents psychic space as physical space, as a location that can be toured in the same way that one might visit the Hermitage Museum or the Kremlin. For some readers of *F20*, hoping for precisely such a guided excursion of the psyche, fiction ultimately proved disillusioning. The endurance of the impetus to look to a novella for such insights, however, suggests the continuing entanglement of psychiatry and literature in Russian culture.⁹¹

In focusing on youth and mental illness, these three fictional texts, considered together, establish a new constellation in Russian literature. Each provides a nuanced and multifaceted depiction of the encounter between psyche and soma through their psychologically disturbed characters—an encounter that pubescent bodies place in stark relief. These works recall earlier periods when Russian cultural producers similarly interrogated the emerging belief in “somatic indices” for the soul, such as the early twentieth century.⁹² They also resonate with the neosentimentalism of the 1990s, when the body as a supposedly privileged site of authenticity featured prominently in literary works. The verdict that they ultimately deliver on whether the body can lead to transcendence, to an amelioration of the suffering caused by schizophrenia or any other psychological condition, however, is a negative one.

In creating such an intricate fictional relationship between consciousness and flesh, these works also call into question some of the discourses about the interiority of young people that have circulated as part of post-Soviet Russia's psychotherapeutic turn. They present a literary retort to the mechanistic notion of the child as a “malfunctioning machine” that can be repaired and launched back into the world, ready to compete in a capitalist marketplace. They crystallize the unique ability of the fictional

⁸⁷ <https://www.ozon.ru/product/f20-154707516/reviews/>.

⁸⁸ Daria Varlamova and Anton Zainiev, *S uma soiti! Putevoditel' po psichicheskim rasstroistvam dlia zhitelja bol'shogo goroda* (Moscow, 2021). The work was in its third edition as of 2021. It received the “Prosvititel” prize for popular scientific writing, in the natural sciences category, in 2017.

⁸⁹ Varlamova and Zainiev, *S uma soiti!* 32, 49, 58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹¹ See Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius*, for the late nineteenth-century origins of this entanglement.

⁹² Olenina, *Psychomotor Aesthetics*, xv.



teen focalizer to “undermine public and scientific narratives about human bodies and human lives,” as well as to question official visions of the future that allow no room for a child’s imperfection.⁹³

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⁹³ Fratto, *Medical Storyworlds*, 3.