IURII OLESHA: THE CHILD BEHIND THE METAPHOR

‘Memories of childhood fly off in all directions like a dandelion.’

(A List of Blessings)

Iurii Olesha (1899–1960), like many of his generation, believed that the poet’s singular gift was an ability to see the world ‘as if for the first time’, ‘as would a child’, as, in fact, he himself had seen the world in childhood. Poets were they who preserved the child’s capacity for unmediated perception. Olesha also believed, however, that childhood experience was itself the source of art, that ‘artistic intellect [...] comes after all from childhood, when a man really does see the world for the first time.’ Poets, moreover, do not merely see like children, they restore to others childhood’s actual images, sensations, and those modes of perception normally lost to adults, owing to habit, indifference, or increasingly abstract and utilitarian linguistic engagements with their surroundings. Art, therefore, enables readers to ‘see anew’, to experience ‘as if for the first time’, to be like children, or, in fact, to be like artists themselves. If this falls short of an accepted aesthetic principle, it appears to be a description of Olesha’s specific talents that is agreeable to all.

In Vishnevaia kostochka (‘The Cherry Stone’, 1928), the capacity to ‘see anew’ provides access to what is called the ‘Invisible Land’. This Invisible Land is that physical world adults have lost the capacity really to see, but which may be returned to them with the assistance of the ‘twin sisters, Attention and Imagination’. It is the world of anthills we fail to ‘see’ after childhood because an abstraction, the term ‘anthill’, crowds from our consciousness the living image. It is the world of stones thrown away before being examined (Izbrannoe, p. 219). Olesha’s Invisible Land, therefore, is the world that Viktor Shklovskii says we recognize but do not truly see without the assistance of art, or, as Leon Stilman put it, the world of ‘perception without apperception’. As Nils Nilsson observes, in Olesha’s world children, poets, and lovers form a blessed triumvirate granted ready access to the Invisible Land.

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1 For more on this view, see Richard N. Coe, When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).
3 Viktor Shklovskii: ‘Struna zvenit v tumane’, Znamia, 12 (1973), 194–205), for example, summarized Olesha’s talent as ‘the ability to see the world anew, in an amazingly child-like manner, to make his primal sense of the world [perekomyschashcheni] understood, to make a gift of it’. Forty years earlier Shklovskii had said much the same thing — ‘Olesha sees things like a child’ — but then had intended it as a serious criticism (‘Mir bez glubiny’, Literaturnyi kritik (1933: 5), 121).
4 In ‘The Cherry Stone’, Fedia, having entered the ‘Invisible Land’, actually ‘sees’ an anthill (not the abstraction that has replaced the living image) for the first time, it is noted, since childhood (Vishnevaia kostochka’, in Iurii Olesha, Izbrannoe (Moscow, 1974), p. 219). All subsequent citations refer to this edition unless otherwise noted. The following translations, with some alterations to render parallels with the original more literal, have been used for passages cited in the text: Envy and ‘From the Secret Notebooks of Fellow-Traveller Sand’, trans. by Andrew R. MacAndrew, in ‘Envy’ and Other Works by Yuri Olesha (New York: Doubleday, 1967); No Day Without a Line, trans. by Judson Rosengrant (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979); short stories trans. by Aimee Anderson, in Iurii Olesha: Complete Short Stories and ‘Three Fat Men’ (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980). All other translations are mine.
5 Viktor Shklovskii, Poskreesnie slova (Moscow: n.p., 1914).
With his art, Olesha provides his readers, too, with the keys to this enchanted kingdom, jogging them from habitual conceptualizations, jostling them from customary paths, breaking down automatic perception, and facilitating their 'seeing' again. How does Olesha achieve this end? How does he create a literary world that both recreates his own childhood vision and initiates in readers a sense of re-experiencing childhood, of reacquiring a child's vital perceptivity?

To one degree or another, all the devices Olesha uses to create his 'child-like', apperceived universe fall within Shklovskii's Formalist concept of *ostranenie*, of 'making strange' or 'defamiliarizing' the world as adults are accustomed to seeing it. The most obvious such device is the use of a child narrator or child character to mediate readers' perceptions. This, for example, is how Olesha reconstructs childhood experience via exploration of memory in the autobiographical *Ni dnia bez strochki* ('No Day Without a Line', 1965), and, far more complexly, via syntax, aspect, a sort of spatial conjuring, and what might be called 'object-orientation', a form of textual over-saturation, in the fictional *Liompa* ('Liompa', 1928). The childhood-orienting devices for which Olesha's art is most celebrated, however, are the cultivation of idiosyncratic narrative perspectives (heights, mirrors, portals, shadows, distorting reflectors and lenses) and, most important of all, of verbal prestidigitation involving whimsical comparisons and 'resemblances'.

What these techniques have in common for Olesha is that ideally they create between artist and reader (and sometimes character) a moment of shared recognition, a moment in which the artist's efforts to restore his childhood apperception evoke in readers an unexpected and delighted recognition of their own experience. Successful art for Olesha results in an infectious smile or gasp of delight, and the very concept of delight (*voshishchenie*) is one closely associated in Olesha with childhood.

In a 1931 article Olesha describes the type of literary device he considers successful:

> In my story ‘Aldebaran’ there is a phrase: ‘A little gypsy girl the size of a small broom approached.’

> Whenever I give a stage reading of this story, the audience laughs at this point. I feel that this laughter is one of warmth and friendliness. I make the following conclusion: the point of a metaphor is that the artist as it were suggests to the reader a definition for a resemblance which had occurred already to the reader but which had remained unformulated. The reader senses that the given thing reminded him of something, but wasn’t able to guess

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8 Viktor Shklovskii, *Ot teorii prozy* (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929), p. 12. As Olesha writes in *No Day Without a Line*, for the artist there is 'nothing more pleasurable than sharing beauty with someone; than pointing out to the reader one or another beautiful thing which he, from inexperience or even simply from indifference, might not notice' (p. 486). In a sense, successful art in Olesha’s view offers readers the key to the metaphorical ‘Door in the Wall’ (a motif central to Olesha’s art taken from H. G. Wells’s tale of a lost childhood paradise) beyond which they may rediscover childhood vision and imagination: see my article, ‘H. G. Wells’ “Door in the Wall” in Russian Literature’, *Slavic and East European Journal*, 36 (Fall 1992), 323–38.


10 In *Koe choi iz sekretnykh zapisei popuchshika Zanda* (‘From the Secret Notebooks of Fellow-Traveller Sand’, 1932), for example, the Olesha persona admires a scientist who ‘displayed such heights of delight as are only reached by children taken to the circus for the first time’.
exactly what. Only those metaphors which could have been composed by the reader himself are successful.11

When the reader encounters one of these resemblances, defined for him by the artist, he ‘experiences pleasure from recognition and he laughs’. Olesha concludes: ‘This sort of metaphor has meaning because it makes each of us a poet, returns to each of us a fresh perception of the world.’ In a later article Olesha added:

You should almost shriek when you come across a comparison. And then on looking at it you ought to be surprised that it never entered your head that things are exactly as the poet has said. Probably even it did enter your head, but unclearly; you did not think things out, but only hobbled approximately nearby. And when the poet says: ‘There!’, you at once acknowledge: ‘Yes. Quite true. It is just like that!’ (‘Olesha Talks’, p. 85)

Olesha includes in Zavist (‘Envy’, 1927) just such a moment of shared recognition and delight. Before becoming acquainted, Nikolai Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev, two of Olesha’s most child-like characters, are walking one behind the other along a Moscow lane when Kavalerov observes a bird which, in its jerky movements and clicking noises, reminds him of a hair clipper. When he notes a smile on Ivan’s face, he is ‘certain that the same resemblance must have occurred to him’ and nearly exclaims this aloud (p. 28). In No Day Without a Line Olesha defends his manner of writing by means of this idea of ‘delighted recognition’. In one passage he even uses a child as the barometer of his ‘recognition-delight’ factor:

I know confidently of myself that I have a gift for naming things differently [. . .] What that gift is for I don’t know. People need it for some reason. A small child, hearing a metaphor, even in passing, even with half an ear, emerges from his game for a moment, listens, and then laughs approvingly. That means it’s needed. (p. 521)

Olesha’s favourite device for provoking ‘delighted recognition’ is, of course, the metaphor. Metaphors also constitute Olesha’s predominant markers in identifying certain of his characters as ‘child-like’, and thus, in a sense, as naturally blessed (except, of course, when their child-likeness collides with the no-nonsense ‘adult’ world of the new Soviet reality). That metaphors and childhood should be linked so closely is hardly fortuitous. It has been suggested that metaphors are the tools real children first use in linguistically assimilating experience and acquiring knowledge.12 It also has been suggested that what distinguishes artists from non-artists is the retention from an early stage of child development of a strongly metaphorical mode of perception, which renders the artist susceptible to more profound influence by sense impression and emotion and enables him to rediscover and ‘revivify’ perceptual practices lost to others.13

Metaphor constitutes perhaps the defining motif in both Olesha’s art and his life.14 In No Day Without a Line, Olesha, after having reread Valentin Kataev’s

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11 ‘Literaturnaia tekhnika’, in Iurii Olesha, Izbrannye sochineniia (Moscow, 1956), p. 428. The next two quotations also come from this page.
13 Danuta Mendelson, Metaphor in Ibsen’s Short Stories (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1982), pp. 23–24.
14 The term ‘metaphor’ is used in the present context as loosely as Olesha himself used it. ‘Metaphor’ for Olesha included all tropes including comparison. Elizabeth Klosky Beaujour points out that Olesha applied the term ‘metaphor’ to both metaphors and similes (The Invisible Land: A Study of the Artist’s Imagination in Iurii Olesha (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 30). On occasion, Olesha chose the word ‘comparison’ (srasmenie) to replace ‘metaphor’, even when the ‘comparison’ was a metaphor. Mitsuei Numano notes that the overwhelming majority of Olesha’s ‘metaphors’ are, indeed, similes (‘Sad’ba iskusstva Iurii Oleshi: ego zhizn’ v metaforakh’, Novyi zhurnal, 145 (1981), 64). Even in his story of the failed ‘metaphor shop’, in No Day Without a Line, the bulk of cited metaphors are similes.
A Solitary White Sail, disparagingly compares his life's work to Kataev's, and concludes: 'Kataev writes better than I do. He has written a great deal. I've written only fragments, a mere collection of metaphors' (p. 451). Later in the same work Olesha describes his life in art with an allegory about having opened a 'metaphor shop', which eventually he had to close because no one would buy his expensive metaphors, the vivid and complex ones, wanting instead only cheap, hackneyed tropes like 'making ends meet' (p. 522). Colleagues concur that the metaphor was as pivotal to Olesha's mundane perception and self-expression as it was to his art. Kataev asserts that even on his deathbed Olesha was making metaphors, telling doctors, for example, that 'you turn me over like a boat.' Kataev summarizes Olesha's life: 'In life he was just as metaphorical as in his works.' Boris Bobovich describes how Olesha's metaphors in conversation astounded his friends, adding: 'He spoke the way he wrote and wrote the way he spoke.'

In No Day Without a Line Olesha describes his gift for metaphor as the ability to name things anew (nazyvat' veshchi po-novomu) and calls himself 'only a namer of things' (p. 521). In another passage he cites 'the ability to name things differently' (po-novomu (p. 495)) as one of the characteristics of great writers. Numano labels that transaction the 'transfer of appellation' (perenos namenovaniiia (p. 64)). Marietta Chudakova calls it the 're-naming of things' (pereimenovanie veshchei (p. 65)). In essence, Olesha's metaphors follow Aristotle's definition in Poetics as 'giving the thing a name that belongs to something else'. Olesha's creation as a whole, in fact, might be described as a renaming of the everyday world by 'giving the thing a name that belongs to something else'. While Aristotle assigned the metaphor an ornamental and 'clarifying' function, he did not consider it an essential linguistic component (Mendelson, p. 16). For Olesha, however, metaphor is essential to all vital perception and communication. Metaphor in art replicates its primordial cognitive function, reclassifying and renaming phenomena and restoring them from the 'dead'.

The majority of Olesha's metaphors do possess a peculiarly childish quality. It has become commonplace to note that they are based predominantly on formal, external, often superficial and fleeting likenesses. Rarely do Olesha's comparisons reflect the essential or functional similarities between things, their internal structures or mechanics. Beaujour sees in Olesha's comparisons the desire to 'delect things from the cognitive level of their existence':

The important point, however, is that Olesha almost always uses a metaphor or simile which is nonfunctional if not antifunctional. If there is a system implicit in his images at all, the systematic element is the transformation of the object by the destruction of the reader's consciousness of function. (Beaujour, p. 36)

She concludes that this is 'the inevitable result of the practice of seeing as if through innocent eyes'; that is, seeing as if through the eyes of a child. Like a child's, Olesha's comparisons frequently derive from misconstructions of the true relationships between phenomena (see Leondar, pp. 278–82). This failure to ground his art in material fact became a cornerstone of the Soviet establishment's criticism of his writing in the 1930s. In 'Notes of a Writer' in 1934, Olesha himself admitted that

16 Pospelovskiy o Iurii Oleshe, comp. by O. Suok-Olesha and E. Pel'son (Moscow: Sovietskii pisatel', 1975), p. 22.
his comparisons too often were based on 'form' and not 'understanding'.

Lev Levin shows how the starting-point in Olesha's art is nearly always either other works of art or some whimsical, anti-materialistic perception of phenomena. Olesha's art fails to 'teach' the reader anything new. Instead, as Beaujour suggests, in Olesha's comparisons there is only 'play'. For Olesha such play, of course, was paramount: it provoked readers to 'see' anew. But this intangible function naturally was deemed frivolous in the humourless era of socialist construction. Kataev even accused his friend and his metaphors of 'decadence' and 'unculturedness', suggesting that there was good reason why Olesha's works were never, at that time, translated abroad:

They won't translate Olesha, for in Paris — for example, in Paris, he would look like a provincial. There the children speak in Olesha's metaphors, and often speak better than Olesha. There common journalists bring to the newspaper ten-franc notices with Olesha's metaphors.

Discussing one of these 'metaphors', a comparison of a vase to a flamingo, made by Evgeny's Kavalerov, Chudakova asserts:

One must forget for a second everything that is known to man about things in order to see how a tall vase 'recalls' a flamingo, how, following gusts of wind, 'the vase-flamingo runs like a flame, igniting the curtains which also run under the ceiling [. . .]'. One has to forget the classification of phenomena, to pull them from their customary pigeon-holes and examine them with an unprejudiced gaze. After this, its name, its sense, and its precise place under the sun will return to the thing. (p. 17)

In other words, in order to 'see' Olesha's comparisons, one must in effect examine them as would a child, bereft of the adult's rational processing systems. Further suggesting childhoodness is the recurrence among Olesha's comparison vehicles of those very object types (sausages, bagels, bird and insect wings, oars, animals) that might appeal to a child and serve for his own comparisons. Critics, then, seem to concur that not only are Olesha's comparisons 'childish' (that is, such as a child might make) but that in order to grasp them one must be childish too, to see as a child would.

Critics, on the other hand, are reluctant to attribute to all this childishness any significance more than that found in other estranging devices. Beaujour, for example, states that 'metaphor and simile have little in common with the process of childish vision itself, but they do provide the adult reader with an impression of freshness' (p. 30). But, in fact, metaphor has almost everything in common with childish vision. Metaphor, as noted, constitutes not only the basis of the child's primordial cognitive process but the means by which children first communicate understanding of the world. If one were to attempt approximating in art the child's actual viewpoint, modern psychology suggests that precisely Olesha's brand of 'nonfunctional' metaphor might be a good place to start.

The idea that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but an essential linguistic vehicle originated with Giambattista Vico. As an expression of primitive animism,
metaphoric poetry (in fact, the fable) was, according to Vico, the first language (cited by Mendelson, p. 17). Vico also was the first to draw the parallel between the development of language in civilization as a whole and the cognitive development of the individual child. Because children lack adult analytical skills and conceptual reasoning, Vico argued, they rely on imaginative, mnemonic, and perceptual skills and therefore, think and express themselves metaphorically (Mendelson, p. 21). As Danuta Mendelson indicates, Vico’s ideas have found support in studies demonstrating the capacity of young children to produce metaphors and their tendency to use them much more frequently than adults.21

Basically, children use metaphors to assimilate and describe unfamiliar experience because comparison with what they already know and for which they already have a name is their lone option. Such comparisons, given the child’s limited experience, may fail to coincide with adult comparisons based on more essential similarities. The child’s metaphors may appear absurd. Barbara Leondar has shown, however, that if taken literally, all metaphor is nonsense: ‘Its most salient characteristic is its semantic absurdity, its transgression of obligatory lexical constraints’ (pp. 274–75). But, Leondar continues, the notion that a child’s metaphoric language is poetic, essentially different from the predominantly literal use of words in adult speech is mistaken. What we consider literal, conventional meanings of words are metaphors that have been ‘literalized’ by cultural acceptance of usage to specify the details and boundaries of the phenomenon defined:

Inevitably, then, a language of novel categories, a culture unacquired, must appear abundant in metaphor. To the anthropologist, the primitive seems to speak in tropes; to the child, every adult seems to make figures; to the adult, all children appear to be poets. (pp. 284–85)

In fact, Leondar concludes, within their respective cognitive systems, primitive tribes and children use language quite literally, even if their generalizations appear mistaken to the civilized adult. Leondar cites the example of the child who, upon first seeing snow fall, exclaims: ‘Look at the butterflies playing together’: ‘Such an inadvertent trope demonstrates, not the inventiveness of the child’s imagination, but the poverty of his vocabulary’ (p. 285). The closest, most ‘literal’ approximation to the falling snowflake in the child’s experience is the butterfly. When in Olesha’s art the muscles of a strong man are seen as ‘moving under the skin like rabbits swallowed by a boa constrictor’,22 when a small girl is compared to a broom,23 or when a man who has the poster he was plastering onto a wall blown into his face is viewed from a distance as someone wiping his face with a white napkin,24 we encounter precisely the sort of metaphoric cognition with which a child literally, if mistakenly, experiences his world.

Olesha’s nonfunctional, intentionally ‘mistaken’ metaphors constitute artistic approximations of the child’s primordial attempts to understand and describe experience. These same metaphors, again, also return readers to a child-like state where it is as if they are encountering phenomena for the first time. Thus, while such metaphors in the natural childhood state reflect limited experience and


impoverished vocabulary, their artistic simulation represents rather a wealth of imagination and skill. Leondar defines this distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘poetic’ metaphors. For the child, ‘metaphor can serve as the agent of discovery [. . .] it can invite, direct, and control exploration of a context in which new knowledge is implicit though not as yet manifest’. For one experiencing a poetic metaphor, however, ‘metaphor paralyzes adult linguistic habit and returns the reader or hearer to the naïveté of his earliest encounters with words’ (p. 34). As Otto Rank put it, ‘genuine poetic art has the capacity to revivify in metaphor the lost past of the individual or of the people, by associating it with the present by means of the art of language and of metaphor’.  

Certainly, this tapping of readers’ lost or latent ‘metaphoric mode of perception’ describes at least part of what Olesha has in mind when defining an art in which metaphor evokes in readers a cry of delighted recognition.

Levin is the only critic to have commented on this dual ‘childhood’ function of Olesha’s metaphors. Writing in the Stalinist mid-1930s, he naturally responds negatively to the ‘nonfunctionality’ of Olesha’s metaphors in general, and to Olesha’s ‘failure’ to ground comparisons in material fact. He does praise, however, the particular usage of such metaphors in The Three Fat Men, Olesha’s novel for children, because in that context they serve to create a ‘living reality’ (zhivaya deistvitel’nost’), the only such instance he can identify in all of Olesha’s work. The abundance of comparisons and the ‘metaphoric hyperbolization of phenomena’ in The Three Fat Men succeed, Levin asserts, because they are ‘directed to children’s perceptions [. . .] concretize the world in specific categories of children’s thought’ (pp. 116–17). I would maintain, however, that Olesha’s child-like metaphors are appropriate, indeed intrinsically motivated, throughout his œuvre. Metaphors in Envy, Liubov’ (‘Love’, 1928), ‘The Cherry Stone’, No Day Without a Line, and elsewhere are motivated through their capacity to define ‘child-like’ characters and to distinguish them from those who have lost their capacity to be ‘like children’, whether this be marked a positive or negative trait.

When the incidence of metaphorization and the definition of characters as child-like are juxtaposed in Olesha’s works, three signal facts emerge: first, only in works dealing with children or the concept of childhood do metaphors proliferate in significant numbers; secondly, only characters who are themselves children or who are defined as child-like create metaphors; thirdly, when characters enter a child-like state they, or the text surrounding them, immediately begin to generate metaphors.

Only in works that treat childhood do metaphors constitute a significant device. The autobiographically-oriented texts recalling childhood (Chepovecheskii material (‘Human Material’, 1928), Ia smotreu v proshloe (‘I Look into the Past’, 1928), No Day Without a Line) are all laden with metaphor. In fact, in No Day Without a Line Olesha relies almost exclusively on the metaphor to evoke the spirit of childhood, contrasting sharply in this with other ‘childhood’ writers of his generation, such as Kataev, Babel’, or Nabokov, who all employ variegated formal palettes to realize a childhood air. Stories such as Tssep’ (‘The Chain’, 1929) and ‘Liompa’ , which in places depict phenomena from the ostensibly unmediated perspective of a child,

also display dense metaphorization. In ‘The Chain’, for example, more than thirty metaphors erupt in fewer than eight pages. When momentarily liberated from the banalities of the grown-up world, the child whose consciousness informs the narrative fires off metaphors in machine-gun succession:

The movement of the bicycle is accompanied by a sound like something being fired. Sometimes it’s as if a firecracker is exploding. But this isn’t important. These are details which you can pile up as many of as you like. You could say about cows that their skeletons make them burst open from inside and they remind one of tents. Or that cows wear white suede masks. (p. 204)

Of the twenty-five metaphors in ‘Liompa’, eighteen derive from the ‘rubber boy’s’ perceptions, the narrator’s descriptions of that child, or the narrative’s attempts to approximate a child’s epiphanic mode of perception, as in the perspectiveless, object-oriented and event-oriented second paragraph (see Björling, pp. 143–62. The remaining metaphors originate in the hallucinating mind of the dying Ponomarev. When Ponomarev is not raving, or when narrative focuses on the older boy, Alexander, who is described as being more ‘adult’ than adults, no metaphors occur at all. The Three Fat Men, the fairy-tale-like children’s novel, corrals dozens of Olesha’s wildest comparisons. Works in which love’s spell renders characters ‘child-like’, returned ‘to childhood sensations’, also are saturated with metaphor. These include the stories ‘Love’ and ‘The Cherry Stone’, and, to a lesser degree, Aldebaran (‘Aldebaran’, 1931). Finally, Envy, which features two of Olesha’s most infantile characters, Ivan Babichev and Nikolai Kavalarov, is drenched in bright metaphor. In the remainder of Olesha’s works, from Prorok (‘The Prophet’, 1929), ‘Natasha’ (1936), Komsorg (‘The Komsomol Organizer’, 1936) and Strugi iunoshka (‘A Strict Youth’, 1936), to Vospominanie (‘A Memory’, 1947), ‘The Turkman’ (1948), and Druaia (‘Friends’, 1949), metaphor plays little or no role.26

Within metaphor-oriented works, only characters who are child-like are capable of metaphoric thought or speech. Thus, in ‘The Cherry Stone’ only Fedia, who even describes himself as ‘infantile’ (infantile; infantil’nyi sub’ekt), generates metaphors: Natasha, Boris Mikhailovich, and Avel’ contribute not a single comparison between them. In ‘Love’ only Shuvalov perceives the world metaphorically, a fact the colour-blind man regards as ‘dangerous’ and ‘disgraceful’. In ‘Aldebaran’ the old-fashioned romantic, Bogemskii, under the influence of a love that connects him to childhood memories (‘the old man remembered going down to the cellar as a child’ (p. 240)), issues the occasional metaphor (‘she acquired a resemblance to a hyacinth’; ‘if you are a storm, then I’m only dreaming about a drop’), a capacity the two young Communists manifestly lack.

The most vivid expression of this paradigm arises in Envy. For Nikolai Kavalarov and Ivan Babichev, metaphor constitutes a way of life. Ivan Babichev’s metaphors operate largely as myth and dominate all facets of his being. His remembered childhood is a ‘wonderful’ time in which metaphorric comparisons are realized in mythic ‘fact’. An aerial balloon ‘realizes’ the child’s magic bubble. Peculiar dreams ‘realize’ the workings of his dream machine. A violet growing from a wart ‘realizes’

26 Curiously, one Olesha story, Inoga (‘The Oriole’, 1947), is narrated from a child’s perspective, and yet contains no metaphor. This seems to be due to the fact that there Olesha attempts to depict an explicitly Soviet child, a child with the ‘collective’ Soviet values shared with adults, not the enchanted (and irrelevant) perspective of the pre-Revolutionary bourgeois child.
a revenge wish. As an adult, Ivan’s existential complaints are realized in his fantastic machine, Ophelia, and his ‘Conspiracy of Feelings’. Metaphors play a less complex role in Kavalarov’s life, but still dominate his perceptual and verbal habits. In Envy’s opening paragraphs Kavalarov describes a door leading to the ‘apartment’s entrails’, the lit-up glass in the lavatory door as ‘a beautiful egg’, the porcelain vase by the balcony as a flamingo, the ‘struggle for existence’ of tiny letters, a pince-nez on the bridge of a nose as ‘like a bicycle’, and so on. Never, on the other hand, do the serious, Soviet ‘adult’ characters (Andrei Babichev, Volodia Makarov, even Valia Babicheva) manufacture a single metaphor. The distinction between these two types, and what precise feature defines that distinction, is encapsulated in a line from Kavalarov’s letter to Andrei Babichev: ‘You called me an alcoholic because I addressed a girl in a form of language incomprehensible to you’ (p. 40). This ‘incomprehensible’ form of language (referring specifically to the famous line ‘you roared past me like a bough full of flowers and leaves’ (p. 29)) is, of course, one based on metaphor.

When Olesha’s characters enter child-like states, whether through the influence of love, through childhood memories, or simply through association of some experience with ‘child-like sensations’, they instantly find themselves to be either objects in a world shaped by metaphor or metaphor-makers themselves. When ‘Love’ Shuvalov, already love-struck, is on the verge of sleep, he is described as being ‘close to childhood sensations’ (blizkii k detskim oshchushcheniam (p. 198)). He begins to see whimsical comparisons between the designs on the wallpaper and various essentially unrelated objects:

In place of tendrils and rings, he saw a goat, a cook.
‘And there’s a treble clef sign’, said Lelia, having understood him.
‘And a chameleon’, he lisped, falling asleep. (pp. 198–99)

Upon awaking, Shuvalov finds himself ‘in a new world’, in love’s thrall. He now seeks and discovers comparisons everywhere: ‘under her skin her spine looked like a slender reed. “A fishing rod”’, thought Shuvalov, “bamboo”’ (p. 199). A wasp becomes a tiger, Shuvalov literally flies on the ‘wings of love’, a faucet speaks, a ladybug flies away ‘with the help of wings she pulled out from somewhere in the back, as you pull out a handkerchief from under a tail-coat’. In all, some thirty-six poetic metaphors fill the five pages following Shuvalov’s transformation.27

In Envy Kavalarov twice ‘returns to childhood’, both times while in bed, and in both instances accompanied by metaphors. When on Andrei Babichev’s sofa, Kavalarov says, ‘I fly back into childhood’. Luxuriating like a child in the interval between drowsiness and sleep, like Shuvalov in ‘Love’, Kavalarov observes how ‘the ringing bubbles from the submerged depths become rolling grapes, how a heavy bunch of grapes is formed, a whole vineyard thick with bunches, and then there is a sunny road beside the vineyard, and the warmth [...]’ (p. 24). Later, imagining himself a child in Anechka’s fantastic bed, he notes resemblances between the bed’s columns and a barricaded fortress, between the quilt and boggy ground, between the rococo cupids and a gigantic Buddha (p. 71). In ‘Aldebaran’ love transports

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27 This contrasts with the five metaphors in the three pages before Shuvalov’s transformation. Because of Olesha’s loose definition of ‘metaphor’, the metaphor counts here are necessarily approximate. I count only those comparisons which are obviously ‘poetic’. Thus, I count Olesha’s reference to the ‘buttocks’ of an apricot (p. 198) as a metaphor, while ignoring ‘the wasp hung’ (osa poesida) (p. 199).
Bogemskii back to childhood: ‘A mustiness wafted from the hollow. The old man remembered going down to the cellar as a child’ (p. 240). This sentence serves no function other than to indicate Bogemskii’s proximity to that blessed but dangerous state peculiar to lovers, poets, and children. The story’s next image underscores Bogemskii’s condition, for it is a metaphor that in its whimsical nonfunctionality could never have arisen in the pragmatic minds of paradigmatic Soviet youth: ‘A little gypsy girl the size of a small broom came up’ (p. 241). In this otherwise undistinguished story, only Bogemskii’s metaphors (‘his head shone like broth’) aspire to poetry.

Modern theory validates another aspect of Olesha’s metaphors and their childhood connection. This is the ‘realization’ of metaphor that plays a significant role in the work of the late 1920s, notably Envy, ‘The Chain’, and ‘Love’. Ivan Babichev, as mentioned, ‘realizes’ his metaphors in the mythic Ophelia and the ‘miraculous’ feats of his childhood. In ‘The Chain’ Sergei Utochkin’s automobile reminds the child ‘of some letter — either an F or a B, lying on its back’ (p. 206). When later he rides in the ‘terrible automobile’, he observes: ‘Five people, with me among them, sit in the belly of the letter B’ (p. 206). Olesha’s most famous realized metaphors are those in ‘Love’, where Shuvalov sees a wasp as a tiger and ‘flies on the wings of love’. Nilsson also cites an instance in ‘The Cherry Stone’:

When the narrator [...] stands at a streetcar stop waiting for Natasha, people for some reason start asking him which car they should take. Soon he feels like a policeman who must have a ready answer to all questioners. After a while it is no longer a comparison. The metamorphosis takes place: he is already a policeman, with a truncheon and everything. (p. 262)

The most interesting use of realized metaphor, however, involves the various rabbits and hares inhabiting Envy. The rabbit/hare metaphor originates when Kavalerov returns to Andrei Babichev’s apartment to take his leave. He recalls the passage of time since Andrei took him in off the street with a metaphor involving the movement of a patch of reflected sunshine across the apartment’s surfaces:

When I came to live here, a ‘sunshine hare’ (solnechnyi zaïats) sat on the doorstep at two p.m. Thirty-six days have gone by and the hare (zaïats) has jumped (pereprygnul) into another room. The earth has relentlessly covered this last stretch and the patch of reflected sunshine (solnechnyi zaïchik), a child’s plaything, reminds us of the infinite. (p. 41)

The colloquial word for a reflection of a sunbeam (playing on a wall, for instance) is zaïchik, the diminutive of the word for ‘hare’ (zaïats). When he first mentions this sunshine patch Kavalerov uses the non-diminutive form and the appropriate adjective, solnechnyi zaïats (sunshine hare), thus calling attention to the metaphorical origins of the sunshine zaïchik. Continuing to use zaïats instead of the accepted zaïchik, Kavalerov has his sunshine patch/hare ‘sit’ and ‘jump’ as one would expect of a hare, and thus revivifies an old metaphor. Upon his third reference to the ‘sunshine hare’, he returns to the accepted form, solnechnyi zaïchik, now endowed with revitalized metaphoric shimmer in addition to its mundane denotative sense. Before moving on, however, Kavalerov enhances his hare’s metaphoric value even further, calling it a ‘child’s plaything’ (detskaia igrushka), which ‘reminds us of the infinite’.

Now associated with sunshine, childhood, and reminders of the infinite, this hare comes to embody Kavalerov’s ‘lost paradises’ and dreams, including those of
childhood itself. After a fairy-tale fantasy in which Kavalerov's daydreams of success are projected onto the figure of Tom Virilirli, who 'searches the city for landmarks familiar to him from the picture books of his childhood', the hare appears again: 'Days will go by, the little sunshine hare [solnechnyi zaichik] will have jumped only a few times from the doorstep into the next room' (p. 42). The hare disappears then for nearly forty pages, resurfacing in slightly altered guise in the courtyard where Ivan and Kavalerov find the new Soviet Adam and Eve playing in the new Soviet Eden: 'Everything seemed designed for happy childhood. It was the sort of porch where one finds rabbits [vodiatsia krobiki]' (p. 80).

In other words, it is the sort of place associated with sunshine, childhood, paradise, and dreams. The fact that these are rabbits, not hares, marks the distance separating Kavalerov from this vision. As the scene progresses, we learn who the inhabitants of this 'happy childhood' space are, and that Kavalerov is barred from their games. He is effectively excluded from childhood paradise. For Kavalerov, things at a distance invariably become tamer, more manageable and safe. Thus, a hare becomes a 'bunny'. This might reflect a deliberate distancing by Kavalerov, whose consciousness determines narrative here, when he intuits a potentially threatening confrontation. Or it may reflect the simple fact that the happy childhood witnessed here is indeed located far from Kavalerov, both physically and spiritually. In its final incarnation, at the novel's conclusion, the rabbit returns to its status as metaphor, but now carries the baggage of all associations accrued in its roles as simile, metaphor, and realized metaphor. In Kavalerov's terrible dream, when Ophelia turns on and murders her master, it is Ivan's 'hare-squeal' (zaichii вопl) that marks his death (p. 92). Ivan and the hare, embodiments of a childhood paradise lost, die as one in Kavalerov's subconscious, victims of the soulless mechanisms of the Soviet 'Plan'.

Nilsson describes the metaphorical imaginations of the 'peculiar triumvirate in Olesha's works' (child, lover, poet) as part of a gift that makes "all things in the universe" seem wonderfully connected with each other (p. 262). His portrayal of the metaphorical act and metaphor realization is romantic and impressionistic:

An object loses its firm contours, becomes material pliable to the will of the imagination, which starts to form new things out of it. But this is not all; there is a further stage. As sometimes happens with the imaginations of children, the metaphor itself comes true, is materialized. (p. 262)

This picture turns out to be quite accurate. It is not, however, merely the 'sometimes' occurrence of children's 'imaginations' that materializes metaphors. It is the invariable condition of child cognition at a certain stage of development. Mendelson observes that there are 'at least five stages in the human experience of metaphors, the second of which, commencing around the second year of life, is marked by both the spontaneous production of metaphors and their perception as reality'. She notes that 'children do not question the reality of their metaphors — they do not comprehend the metaphoric expression as a figure of speech, but accept it as a

28 For discussion of this scene as a vision of paradise associated with childhood, see my 'H. G. Wells' "Door in the Wall" in Russian Literature'.
description of reality.\textsuperscript{30} In metaphor realization, then, Olesha again taps his own childhood experience, evoking a freshness of perception readers ostensibly ‘recognize’ with delight. That several of Olesha’s metaphor realizations are linked contextually to recurring childhood themes and motifs underscores the point.

Towards the end of his life, metaphor became the virtual focus of Olesha’s art. It was as if his quest for authentic resurrection of specific images and a general mode of perception experienced in childhood could find an echo of success only in metaphor, in imitation of the child’s primordial attempts to assimilate and articulate experience.\textsuperscript{31} No Day Without a Line, according to Kataev, constitutes no more or less than Olesha’s creative process, his metaphor workshop, laid bare. Its ubiquitous, self-conscious metaphor-making led Kataev to observe that it was poorly named. He suggested ‘A Theater of Metaphors’, ‘The Metaphor Shop’, or even ‘The Metaphor Depot’ as more appropriate.\textsuperscript{32} No Day Without a Line is a literary ‘open-house’. Kataev praises this as an innovation:

It seems that before Olesha no one had ever done this. This was his discovery. Olesha as it were reproduced verbally the very movement of his artistic thinking. The reader sees the miracle of the birth of a literary masterpiece.’ (p. 249)

One might just as easily construe this as the final, perhaps inevitable outcome of Olesha’s difficulties as a Soviet writer, a celebration, as it were, of his ‘failures’, a catalogue raisonné of his strengths as an artist that also speaks loudly, if implicitly, of his limitations: of his inability to create viable generic vehicles to transport his metaphors; of his failure to develop viable Soviet themes other than that involving the dilemma facing the old-fashioned intelligent in the no-nonsense new world, a theme he had exhausted or was forbidden to pursue after the early 1930s.\textsuperscript{33} Passage after passage in No Day Without a Line offers little more than colourful, self-conscious searches for ‘metaphors’. Thus, Olesha fishes for the right animal metaphor to ‘resurrect’ his gymnastics teacher: ‘The wrestler Pytlyasinsky taught gymnastics. He was an ex-world champion, an old war horse, or rather bull, although he wasn’t a bull either, but a whale perched on its tail. No, he wasn’t a whale either!’ (p. 393). He declares his admiration for sunsets, but becomes dissatisfied with his intended metaphor and launches into a trans-metaphorical disquisition:

It’s difficult to imagine for oneself anything more attractive to the sight than just that great wall of fire.

But does one need to compare the sunset so feebly?

The Greeks saw it as the fire in which Phaethon perished. The sunset belongs, probably, to those earthly manifestations that can be compared to anything you like. There a city is piled up, there towers grow, there long roads are built. Sometimes it is the Bible — Ezekiel’s vision with an immense guitar of sunbeams; sometimes it is a bird-lyre; and sometimes it is a quiet


\textsuperscript{31} Olesha writes in No Day Without a Line: ‘I write as if I were looking backward. I don’t create, shading, structuring, pondering; I remember. It is as though what I had intended to write had already been written. Written, and then had somehow fallen apart, and I want to gather the fragments again into a whole’ (p. 376). Also in No Day Without a Line, he describes his writing as ‘attempts to restore life’ (vostanovit’ zhizn’): ‘I desperately want to restore it sensually’ (p. 363).


\textsuperscript{33} Olesha pursued this theme once again in the film scenario, A Strict Youth’, but, predictably, the resulting film was banned: see Jerry T. Heil, No List of Political Assets: The Collaboration of Iurii Olesha and Abram Room on ‘Strogii Ivanov’ (A Strict Youth (1936), Slavistische Beiträge, 248 (Munich: Sagner, 1989).
fleet of aircraft moving away from us to the country of friends who have left us behind.

(p. 495)

Complaining of having aged, he notes how recently he had eaten a cherry without his ‘usual sense of ecstasy’. How did this ‘ecstasy’ manifest itself? ‘You used to want to compare them — their form, their taste. You wanted to imagine sparrows pecking them. You thought they were a cherry rain, slightly sweet, and very, very fresh!’ (p. 467; my italics).

In a 1935 interview, when dutifully criticizing the shortcomings of Envy, it is the excessively rich texture (faktura [...] slishkom zhirma) Olesha singles out, the superfluity of comparisons and metaphors (slishkom mnogo srasnenii, metafor). There he also plays down the importance of metaphor: ‘Marcel Proust said that for eternity there remains from art only metaphor. It is impossible to agree with this extreme position’ (‘Olesha Talks’, p. 82).

Some twenty years later (during the cultural ‘Thaw’), however, metaphor is virtually all Olesha cares about. This looking-glass reversal, which reflects the literary politics of the respective periods more than any crisis of personal conviction, is neatly packaged in Olesha’s quite different spin on Proust’s aphorism in No Day Without a Line.

Somebody once said of art that it is only the metaphor that remains for eternity. In this connection it’s pleasant to think that I am doing something that might last forever. And why, after all, is that pleasant? What is eternity if it isn’t a metaphor? We know nothing, you see, of non-metaphorical eternity. (p. 521)\(^\text{34}\)

One of Olesha’s anxieties while composing No Day Without a Line was, in fact, that he had lost the ability to make metaphors: ‘Is there still strength in me capable of giving birth to metaphors? Sometimes I want to test myself in this sphere’ (p. 520). The desire to test his metaphorical fecundity becomes a recurring motif. Thus, confronted with a scene of heavy snowfall, Olesha gropes almost desperately for la metaphore juste:

A lot of snow has fallen and it is still falling; earth, trees, buildings — everything is covered with snow [...]. And the sky too is covered with it, since the snow is visible at a rather great height.

In short, something is happening which I am unable to describe. What is it, silver? Nickel silver? Does the forest resemble a collection of expensive dishes? I don’t know! (p. 537)

Olesha had incorporated this failure to formulate appropriate comparisons as part of his narrative strategy in earlier works such as My v tsentre goroda (‘We are in the Centre of Town’, 1937) and Stadion v Odesse (‘The Stadium in Odessa’, 1936). Here ‘failure’ figures rhetorically to convey speechless awe in the presence of natural wonders (‘Several [parrots] were as if covered with enamel, others were fluffy like lilac, a third group [...]. I couldn’t find any analogy’ (p. 280)) or the accomplishments of the Soviet people (‘It’s a new stadium in Odessa. Against the background of the sea. It’s impossible to imagine a more marvellous sight. The knack of comparisons proves powerless. What does it resemble? I don’t know. I’ve never seen it before’ (p. 258)). In No Day Without a Line, however, the anxiety attached to metaphor hunts seems ingenuous, and rhetorically gratuitous:

\(^\text{34}\) Numano (p. 73) also notes these contradictory references to Proust and memory’s eternity.
The Easter table was decorated with hyacinths on long stems in holders. The hyacinths were pink and violet, a whole cavalcade of boats descending toward the flower pot. A whole cavalcade of pink or violet boats descending in a spiral, looping the stem in spirals... Is this right? Or isn’t it? [Tak? Ne tak?] (p. 540)

The comparisons tell us nothing about the hyacinths or the Easter table, nor does the self-doubt contribute to our experience of the image or to the larger context that follows. The anxiety does underscore Olesha’s belief that there really was such a thing as a comparison that was ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, depending on its ability to evoke that delighted recognition readers share with the poet from childhood.

Perhaps Olesha’s most revealing remark in matters of metaphor arises in No Day Without a Line, when he relates a nearly forgotten childhood incident. He had been forbidden by his father to play with the neighbourhood children. Once, when he thought his father was asleep, he risked going out anyway. Before leaving, however, ‘in order to make light of [his] offence’, he drank some water from ‘a blue enamel cup with white spots that naturally resembled a blue cow’. He is caught and punished. What he remembers as important in this incident, however, is classic Olesha:

I remember being suspended in the air in the pose of a swimmer and being loudly smacked on the behind.

Other than that I don’t recall anything. In this story, the main thing is that I considered it necessary to be casual about my offence, and that the cup resembled a blue cow. (p. 359)

Whether the ‘main thing’ here refers to the event’s psychological import for the child or to the adult’s triumphant retelling (despite all, he did manage to resurrect ‘the main thing’), it is, in any case, anomalous, if not entirely singular that ‘mere’ metaphors should play so great a role in defining an adult’s perspective. It also confirms, at least in terms of auto-mythopoiesis, the undeniable prominence of the Oleshan child behind the metaphor.

All of the above constitutes that ‘metaphor shop’ Olesha opened in old age (No Day Without a Line, p. 522). The shop, one recalls, fails because no market exists for the more expensive metaphors, only for shopworn clichés. Through this allegorical telling of his literary fate, Olesha seems to suggest that any ‘failures’ that might be ascribed to his career in fact represent his culture’s failure to appreciate the artist’s unique gift. Elsewhere in No Day Without a Line Olesha acknowledges that while a writer like Tolstoy, who is ‘busy with moral and historical or economic arguments’, ‘throws out images inadvertently’, Olesha, himself, ‘turns everything toward the image’ (p. 521). Likewise, while ‘Kataev has written a great deal’, Olesha himself has written ‘only fragments, a mere collection of metaphors’. But if a writer’s manifest goal is to restore a world seen in childhood and to endow his readers with its delighted recognition, and if one accepts that the metaphor does most authentically of all literary devices approximate a childhood perceptual mode and does most successfully resurrect the images preserved from that time of enchanted vision, then the metaphor rightly figures at the centre, if not as the centre, of that writer’s work, indeed, of his very life.

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