

Benjamin M. Sutcliffe
Iurii Trifonov's *Students*:
Body, Place, and Life in Late Stalinism

Iurii Trifonov's first *povest'*, *Students* (Studenty, 1950) is an overlooked yet fascinating attempt to join two contradictions of late Stalinism: ideas and the physical world. Through these opposites the novella conveys the anxieties of post-war youth who, as Julianne Fürst notes, struggled to reconcile everyday life with state ideology.¹ The plot of *Students* is undistinguished: Vadim Belov, returning to his native Moscow after the Great Patriotic War, enrolls in the department of a teaching institute only to be gravely disappointed. Tellingly-named Professor Kozel'skii is an uninspiring teacher who turns out to be a cosmopolitan and toady (*nizkopoklonnik*). Then Vadim's closest friend, Sergei Palavin, also proves unworthy: his individualism and careerism garner censure from fellow students. As these dramatic events are riling the collective, Vadim discovers that his first love (Lena Medovskaia) is a frivolous materialist, less worthy than serious and hardworking Olia Syrykh. The work concludes with Kozel'skii no longer teaching, Sergei admitting his errors, and Vadim and Olia chastely taking in the May Day fireworks. This narrative, like other student novellas (*studentcheskie povesti*), engages the ideological issues of the late

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¹ Julianne Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65–66.

1940s; however, the work is also deeply concerned by bodies, objects, and how they implicate ideas.²

My study is the first English-language article solely on *Students*, a work scholars neglect when examining Trifonov's oeuvre. The *povest'*, based on Trifonov's 1949 thesis at the Gor'kii Literary Institute, bears the evident stamp of artistic immaturity. Likewise, the work has the cliché formulations, contrived plot, and abhorrent orthodoxy typical of socialist realism (*Students* won the Stalin Prize, third class, after its publication in *Novyi mir*). Finally, Trifonov himself in later years disliked the novella, noting even that he was afraid to pick it up. Indeed, it is impossible to address this early work without discussing the subsequent career of its creator. The son of an executed Old Bolshevik, Trifonov was lauded for *Students* during late Stalinism. His better-known works in the 1960s–1970s were attacked by some Soviet critics for their gloomy quotidian aura, while in the 1990s others lambasted the (now deceased) author for cooperating with the state. David Gillespie typifies the dominant trend among Western Slavists, heralding Trifonov as a “precursor” of the more open Gorbachev era. *Students* has become at best an embarrassing lapse that critics dismiss in favor of the weightier tomes securing Trifonov's place in Russian literature.³

² Iurii Trifonov, *Studenty*, in *Iurii Trifonov: Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, eds. S. A. Baruzdin, et al. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1985), vol. 1, 21–406. The work was labeled both “povest'” and “roman” by Trifonov and others during various different publications: see Marina Selemena: “Oppozitsiia ‘razum/chuvstvo’ v povesti Iu. V. Trifonova ‘Studenty’,” in *Ratsional'noe i emotsional'noe v literature i fol'klore. Materialy IV Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi pamiati Aleksandra Matveevicha Bulanova. Volgograd, 29 oktiabria — 3 noiabria 2007 goda. 2 chasti*, eds. L. N. Savina, et al. (Volgograd: Izdatel'stvo VGIPK RO, 2008), vol. 1, 337–38. For an overview of the *studentcheskaia povest'*, see the classic work: Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 205–13.

³ *Students* was first published in *Novyi mir*, nos. 10–11 (1950). On reasons that recent critics have marginalized the *povest'*, see Selemena, “Oppozitsiia ‘razum/chuvstvo’,” 336. For one of the numerous mentions of Trifonov's later attitude to this early work, see the solid discussion in: Natal'ia Ivanova, *Proza Iuriiia Trifonova* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1984), 13. Ivanova cites Iurii Trifonov, “Zapiski soseda,” *Druzhba narodov*, no. 10 (1989), 11. Aleksandr Shitov provides an ex-

However, this *povest'* is much more than a stepping stone. Certainly, as Josephine Woll outlines, it contains hints of the themes that will dominate Trifonov's later (and better) works: *Students* privileges *byt* (everyday life), is obsessed with Moscow, worries about contemporary morality, and binds the individual to history. The most evident connection between this novella and the author's corpus is the well-researched relationship between *Students* and *House on the Embankment* (*Dom na naberezhnoi*, 1976). The latter work is repentance for the former; as Anne Dwyer explains, reading *Students* in light of *House on the Embankment* reinterprets Vadim's crusade for the Party line into a subversive depiction of late-Stalinist hypocrisy.⁴

Such an approach works in terms of Trifonov's literary development and a diachronic view of Soviet culture. Ironically enough, however, it echoes Stalinist critics in the early 1950s, who focused on the reeducation of errant Sergei and Kozel'skii but neglected a core concern of the novella: how to depict these characters' virtues and faults. This portrayal of the positive and negative personages in the *povest'* reveals the strained relationship between the physical (embodied in objects and the body) and the ideas driving Soviet society. These two forces attempt to reconcile what Iurii Lotman espies as the enduring opposition between *byt* (material, ephemeral) and *bytie* (spiritual/ideational, permanent). *Students* shows how the physical (*byt*) can be positive or negative as it reflects the ideas (*bytie*) behind it. In doing so, the novella makes clear whether a character belongs to the literal and symbolic Life

haustive chronological study of Trifonov's life and works in his *Iurii Trifonov: khronika zhizni i tvorchestva (1925—1981)* (Ekaterinburg: Izdatel'stvo Ural'skogo universiteta, 1997). N. L. Leiderman and M. N. Lipovetskii, *Ot "sovetskogo pisatel'ia" k pisatel'iu sovetskoi epokhi. Put' Iurii Trifonova* (Ekaterinburg: Izdatel'stvo AMB, 2001), 3; David Gillespie, *Iurii Trifonov: Unity through Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2. It is no coincidence that Gillespie, along with several other Western critics, published monographs on Trifonov during *glasnost'*: the author's confrontation with a newly unquiet Soviet past exemplified how the US and Europe wished to view perestroika literature.

⁴ Josephine Woll, *Invented Truth: Soviet Reality and the Literary Imagination of Iurii Trifonov* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17, 135. See the good discussion of Trifonov and life writing in: Anne Dwyer, "Runaway Texts: The Many Life Stories of Iurii Trifonov and Christa Wolf," *Russian Review*, no. 64 (2005), 618.

(zhizn') of Stalinism. Mikhail Iampolski, critiquing Aleksandr Fadeev's canonical 1937 definition, notes that this Life gives meaning to socialist realism's idealized images, images that replaced the reality they supposedly represented. Both the material and ideational, *byt* and *bytie*, are crucial parts of this concept.⁵

In this sense Natal'ia Ivanova provides a reasonable but flawed approach when asserting that in the *povest'* Stalinist culture relegates literature to mere social debate. While the critic views this as making art into ideology's slave, for Vadim subordinating literature to reality is natural and necessary. Indeed, the novella's positive personages believe fiction can have no higher purpose than explaining the relationship between reader and Life. This assumption is crucial. Being part of Life necessitates promoting the (Stalinist) values of the Great Family, which Katerina Clark connects to ideological kinship uniting the Father of the Peoples and his progeny. Belonging to this group is evinced through the correct ideas and the right deeds, as critics demonstrated: they praised Vadim for denouncing Kozel'skii's cosmopolitanism and formalism. The student's attack shows him to be a loyal son who proves his lineage by correct actions and, in doing so, demonstrates that he is in touch with the Life of the nation.⁶

⁵ Iurii Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul'ture: Byt i traditsii russkogo dvorianstva (XVIII — nachalo XIX veka)* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1994), 10. On *byt* and *bytie*, see also Stephen Hutchings, *Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 38. Mikhail Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life," in *Socialist Realism without Shores*, eds. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 173. Aleksandr Fadeev links Life to the working class: "Literatura i zhizn'," in *Literatura i zhizn'. Stat'i i rechi* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1939), 15–17. The interplay between the physical and ideational in Life parallels Stalinism's relationship between chaotic spontaneity and its transformation into organized consciousness. See Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 15–16. While not relevant to the ideological drama of *Students*, the theme of Life and reworking of fates shapes Thomas Lahusen's *How Life Writes the Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁶ Ivanova, *Proza Iurii Trifonova*, 14. One particularly vociferous Stalinist critic carps that we learn much about the (physical) volleyball competition Sergei wins but little about the (presumably more important) student debates over Soviet literature: B. Platonov, "Literaturnoe obozrenie. Zametki o russkoi sovetskoi

Physicality and ideas are complementary opposites in the world of Trifonov's students. The 1930s had attempted to define their interaction through images of mechanized bodies and souls of steel, thus positing thought's victory over things. Then came the Great Patriotic War, with its millions of dead and the maimed veterans who became a common site in Moscow. Wounded soldiers signaled the failure of Stalinism, yet *Students* recasts this compromised corporeality as a new source of strength. Vadim (improbably) returns from both Europe and Asia unscathed, brawny and with a forehead now as broad as his father's. The parent in question perished in December 1941 while defending the USSR—his death implies loyalty to the state, expressed through what Lilya Kaganovsky depicts as the sacrificial male body. Vadim's survival and strength, on the other hand, shows how the trauma of combat becomes the vigor of healthy veterans in a joyful land.⁷

In *Students* postwar Moscow itself seems to celebrate Stalinist physicality. Vera Dunham observes that the city's optimism both elides wartime losses and hints that readers were tired of military themes. Early criticism commended the expansion, modernization, and prosperity ascribed to the Soviet capital. Moscow's concrete and metal reflects the brilliance of Stalin, whom the protagonist extols: "In Vadim's eyes the genius for leadership, the ability to inspire others with lofty aspirations and to lead them onward, was the greatest of all gifts." The protagonist is an exemplary child of

proze 1950 goda. Stat'ia vtoraiia," *Zvezda*, no. 2 (1951), 160. On the Great Family, see Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 114, 115, and, more recently, Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova, "Cinepaternity: The Psyche and its Heritage," in *Cinepaternity: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film*, eds. Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). Leiderman and Lipovetskii, *Ot "sovetskogo pisatel'ia" k pisatel'iu sovetskoi epokhi*, 6.

⁷ For a good overview of 1930s conceptions of the body, see Rolf Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). On the visibility of crippled soldiers in Moscow, see Ivanova, *Proza Iuriiia Trifonova*, 14. Trifonov, *Studenty*, 40, 34. Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 146.

the Great Family, recognizing that the correct ideas have protected this metropolis and will now literally and symbolically remake it.⁸

Bodies That Matter

Corporeality (*telesnost'*) guided the reception of *Students*. Stalinist critics praised the book's ideational physique, hailing its creator as a "son of the Stalin era" and thus establishing the novella's place within the canon. Another supporter observed that the *povest'* was fresh and young, adjectives suiting Trifonov as neophyte as well as how the book heralds new beginnings (and ignores recent terror and tragedy). *Students* is a narrative about the present claiming its future, a task one Stalinist critic ascribed to the *studencheskaia povest'*. In this sense it is far removed from the retrospective prose of middle age that defined Trifonov's writing in the Brezhnev era.⁹

⁸ Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 46. The exaltation of postwar Moscow begins with Vadim's marveling at its new cars and trolleys: Trifonov, *Studenty*, 23. For a representative response to these images, see the positive comments by students, professors, and Trifonov himself: "Obsuzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova 'Studenty'," *Novyi mir*, no. 2 (1951), 222. The classic discussion of Moscow architecture under Stalin (albeit with a focus on the 1930s) remains Vladimir Papernyi's *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Yuri Trifonov, *Students*, trans. Ivy Litvinova and Margaret Wettlin (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo literatury na inostrannykh iazykakh, 1956), 36. Stalin is not mentioned explicitly in the narrative, but his presence is everywhere implied, as one cunning student discerned in praising the *povest'*: "Obsuzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova 'Studenty,'" 222.

⁹ Iu. Karasev, "Povest' o studentakh," *Ogonek*, no. 12 (1951), 24. On the youthful attributes of *Students*, see B. Galanov, "Nachalo puti," *Znamia*, no. 1 (1951), 171. S. L'vov, "Povest' o sovetskom studenchestve," in *Vydaiushchiesia proizoedeniia sovetskoi literatury. 1950 god. Sbornik statei*, comp. S. Babenysheva (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1952), 265. The prose of middle age marks works such as *The Exchange* (*Obmen*, 1969) as well as those narratives more explicitly built around recalling a youth long past. These link morality and hindsight to critique the decisions of individuals, families, and the USSR as a whole. On the link between ethical choices and the past in *The Exchange*, see Woll, *Invented Truth*, 25. The section heading "Bodies That Matter" references the key work by Judith Butler, who argues for the central role of corporeality in culture: Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

Following the schematic divisions of socialist realism, characters come in contrastive pairs: positive and negative and, more interestingly, redeemable and doomed. While *Students* clearly shows the differences between Vadim and Sergei, I focus on the intriguing distinctions between the two main reprobates (Sergei and Kozel'skii). Sergei is brought back to Life, although many at the time derided his transformation as unconvincing. Kozel'skii's fate is less clear: while most critics (unwillingly) believed the novella rehabilitates him, his errors are too serious for redemption. *Telesnost'* reflects these different outcomes, in the process reinforcing Stalinism's axiom that ideas determine physicality just as ideology determines Life.¹⁰

On his first day back in the city Vadim meets Sergei on a central Moscow square, the same location of their final, reconciling conversation at the novella's end. This is not coincidence but the symbolic geography of socialist realism, where chance, that petty problem of *byt*, is subordinate to the oversight of *bytie* (in this case, Sergei's moral development). He is a more attractive version of the youthfully vague Vadim: Sergei has grown broader in the shoulders, with light-brown hair, blue eyes with a merry Tatar slant, and a sun-burned forehead slightly creased by wrinkles presumably from challenges met during the war. Unlike the shier protagonist, Sergei is successful with women and is an excellent athlete. In the climactic scene signaling that he has rejoined society, he scores the winning point for the institute's volleyball team in the city championship. By physique alone Sergei conveys that, while his missteps are serious, they cannot prevent this young man from the Life he and Vadim helped to defend and will now rebuild.¹¹

¹⁰ On contrasting characters, see Galanov, "Nachalo puti," 174. For doubtful reactions to Sergei's shift, see Karasev, "Povest' o studentakh," 24, and Platonov, "Literaturnoe obozrenie," 161. In terms of Kozel'skii's change of heart, see Galanov, "Nachalo puti," 173; "Studenty o povesti 'Studenty'," *Smena*, no. 22 (1950), 20; L'vov, "Povest' o sovetskom studenchestve," 276. For a contrasting view, see Carolina de Maegd-Soëp, *Trifonov and the Drama of the Russian Intelligentsia* (Ghent: Russian Institute, 1990), 33. On the relationship between ideology and Life, see Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life," 172.

¹¹ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 28, 387, 396.

Youthful prowess, however, must be managed by the collective and that group's guiding ideas, which themselves originate in the genius-leaders Vadim so admires. Strength by itself can be a liability. Indeed, under the wrong conditions it invites disaster, as Dunham implies when noting that returning veterans were seen as a danger by the state. In *Students*, hotheaded Ukrainian sailor Petr Lagodenko embodies this peril: short, stocky, and swarthy, he insults Kozel'skii during an exam and is reprimanded by the Komso-mol. The professor, as the plot shows, is the root issue, yet Vadim condemns Lagodenko's outburst as "partisan activity" (*partizanshchina*). This denotation references what in Clark's terms is spontaneity: it is justified but lacks the consciousness of directives from above. More importantly, Vadim's word choice alludes to fears that soldiers may (and did) operate beyond government control. On the battlefield and in peacetime ungoverned physicality is a destructive force.¹²

Kozel'skii, supposedly a bulwark of Soviet education, harbors harm of a different sort. Boris Glebovich is fifty and tall, yet seems to look down on even those who are taller. He is distinguished and fit, in great part due to his love for tennis, a choice of sports that Gillespie equates with individualism and aristocracy. In a culminating argument with his old acquaintance, Dean Sizov, Kozel'skii points out that he could have fled to France in 1918 with his privileged father. The fact that he chose to remain in Soviet Russia, however, is less significant than his subsequent inaction, akin to what in later decades would be termed "internal emigration." In form, demeanor, and worldview he is unquestionably alienated from Stalinist *bytie*. As in other student novellas of the era, mannerisms are telling: while Vadim competently answers an exam question (on nineteenth-century civic poet Nikolai Nekrasov), Kozel'skii plays with his pipe.

¹² Lagodenko is quick-tempered but passionately believes in the Soviet state. This is unsurprising since he belongs to an elite group in Bolshevik mythology: the navy. Trifonov, *Studenty*, 75, 141. L'vov, "Povest' o sovetskom studenchestve," 270. On the state's worries about returning soldiers, see the well-written study by Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941–1991* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Vadim answered his first question quickly and easily. He loved Nekrasov and knew much of his work by heart. [. . .] Kozelsky alone seemed insensible to what Vadim was saying, as if absorbed in his pipe—cleaning it, filling it, neatly packing it down with a flat thumb, taking a long draw, throwing back his head and sending a fragrant stream of smoke ceilingward. As he spoke, Vadim kept his eyes on Kozelsky's dry, scrawny neck, red towards the ears, white and goose-fleshy further down.

Kozel'skii clearly does not share Vadim's enthusiasm for Nekrasov, despite the 1800s being his specialty. His disinterest is suspect, as is the way he makes his pipe into an aristocratic bauble. Vadim looks at the professor's neck, which hints at weakness and ill-health. This image sharply contrasts with the situation at the beginning of Vadim's exam, with "Kozelsky in the centre in a smart black suit, shaved and combed and radiantly pink, as though he were celebrating his birthday." His initial smug elegance becomes a corporeal unease that hints at something deeper: the rotten nobility he personifies lives on, tainting society through the varied ideological sins Kozel'skii will soon be accused of.¹³ This is part of physicality's presaging function—distinction can imply alienation is well as exceptionality. One critic observes that the negative characters of *Students* make more of an impression than their positive counterparts. This, of course, is a staple of tendentious literature in

¹³ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 76. Gillespie, *Iurii Trifonov*, 25. On internal emigration, see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 133. For a discussion of mannerisms and negative academic characters in the late-Stalinist *studentcheskaia povest'*, see Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 206. Trifonov, *Studenty*, 303, 267. Trifonov, *Students*, 263, 261. The pipe is a loaded image in late Stalinism: its most obvious reference (and one Kozel'skii profanes) is to the Generalissimo's thoughtful smoking, prominent in films such as Mikhail Chiaureli's *Fall of Berlin* (Padenie Berlina, 1949). In an early commentary Trifonov notes that Kozel'skii was based on professors at the Gor'kii Literary Institute who had been "driven out for promulgating formalism and cosmopolitanism" (*propoved' formalizma i kosmopolitizma*). "Ob-suzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova 'Studenty,'" 228.

general (as well as socialist realism in particular)—readers must entertain no doubts about a character's role.¹⁴

Vadim, in good Stalinist fashion, does not trust the professor's appearance, thinking that his pipe, bald spot, and even sweater vest are all for show. One critic, responding to the *povest'*, makes an analogous, chilling comment when she observes that Trifonov shows it is difficult to unmask someone like Sergei (or Kozel'skii). This drive to uncover hidden defects recalls Oleg Kharkhordin's observation that by late Stalinism the state no longer needed to police citizens; Vadim and his fellow enthusiasts capably assumed this role.¹⁵ Dissembling is futile—Sergei discovers that it divides a person from Life and ultimately will be revealed. Vadim makes this clear when critiquing the "egoism" of Sergei's callous behavior towards girlfriend Valia and linking this to the "careerism" compromising his friend's status in the institute. This charge asserts that private and public behavior is inseparable due to its visibility to the collective. In a similar vein, the novella convinces readers it is necessary to uncover enemies such as Kozel'skii, an imperative that is a particularly loathsome aspect of the unity between appearance and essence that Stalinism demanded of the human sign.¹⁶

Kozel'skii's sinisterly refined *telesnost'* indicates his faults are more serious than Sergei's; likewise, lush Lena Medovskaia overshadows simple yet ideologically correct Olia Syrykh. These two women structure the plot, justifying Kaganovsky's assertion that in postwar culture love reclaims a central place in the Stalinist nar-

¹⁴ On the striking nature of negative characters, see de Maegd-Soëp, *Trifonov and the Drama of the Russian Intelligentsia*, 33. Stalinist villains prove quite memorable. For instance, in Grigorii Aleksandrov's *Circus* (Tsirk, 1936), sinister yet unhinged von Kneishitz is more interesting than blond Stalinist stuntman Martynov.

¹⁵ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 81, 261. "Obsuzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova 'Studenty'," 222. On postwar surveillance, see Oleg Kharkhordin, "Reveal and Dissimulate: A Genealogy of Private Life in Soviet Russia," in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, eds. Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 357.

¹⁶ Sergei's caddish rejection of Valia when she believes she is pregnant is ultimately forgiven because no child is born, a detail the Komosoml is quick to ascertain. Trifonov, *Studenty*, 322, 339.

rative. Lena is tall, striking, and on her first date with Vadim offers him perfume. At the theatre her appearance recalls Anna Karenina and, more damningly, namesake H el ene Kuragina from *War and Peace*. The audience—especially its male contingent—admires her dress and beauty. As Lena and Vadim talk before the play.

People began turning round to look at Lena, some with curiosity, others with disapproval. But they all went on looking—the men gazing long into her face, the women chiefly studying her dress. Lena did not seem to notice their glances, but Vadim felt mingled embarrassment and pride. It was delightful to be sitting next to this beautiful girl, who attracted such general attention.¹⁷

Vadim is flattered by his girlfriend. She resembles the luxury goods in her apartment, things that the loyal citizen will presumably earn by continued service to the state. However, the intertextual reference to Tolstoi’s character bodes ill; Lena/H el ene exemplifies the corporeality of the nineteenth century, which has somehow lingered on in Stalinist Moscow. Later, at the housewarming party in her new (private) apartment, even elegant Lena’s lips glitter, yet Vadim’s admiration for her body has waned because of her disinterest in ideas. That evening they have an argument and Vadim watches her reflection in one of the apartment’s shiny lampshades: Lena’s face is distorted by the mirrored surface, with a prominent discolored tooth imparting that her physical perfection is flawed.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49–50, 53. Trifonov, *Students*, 53. Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man was Unmade*, 4. Despite Kaganovsky’s claim, the love plot is prominent throughout Stalinist film and literature, as works such as *Circus* and Konstantin Simonov’s wartime poem (and subsequent song) “Wait for Me” (Zhdi menia) show (Konstantin Simonov, “Zhdi menia,” *Pravda*, 14 January 1942, 2).

¹⁸ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 309, 318. On luxury goods in the postwar context, see the fascinating overview in: David Crowley and Susan Reid, “Introduction: Pleasures in Socialism?,” in *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, eds. David Crowley and Susan Reid (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 14. L’vov, “Povest’ o sovetskom studenchestve,” 272. The two last names are significant: Medovskaia is sweet yet sticky in her materialism, while Syrykh is the raw material that will yield mature love with Vadim.

Detractors railed against Lena's superficiality, an accusation that begins with *telesnost'* then impugns the ideas behind it. She is neither seriously involved with the institute nor particularly interested in the studying that, as one critic reminds us, is a form of labor. Lena's love of things and voluptuous figure imply an existence in which physicality eclipses thought; she seems not to belong among these students, themselves a symbolic extension of the working class. Indeed, Lena's academic focus is preparing "to become a woman" (na zhenshchinu) in order to snare a successful husband; such people threatened to replace honest work with a shallow love of languor. Just as problematic, Dunham notices, is disinterest in the war that has defined her generation. Lena has no desire to contribute to society; instead, she looks for a cozy nook analogous to the one Kozel'skii has found. Unlike the professor, however, her entree to a world of unearned wealth will be perfunctory beauty, not the suspect legacy of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. Watching her during a teaching internship, Vadim notices that Lena is successful in the classroom because students are drawn to her appearance. Critics were understandably skeptical of this rationale, which they found as contrived as Lena herself.¹⁹

Women's bodies come with cultural anxieties differing from those that mark the professor. One critic unkindly distinguishes Lena from her skirt-chasing male comrades by sniping that her frivolous nature (*legkomyslie*) and coquetry become *poshlost'* and emptiness. These are serious allegations in Soviet culture—*poshlost'* is trivialized sexuality, purely physical and thus divorced from the *bytie* of love. Vacuity is also condemned by the charged semiotics of postwar Stalinism and what it expects from youth; Lena's shortcomings estrange her from the ideas that must redeem the banal world of bodies and things.²⁰

¹⁹ Karasev, "Povest' o studentakh," 24. On studying as labor, see L'vov, "Povest' o sovetskom studenchestve," 267. Fürst discusses the problems of frivolous young women in *Stalin's Last Generation*, 274. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 81. Trifonov, *Students*, 208. Trifonov, *Studenty*, 375. On Lena's unconvincing portrayal as a good teacher, see "Obsuzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova 'Studenty'," 224.

²⁰ L'vov, "Povest' o sovetskom studenchestve," 272. On *poshlost'*, see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 45. Boym draws on Vladimir Nabokov's critique of

Ideological vigilance demands that readers uncover the source of such flaws, and critics determined Lena's mother to be the guilty party. At the housewarming, Al'bina Trofimovna luxuriates in not working, instead frittering away time with her daughter's bright, privileged friends. This corruptive connection between women and material comfort, which Xenia Gasiorowska identifies as a leitmotif in the era's prose, will become a disturbing hallmark of Trifonov's later work. In *Students*, it obscures the source of both mother and daughter's wealth and leisure: Lena's father. Vadim immediately likes the older man's weathered face, which implies a working-class background that justifies his new position of factory director. An impressive physique is accompanied by sound ideas. Konstantin Ivanovich is fascinated by an innovation created by one of his workers and is just as impressed with Vadim, who, he observes, is worthier than those from his daughter's usual coterie. Lena is a mix of the paternal positive and maternal negative, with the novella's praise of her teaching intimating it is her father's genes that ultimately dominate. The same logic dooms Kozel'skii: his aristocratic papa fled the impending dictatorship of the proletariat and, following in his footsteps metaphorically if not literally, the aloof academic refuses to contribute to the collective. True to the patriarchal imagery of Stalinism, it is the father who defines kinship, whether of the biological or Great Family.²¹

Despite her redemptive pedigree, Lena's troubling *telesnost'* signals she is the wrong woman for Vadim. The positive hero's true love is the sister of Andrei Strykh, a former factory worker

poshlost' as failed imitation of taste that is stymied by the material world (Vladimir Nabokov, "Philistines and Philistinism," in *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 309).

²¹ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 312, 315; "Obsuzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova 'Studenty'," 222. On Konstantin Ivanovich providing the power that guarantees the family's wealth, see de Maegd-Soëp, *Trifonov and the Drama of the Russian Intelligentsia*, 36. In her pioneering study of women in Soviet literature, Xenia Gasiorowska notes how authors accused privileged Stalinist mothers of spawning spoiled daughters: *Women in Soviet Fiction, 1917–1964* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 219. Critics also blamed Sergei's mother, Irina Viktorovna, labeling her "not progressive" (*ne peredovaia*) and insinuating that she caused the divorce that sundered the family (Trifonov, *Studenty*, 31; "Obsuzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova 'Studenty'," 222).

who is now at the institute. On an invigorating ski trip to the country Vadim meets Olia, whose nickname (Elochka) reflects her fascination with forestry. Sergei and Lena have disillusioned him, but on the crisp winter day “[Olia] bent over lithely to fasten her skis, and when she straightened up Vadim was suddenly aware of the slender, graceful lines of her figure, emphasized by the snug-fitting sweater.” This clothing is a modest contrast to Lena’s ostentatious dress, just as the snowy scene lacks the Medovskii apartment’s whiff of corruption. Olia’s physical activity (which Lena shuns) and interest in the woods emphasizes her harmony with the countryside; she combines the fit Stalinist maiden and the nineteenth-century heroine in tune with nature. Olia’s sexuality is appropriately demure, reflecting what Fürst describes as the era’s aversion to the erotic. However, Vadim notices that she has outgrown her old housedress and cannot bend over comfortably, hinting that her body is just as appealing as Lena’s. (Olia, who is eighteen, is also younger than both Vadim and his erstwhile love.) The muted allure of her *telesnost’* comes through involuntarily, unlike Lena’s deliberate and crass sensuality. In terms of maturity, stability, and interest in the collective, Gillespie succinctly summarizes the two women: Olia is everything that Lena is not.²²

Bodies and ideas are interlinked in late-Stalinist culture. Before meeting Andrei’s sister, Vadim compares love to the fatal frustration felt by bourgeois heroines Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina. For them desire was yearning for what one could not obtain. Instead, Vadim asserts, love should be what one wants and does not have but will get soon. This formulation personalizes the credo of socialist realism, which depicts the world not as it is but how it should be—and will be in the future. The narrator strongly hints that such is the case with Vadim and Olia. At the end of *Students*, Olia is going away to work in a forest in Stalingrad oblast’—she wants to be on the front lines of her field (the location likewise recalls the key battle in the Great Patriotic War). Vadim will be able to visit her for a short time in the next few months, but then the two must postpone their love until Olia returns to Moscow. They

²² Trifonov, *Studenty*, 115, 289, 161. Trifonov, *Students*, 338. Fürst, *Stalin’s Last Generation*, 268. Gillespie, *Iurii Trifonov*, 23–24.

defer happiness to serve their country, reflecting what one critic applauded as the “common mental (*dukhovnye*) interests” without which (physical) love cannot exist. Iampolski notes that Stalinist culture connected youth, love, and Life, yet ideas must ultimately dominate corporeality in this triumvirate. The novella makes this clear when, on its final page, Vadim and Olia stand together underneath the capital’s May Day fireworks. Their passion will not drive them away from the collective (as Lena’s would have) but binds them to the Great Family that their progeny will expand.²³

Locating Ideas

In *Students* the body reflects the thoughts that guide it; places reveal the beliefs of those inhabiting them. Given the interconnected nature of socialist realism, it is unsurprising that *telesnost’* and living space complement each other, a scenario intensified by the postwar craving for domestic normalcy. Lena’s expansive surroundings match her lubricious form; Vadim, by contrast, shares a room with his widowed mother in a *kommunalka*. As Dunham observes, the protagonist ogles Lena’s apartment; its stylish furnishings and implied social stratification constitute a fantasy of what he might attain. By the end of the novella, however, Vadim has rejected this opulence (just as he and Lena have parted ways). His shift is far from coincidental: *Students* persistently associates unearned wealth with individuals alienated from the ideological *bytie* that is Life’s central component.²⁴

²³ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 148, 405, 406. On deferring love for country, see Selemena, “Oppozitsiia ‘razum/chuvstvo,’” 342–43. For the role of shared ideas and relationships, see “Obsuzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova ‘Studenty,’” 221. Another critic is less satisfied, noting that we learn more about Vadim’s two loves than about the papers he writes: Platonov, “Literaturnoe obozrenie,” 161. On how socialist realism opposes youth, love, and Life to formalism (i.e., Kozel’skii’s passionless teaching), see Iampolski, “Censorship as the Triumph of Life,” 176.

²⁴ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 51–52. As Eric Naiman notes, throughout the Stalin era home was an important location for ideological battles (Eric Naiman, “Introduction,” in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), xv). On the desire for peacetime domesticity, see Anna Krylova, “Healers of Wounded

As Dunham has argued, in late Stalinism the moral stature of material possessions comes from owners and the ideas these people hold. Duty to the collective warrants rewards. This is clear when Vadim stops by his family's room as he heads for the front, intent on avenging the death of his father. In Moscow he does not find his mother (who is at work) but he does see their furniture: "Everything was as he had left it: the books on their shelves, the piano with the embroidered runner on the top, the old bronze clock, and his bed, neatly covered with a green blanket. Lifting the napkin off a plate on the table, he revealed a bit of dry bread, an onion and an egg shell." These things exude an aura of warm familiarity and comfort strongly contrasting with Lena's opulent apartment. Vadim's mother and father have devoted themselves to advancing the Life that the protagonist defends against first Nazis and then the likes of Kozel'skii. The family's domestic objects join *byt* and *bytie* through ideational and physical harmony; there is no gap between appearance and essence. The humble communal apartment, symbolically yielding to Moscow's rebuilding, promises that for Vadim and Olia's children a more bountiful future awaits if they participate in Life and serve the state.²⁵

Kozel'skii's dwellings divulge a different fate. Going to visit the professor, Vadim happens to see Sergei, who also has an appointment (he is using the arrogant academic to nab a prized scholarship).

Everything in [Kozel'skii's room] spoke of a tranquil, comfortable [komfortabel'noi], bachelor life. The room was study, drawing room, library, and bedroom in one. The entire floor was covered by a thick Persian carpet. The handsome old writing table, the armchairs, and the bookcase were all of mahogany. A television set on a low table. An electric heater. A tennis racket in a press. Two light, three-kilogram dumbbells on the window sill, and next to them

Souls': The Crisis of Private Life in Postwar Soviet Literature, 1944–1946," *Journal of Modern History*, no. 2 (2001), 308. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 44–45. On Lena's form and voice, see Ivanova, *Proza Iuriia Trifonova*, 16–17. For discussion of fantasy and the world of things, see Crowley and Reid, "Introduction," 20.

²⁵ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 38. Trifonov, *Students*, 33.

a long-necked bottle of brandy. And a pier glass [zerkalo]—a flawless, shining pier glass between the windows. The dainty, voluptuous oval seemed to have found its way from some lady's boudoir into the bachelor quarters of this scholar and sportsman.

Things take over this scene, even replacing verbs as Kozel'skii's possessions relate their owner's love of sensual objects and ancien régime attachments. The pier glass reflects the professor's "voluptuous" nature just as Lena's corruption is mirrored in the lampshade Vadim notices after they argue. Kozel'skii shares this apartment only with a relative. The place is "comfortable," connoting suspect sumptuousness instead of earned prosperity. Unlike the Belovs' *kommunalka*, this home alludes to an existence devoted to the professor's private interests over those of the collective. *Studencheskie povesti* critique this selfishness, which also violates the precept that only the loyal and hardworking receive luxuries. One critic, unwittingly foreseeing later Soviet attacks on Trifonov, describes Kozel'skii's apartment as outmoded *byt*. This judgment conflates objects, banality, and the lurking danger of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. As with the critique of Lena's *poshlost'*, the physical world is a problem when paired with dubious characters and their poisonous ideas.²⁶

One of the professor's possessions is particularly perturbing. Sergei, currying favor, brings Kozel'skii a rare book on French ballet. An early critic is outraged by the foreign as well as pre-Bolshevik nature of this tome. He seethes at how the professor leafs through it like a gourmand, in the same way Kozel'skii dismisses Vadim's attempt to prove that Russian literature first created the image of the little man (*malen'kii chelovek*). These seemingly differ-

²⁶ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 250–51; Trifonov, *Students*, 301. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 205. For an investigation of luxury goods and loyalty, see Randi Cox, "All This Can be Yours! Soviet Commercial Advertising and the Social Construction of Space, 1928–1956," in *Landscape of Stalinism*, 128. On the vicissitudes of *byt*, see L'vov, "Povest' o sovetskom studenchestve," 272. In the *studencheskaia povest'* an academic's bachelor status is also a warning; Kozel'skii is neither physically nor symbolically contributing to the Great Family, another hint that he is estranged from Life (Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 207, 211).

ent issues illuminate the high stakes attached to the book Sergei has found. On one level, as *Students* repeatedly reminds us, the right reading produces solid, cultured Soviets. The wrong literature breeds cosmopolitanism and kowtowing to the West. Kozel'skii's fondness for decadent, alien literature is directly connected to his refusal to acknowledge Russia's 'invention' of a key nineteenth-century trope; together, these attitudes show he is unfit to teach. There is also a more basic problem: the professor's fascination with "fine" (*utonchennyi*) Western writing renders the book merely another object to be savored like Kozel'skii's brandy. This contradicts the era's core belief that ideas control materiality, and, by extension, *bytie* directs *byt*. A rare volume becoming an intellectual bauble threatens the preeminence of thought over things, a hierarchy predating the ideological obsessions of Stalinism. Another critic notes that Kozel'skii's formalism causes him to wall himself off with books: the professor's alienating use of the word has a physical as well as metaphorical consequence. While Vadim's love of literature brings him closer to *bytie*, the erring academic threatens this process. The novella cannot allow reading to be divorced from the Life that gives it meaning.²⁷

Coming Back to Life

Students shows that literature must unite (not isolate) and, in doing so, erase the boundary between individual and Great Family. Sergei illustrates this ongoing process as he rejoins the collective near the plot's end. Stalinist critics pointed out a need for developing (*zhivye*) characters, whose self-improvement draws them to the Life of a great country that, under the aegis of conflictlessness, is moving from the good to the better. The novella itself is no exception, as one critic reminds Trifonov: the next edition of *Stu-*

²⁷ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 250, 222, 267. L'vov, "Povest' o sovetskom studenchestve," 270. On the deleterious results of Kozel'skii's love of fine literature, see Galanov, "Nachalo puti," 172. L'vov, "Povest' o sovetskom studenchestve," 269. The opposition between Life and formalism motivated the early campaigns against the latter (Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life," 166–67). Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 205.

dents should be revised in accordance with reader responses. Fiction is an appendage of Life, a dependency that guarantees the evolution of writing (Trifonov's subsequent career revealed that this development occurred in ways socialist realism could not imagine).²⁸

Literature must take its lessons from reality or be reduced to irrelevance. Ideas are more important than things, yet the material world can itself become a problem if it is distorted (by those such as Kozel'skii) or ignored. Sergei learns the importance of *byt* after he scornfully disregards it. Writing a *povest'* about life and love in a factory, he assures Vadim that knowing how to depict workers is more important than experience with labor. When the aspiring author reads his opus at the plant, the result is predictable. The narrator informs us that the story is a sorry pastiche of others' ideas and clichés. Spartak Galustian, the Komsomol leader, is more specific: the ideas are sound but the *povest'* is not taken from reality (the institute and factory collectives Sergei has neglected). Vadim later attempts to explain this to his former friend, citing no less than Maksim Gor'kii, who wrote directly from Life. Indeed, socialist realism developed around what Iampolski labels "life-centeredness," which assumed authors could not envision the triumphs of the nation without participating in its collective efforts. These comments show how *Students* charts a narrow but precise path for literature, mandating that it be taken from reality yet guided by the genius of Stalin that Vadim praises at the novella's beginning. In establishing these guidelines, Ivanova succinctly remarks, Trifonov's own *povest'* falls prey to the same staleness it deplores in Sergei's work.²⁹

Sergei soon finds himself removed from Life. After his failed novella and denunciation by Vadim and others, he hides in his apartment, intending to withdraw from the institute and teach in a village school. When Vadim comes to visit, the chastened student confesses that he cannot live alienated from the collective. The narrative none too subtly underscores that the false individu-

²⁸ "Obsuzhdenie povesti Iu. Trifonova 'Studenty'," 224, 227.

²⁹ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 205, 327, 335, 369. Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life," 172. Ivanova, *Proza Iurii Trifonova*, 10.

alism of a 'great' author is meaningless without Life, just as Kozel'skii's rare books are not literature but an assortment of objects. Removal from the common struggle destroys all significance. Fortunately, the recalcitrant young man realizes his errors. As Gillespie reminds us, Sergei is a product of the Soviet system; he thus subordinates self to society, helping the institute win its volleyball championship and telling Vadim he will work to regain the other students' admiration.³⁰

Kozel'skii's future is gloomier. While reprimanding the swarthy Lagodenko for insulting the professor, Vadim adds that the scholar is lifeless. The reason for this sterility is ideological, not literary. Discussing his problems with Sizov, Kozel'skii confesses that, although he remained in Russia, he did not believe in the revolution and could not take part in it. Sizov then accuses his colleague of "comfortable skepticism" (*komfortabel'nyi skeptitsizm*), employing the damning epithet already ascribed to his apartment and underscoring how objects implicate ideas. Kozel'skii inhabits a cushy niche from which he mocks the great events taking place all around him. However, as Vadim makes clear when publicly calling for Sergei to repent, the collective will not permit one to live an isolated and erring existence. Such a fate, as Sergei has shown, is tantamount to death.³¹

Students is full of foreknown answers and the tautological repetition of orthodox thought. Yet its depiction of bodies and place—particularly those attached to negative characters—is at times unexpectedly nuanced. Kozel'skii's struggle (refusing to emigrate but not supporting the revolution) and ensuing loneliness hints at the cloudy morality of Trifonov's later protagonists. Complexity, however, ultimately cannot impede the message of the *povest'*. The material world is crucial for the literal building of Communism; indeed, wealth and comfort are no vice, provided

³⁰ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 386, 396, 388. On Sergei's symbolic death, see Galanov, "Nachalo puti," 172. Gillespie, *Iurii Trifonov*, 23.

³¹ Trifonov, *Studenty*, 137, 270, 268, 361. The scene of Vadim (and thus the collective) telling Sergei how to live is praised in "Studenty o povesti 'Studenty'," 19. Iampolski for his part notes that for Stalinist culture such moments were a symbolic return to Life. Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life," 168.

they are garnered by honest labor. Ultimately, however, the realm of things must be subordinate to the great ideas dominating Life, just as *byt* can only have meaning in the context of *bytie*. The everyday problems of Sergei and Vadim are miniscule compared with the ideological Great Family to which they must belong.

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