“It sometimes seems that I’m a mother to all things”:

Gendering human/non-human distinctions in the texts of Elena Guro

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Abstract

The thesis explores how human/non-human distinctions and human/non-human contact are gendered in the texts of Elena Guro (1877-1913), a pre-revolutionary Russian Futurist writer. The post-humanist approach, particularly works by Donna Haraway and Giorgio Agamben, is used to map how human/non-human boundaries are blurred and re-constituted in Guro's project of an intimate and creative communication between the human, nature, and the objective world. The close reading of Guro's short prose, poetry, and diaries demonstrates underlying gender dichotomies that organize Guro's vision of the human/non-human communication. Guro imagines the ideal mode of human subject relating to the world as a version of heterosexual nuclear family of mother and son. Since the father figure is in most cases absent, this couple's relationship is presented as devoid of sexuality, although certain erotic overtones of the mother-son communication are still identifiable. Donna Haraway's conceptualization of the human/non-human encounters as *becoming with* one's companion species helps to see how both the "mother's" femininity and the "son's" masculinity are constructed and performed through their interaction with non-human living and non-living beings. Multidirectionality of this becoming is particularly visible in the interpretation of Guro's transrational poetry as a performance of motherhood and femininity and a performance of "poethood."

Becoming together for Guro involves the experience of being the other, where experimental Futurist transrational language stands as a voice of the non-human. At the same time, fear of contagion and sexuality as contamination characterizes instances of the human-human contact in Guro's writings. Similarly, the city as the space of the human-human interaction is depicted as a space of violence, male dominance, and commodification of women, epitomized in the figure of the prostitute. Masculine urban space in Guro's view de-humanizes all its inhabitants. What is at work here in Guro's texts is mechanism of the anthropological machine, as described by Giorgio Agamben. As the human proper is separated from the animal or the "objective" component in them, Guro's urban characters are deemed not human enough, since their "low" animal nature or mechanical emotions prevail over their spirituality. On the contrary, the process of separation between the human and the non-human is stopped in the domestic space, which is marked as feminine. The private sphere thus appears the main locus where intense and fruitful communication between the human and the non-human happens on a daily basis.

Contents

Introduction

Elena Guro, born in 1877 in St. Petersburg, was a professional painter and one of the first Russian Futurist poets. She can be seen as one of the founders of Russian Futurism, since it was in her house in 1909 that the group of poets, which was later to be called the Cubo-Futurists, started to gather.[1] Together with her husband, the artist and composer Mikhail Matiushin she opened a publishing house The Crane, which sponsored and printed the majority of Futurist books and booklets.[2] Guro's prose sketches and poetry were published in three books: *The Hurdy-Gurdy* (1909), *Autumn Dream* (1912), and *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914); her texts were also printed in Futurist group publication almanacs *A Trap for Judges I* (1910), *A Trap for Judges II* (1913), and *The Three* (1913). However, none of her books attracted much critical and public attention during her life.[3] It was only after 1914-1916, already after the author's early death from leukemia in 1913, that some critics started to promote her works, and she even became a center of several "minor cults."[4] Today Guro's texts and her place in Russian Futurism are still known only among literary scholars and some parts of poetical community.

In her writings, created between 1905 and 1913, Guro makes effort to position the human in the contact with other living and non-living beings. She idealizes nature, which she sees as an ultimate source of poetry,[5] and animates objects. In order to de-stabilize rigid human point of view on the world, Guro often tries to recreate children's speech and children's ability to see things as if they never existed before.[6] Her ideal vision of the poet and the human was built on the notion of motherly love, tenderness, and compassion towards other living beings and even objects.

The boundaries that separate the human and the non-human tend to become blurred in Guro's texts, as she offers an image of a different, more equal and more intimate relationship between them. The strong focus on the interaction with non-human and even non-living creatures distinguishes Guro from other Russian modernist authors. However, as some

[1] Kjeld B. Jensen, *Elena Guro and the urbanism of Russian modernism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. Microfilms, 1978), 37.

[2] Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 14.

[3] Jensen, *Elena Guro and the urbanism of Russian modernism*, 58.

[4] Ibid. See a detailed account of Guro's reception in literary criticism and scholarship in ibid., 30-80.

[5] Nature also quite literally entered her books, as Guro, who illustrated them herself, drew little fir trees, stars, and leaves on the margins or to separate one text from another (Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 17).

[6] Ibid., 16.

human/non-human boundaries are challenged, the other are strengthened, and gender binaries seem to occupy an important place in this process of remapping the borders between the human and the non-human. For instance, Guro imagines the ideal form of both human/non-human and human-human communication as imitating a sexless family of mother and son. At the same time, she often depicts instances of contact with the "inhuman" (the city, the mechanical modern civilization and its agents) in terms of contaminating sexual contact. Gender dichotomies thus subtly but pervasively organize Guro's vision of the human's place in the world. My specific goal in this work is therefore to map *what is the role of gender and sexuality in the challenging and reconstitution of human/non-human distinctions in Elena Guro's texts*.

Guro's project of the new relationship between the human and the non-human is particularly interesting in the context of the Russian modernism of 1890s-1910s and its quest for the new creative human subject. As Olga Matich describes in her book on eroticism in the Russian Symbolism, two feelings that dominated artistic sensibility of the time were the "sense of the end,"[7] the general feeling of the old world being dead, and utopian hopes for the future where old life will be transfigured and purified. In order to bring this future closer, individual artists created new forms of art and embarked on experimental life practices.[8] One of the main venues of these experiments was sexuality. Russian Symbolist artists and writers aimed at "conquering death"[9] by refusing from heterosexual procreative sex and challenging middle-class binary gender norms. In order to transfigure the human, the family had to undergo radical changes too.[10] Guro's writings, as well as that of other Russian Futurists, was similarly informed by the desire, common to all Russian modernist literary schools, to renew the world and the human.[11] Other Futurists, similarly, claimed in 1912 that they already "[knew] feelings which had no life before [them]," and that they were "the new people of a

[7] Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's fin-de-siècle* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 3.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Viacheslav Ivanov, a famous Symbolist poet, in his review characterized her second book *Autumn Dream* (1912) as a sign and a promise that the new people are already coming into the world: "[...] the children of promise are already born and - the first messengers of the new suns in the late frosts - die. Oh! they will bloom in their time with force that they will bring with them into the earthy incarnation, - as they die now, because they cannot live within themselves, and the world does not accept them. [...]. These are exactly the different people, different from us now - the people with anlage for different organs of perception, with a different sense of the human I: people, who somehow completely lack our animal I..." (Ielena Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata. Izbrannoie* (Saint-Petersburg: Limbus-Press, 2001), 228). All quotes from this book are translated by myself.

new life."[12] Futurism was imagined as "the avant-garde of psychic evolution."[13] Futurists, therefore, were to re-animate the dead world.[14]

In order to make the subsequent discussion clear, it is necessary to establish here in what ways Russian Futurism was different from Italian Futurism. These two movements developed at practically the same time [15] and stemmed from the reaction against 19th-century positivism.[16] But there were significant differences between these two variants of Futurism, one of them being that the Russian version consisted of several groups that constantly tried to disqualify their rivals as "fake" Futurists. The group to which Elena Guro belonged took a name of Cubo-Futurists in late 1913.[17] Other members of this group were brothers David, Nikolay, and Vladimir Burliuk, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksey Kruchenykh, Aleksandr Kamensky, Benedikt Livshits, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Many of these writers were also professional painters, and they were closely associated with such avant-garde artists like Mikhail Larionov, Natalya Goncharova, Olga Rozanova, and Kazimir Malevich, who illustrated their books and created decorations for their Futurist "operas."[18]

The main difference between Cubo-Futurists and their Italian counterparts was the Russians' deep interest in primitivism and archaism. Their quest for the new language was in many ways understood as a restoration of the lost purity of pre-historic language. This fascination with the past led Marinetti to state that the Russian "pseudofuturists live in *plusquamperfectum* rather than in *futurum*."[19] Primitivism, in turn, was combined with strong nationalist overtones, as most Cubo-Futurists emphasized their deep connections with the Russian people and its "natural" creative spirit, and claimed to be the true spiritual descendants of barbaric Asian hordes, whose brutal vitality was explicitly contrasted to the weakness of the old Europe.[20] This opposition to "the West" was one of the reasons why Russian Futurists refused to have anything to do with Marinetti, often poignantly criticized him in their manifestos and public speeches, and consistently claimed that they were only

[12] Anna Lawton and Herbesrt Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos, 1912-1928* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 54.

[13] Ibid., 70; see also ibid., 75-76.

[14] See more in Viktor B. Shklovskii, "The Resurresction of the Word," in *If Judged Fairly: Articles - memoirs - essays (1914-1933),* edited by A. Iu. Galushkin (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), 36-40.

[15] Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos,* 11. Although the first Cubo-Futurist manifesto was published only in 1912, the beginnings of the group can be traced to 1909 as well (ibid.).

[16] Both of them also largely drew upon irrationalism promoted by Nietzsche's and Henri Bergson. (Ibid., 8.)

[17] Ibid., 12

[18] Ibid., 16.

[19] Ibid., 19.

[20] Ibid., 18.

labeled Futurists by the press.[21] Instead, they preferred to call themselves *budetliane* - a word created by Khlebnikov, which was a literal calque of the word *Futurists*, derived from a future tense of the Russian verb *to be*.[22]

An established image of Russian Futurism, which is greatly influenced by its later developments in late 1910s and 1920s, makes Guro's status as a Futurist writer questionable. Her calmness and focus on fleeting emotional states, her interest in nature and children's world, her poetic style, which lacks in experiments with language, if compared to other Futurists – all these are reasons to characterize Guro as an impressionist rather than a Futurist.[23] The fact that she was she only woman in the group, and the only person born and educated in the capital, while other Futurists came from the provinces, added to this difference. [24] Nevertheless, some Cubo-Futurists demonstrated similar "'unfuturistic' features,"[25] like Khlebnikov, who also focused on children's speech and were interested in pre-historic topics. Others, like Kamensky and Mayakovsky, were influenced by Guro in their prose and poetry, and Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh promoted Guro as a Futurist in their manifestos both before and after her death.[26]

There is one more important difference from Italian Futurism, which helps to better understand the place that Guro with her deep interest in nature and ambivalence toward the city occupied in early Russian avant-garde. Although, just like the Italians, Cubo-Futurists often depicted urban landscapes and technology in their writings, their attitude toward these topic was far from unambiguous fascination. One of the key myths of Russian Futurism became the motif of the "revolt of things," the uprising of machines, commodities for sale, and ordinary things of everyday use, that turn against humanity.[27]

One of the most famous examples of Futurist creativity is the concept of transrational language (*zaumnyi iazyk*). Transrational words that the authors made for themselves did not mean anything, but their phonetic form was supposed to carry meaning in itself and to invoke intuitive associations. The expected way of apprehending transrational language gave this poetic strategy its name, as Futurists deemed purely rational attitude to reality mistaken and fruitless. The ambivalence between transrational language as human and as non-human will be in the focus of my analysis of Elena Guro's texts. On the one hand, transrational language

[21] Ibid., 16.
[22] Ibid., 19.
[23] Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 19.
[24] Ibid., 14.
[25] Ibid., 19.
[26] Ibid., 20.
[27] Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos*, 19.

was presented as the only pure form of human language, primordial and therefore universal.[28] On the other hand, transrational language was often understood as means of capturing liminal experiences, where the human borders with the non- and super-human, or even as the language of nature itself.[29] Guro rarely used it in her poetry,[30] although she was repeatedly cited as a transrational poet in Futurist manifestos.[31] In her own version of transreason, she uses patterns of children's speech and affective pet names,[32] and there is also an instance of nature speaking in her texts. From this perspective, transrational language for Guro appears mainly as an instrument of representing the speech of various (hu)man's others: nature, women, and children.

For literary scholars who wrote on Guro, the notion of gender was not the focus. Since the interest toward her texts re-emerged in 1950-1960s,[33] their main task was rather to situate Guro among more well-known writers, and to draw links that would connect her to the literary movements of the time both thematically and stylistically.[34] It were rather questions of

[28] Aleksey Kruchenykh wrote in 1913 in his "Declaration of the Word as Such," "The artist has seen the world in a new way and, like Adam, proceeds to give things his own names. The lily is beautiful, but the word 'lily' has been soiled and 'raped.' Therefore, I call the lily, 'euy' - the original purity is reestablished" (Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos,* 67).

[29] This interpretation is explained in more detail in Kruchenykh's "Declaration of Transrational Language," where he lists various cases when "one does not need" one's reason. These are first of all religious ecstasy and love. As other examples Kruchenykh mentions "children's babble" and "pet names"; incantations, curses, songs, and similar instances of folk word magic; "the language of the clinically insane," and all kinds of mistakes, misprints and slips of tongue, which apparently stood for cases where reason fails. (Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos,* 183).

[30] Apart from two poems "The Words of Love and Warmth" and "Finland," which I will analyse, there are few other instances of Guro playing with word-creation: "Scatterbrain, madman, soarer," "Stormy petrel, rusher, rascal," and "The sea is smooth and glenty" from *The Little Camels of the Sky* (Elena Guro, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1983), 20, 61, and Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 77-78, respectively). Because they are not immediately relevant to the topic of my research, I do not focus on their analysis in this paper.

[31] See Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos,* 57-58, 73-74.

[32] Ibid., 14.

[33] Vladimir Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation, his death and resurrection in the writings of Elena Guro," in *Peterburg text of Russian literature: Selected works* (Saint-Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2003), 576.

[34] See Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation," 556-582; Zara Mints, "Futurism and 'neo-romanticism.' On the problem of genesis and structure of the *Histoty of the poor knight* by El. Guro," in *Poetics of Russian symbolism*, vol. 3 of *Blok and Russian symbolism: Selected works* (Saint-Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2004), 317-326; Banjanin, "Between Symbolism and Futurism: Impressions by Day and by Night in Elena Guro's City Series," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 37, no. 1 (1993): 67–84; V. Gekhtman, "The *Poor Knight* of Elena Guro and *Tertium organum* by P. D. Uspensky," *Works on Russian and Slavic philology. Literary criticism* 1 (1994): 156–167; Iekaterina Shevchenko, "Two plots of 'Poor Harlequin' by Elena Guro (on the question of the creative strategy of the playwright," In *Korman readings: articles and materials of Interuniversitarian academic conference* 8 (2009): 147-154. One of the most prominent trends in this literary criticism is the mythocritical analysis of Moscow and Tartu school of semiotics, represented primarily by works of Toporov and Mints.

the human/non-human contact that were addressed (although, of course, not being explicitly named as such), since the issue of boundaries between the human and the divine, as well as the ways for human beings to become divine, were among the most crucial problems for Russian modernism.[35] Here I will review literature on Guro which gives certain hints on gender dimension of her work, even if not addresses it explicitly, while elaborating on the questions of the human/non-human communication.

Toporov, Mints, and Gekhtman contextualize Guro's work and are interested mainly in the human/non-human interaction, but they also have valuable ideas about sexuality and gender binaries.[36] In his mythological analysis, Toporov defines Guro's fundamental myth as the myth of her young son's death and resurrection.[37] He sets the basic opposition between the two main characters of this myth: everything dying is marked as "filial," everything witnessing this death and compassionate to it – as "maternal."[38] This opposition is further deployed, as the son is presented as "aerial" and "not quite embodied,"[39] and his mother as earthborn and embodied.[40] According to Toporov, Guro's project thus involves the shift from the human to the non-human (divine) through the refusal of embodiment and the "law of flesh."[41] The final stage of this process is then seen as the "miracle of becoming one kin"[42] with all beings, which is understood through the feminine notion of motherhood. Zara Mints makes an important point about the gendered opposition between embodiment and disembodiment. According to her, the disembodied spiritual nature of the son in Guro's texts functions to eliminate possible erotic interpretations of the relationship between him and his mother (since Guro often explicitly states that she is not his biological or foster mother, and motherhood is rather seen as a metaphor for an especially deep spiritual bond).[43]

This opposition between embodiment and disembodiment, between suffering as male (the son) and compassion as female (the mother) may be taken as the starting point for my analysis. The movement from embodiment to desired disembodiment may be analogous to the movement from compassion to shared suffering, and thus from the feminine to the masculine, as the feminine part of the opposition (the mother, the earth) occupies the traditional place of

35 See Ielena Tyryshkina, *Russian literature of 1890s – early 1920s: From decadence to avant-garde* (Novosibirsk: NGPU, 2002), 34-36, 63-66.

36 All three scholars focus on the last Guro's prose text, "The Poor Knight."

37 Ibid., 560.

38 Ibid., 561.

39 Ibid., 567.

40 Ibid., 570.

41 Ibid., 572, 573.

42 Ibid., 575.

43 Mints, "Futurism and 'neoromantism,' " 324.

the matter in need of the spirit. This conclusion about the movement between genders as part of the movement from human to the non/super-human might be also supported by Gekhtman's article on the links between "The Poor Knight" and theosophical views popular at the time. Here he asserts that the theme of the boundary and its crossing is central to Guro's work. These boundaries include both literal borders in space as well as boundaries separating the subject and the object, the human and the non-human. In this context the motif of shape-shifting as a way of being the other becomes important.[44] While Gekhtman does not mention it, this may also apply to gender boundaries that can be crossed (or that characters will be able to cross in future). In this case, blurred or crossed gender boundaries would mirror weakened distinctions between the human and the non-human.

The highly gendered notion of motherhood, central to Guro's understanding of the attitude required from the human subject (and from the poet as the ideal subject) towards all other beings, is also addressed by other scholars. Tyryshkina, in her article on the use of popular apocryphal tradition in Guro's texts, characterizes the writer's auto-representational choice as the myth of the Godmother. The scholar stresses how atypical it was, since other modernist women writers tried to avoid traditional models of femininity defined by their reproductive function and tended to emphasize pure creativity instead.[45] Tyryshkina's point is important to contextualize Guro's vision of desexualized and traditional femininity (which turned out to be paradoxically non-conformist in the modernist context). However, Guro's understanding of motherhood may be not as traditional as it seems to be. Moreover, as the father figure appears to be absent in Guro's view of the mother-son couple, the model of heterosexual nuclear family is disrupted here and replaced by the asexual union of mother and son. It therefore becomes possible to say that the son-mother couple does not quite represent the masculine-feminine opposition, and that the masculine is excluded from Guro's vision of ideal communication. However, masculinity returns in Guro's depiction of the city as the other contact zone where the human meets the non-human. In his detailed dissertation on Guro's urbanism, Jensen argues that she tends to depict the city as a locus of male dominance and violence, which not only oppresses, but also de-humanizes urban women.[46] In order to provide a contextual background, I will refer to Matich's work on eroticism and sexuality in Russian modernist literature and philosophy, which demonstrates that the idea of sexless union in Russian Symbolist sensibility was closely linked to the desire to transfigure life and

44 Gekhtman, "The Poor Knight of Elena Guro and Tertium organum by P. D. Uspensky," 160.
45 Tyryshkina, "Religious conception of E. Guro," 158.
46 Jensen, *Elena Guro and the urbanism of Russian modernism*, 106-112.

create a radically new kind of creative human subject.[47]

Thus although these literary critics mostly do not focus on gender binaries and do not explicitly address issues of the human/non-human communication, their works provide valuable insights considering the oppositions of masculine/feminine, disembodiment/embodiment, and sexuality/asexuality. These oppositions will form a basis for my analysis.

In order to address the blurring and remapping of human/non-human distinctions, I will use Agamben's concept of anthropological machine. This term refers to the mechanism of continuous separation between human and animal, bodily and spiritual components within the human. The human status is thus never stable and is constantly threatened from the inside by its own animality.[48] Anthropological machine works to define who is human and who is not, by qualifying certain categories of people as not human enough.[49] This perspective will help me to analyze instances when Guro animalizes her positive and negative characters or compares them to objects, and to see what the implications of these comparisons are.

To analyze the mapping of the human/non-human divide in Guro's texts, I will use Donna Haraway's conceptualization of human beings and animals as companion species, who are mutually constituted in their interaction.[50] Reciprocity, which is necessary for human/non-human encounter to open new possibilities of being in the world, is encapsulated in the notion of the look.[51] These concepts help to highlight certain similarities in the way Haraway and Guro understand the human/non-human communication. Haraway's approach is especially useful to de-naturalize and de-stabilize the gender binaries mentioned above. She shows in what way the positioning of woman as nature and nature as feminine is part of the exclusion of both from the realm of the human proper.[52] On the other hand, Haraway's notion of *becoming with* companion species helps to see how the subject is constituted as feminine or masculine through specific ways of interaction with non-human companions.

47 Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's fin-de-siècle* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 4-6.

48 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 12, 14-16.

49 Ibid., 37-38.

50 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

51 Ibid., 19.

52 Ibid., 11, 18.

In order to answer my research question, I will analyse a set of poems and short prose texts which deal with the topic of human/non-human communication and the role of gender and sexuality in it.[53] To provide contextual background, I will use published archival materials, such as Guro's diary entries, Cubo-Futurist poetic manifestos, and an article "The Resurrection of the Word" [54] by Viktor Shklovsky, one of the founders of Russian Formalism,[55] where he explains what is, in his view, the most important mission of the Futurism.

I will offer a close reading of these texts, in order 1) to identify specific tactics through which human/non-human distinctions are blurred and displaced; 2) to examine the role of gender and sexuality markers in this displacement; 3) to see what is implied by these markers in the situation of human/non-human contact: how participants are positioned as feminine or masculine, sexless or sexualized, and how these characteristics are seen to facilitate or hamper the human/non-human contact. One of the focuses of my analysis will be explicitly gendered figures, which Guro repeatedly uses (the mother, the son, or the prostitute). In other cases gendering may happen by assigning active and passive (subject or object) positions in the interaction, or through reference to implicitly gendered feelings or physical and emotional states. Finally, the "contact zones" themselves may be gendered too (as public or private spaces).

In the first chapter, I will describe a mode of human/non-human relationship which Guro sees as ideal: a "mother"-"son" couple. I will show how Guro constructs the unconventional masculinity of her "son" characters, and explain the motherly stance toward all living beings as an imperative for the female poet. By using Agamben's concept of the anthropological machine I will highlight how Guro uses different types of animalization in order to distinguish between positive and negative male characters. Finally, I will talk about explicit sexlessness and implicit eroticism in this mother-son relationship, and show how they are linked to

[53] These are the texts from Guro's books *The Hurdy-Gurdy* (1909), *Autumn Dream* (1912), and *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914); I will also use her texts which appeared in collective Futurist almanacs: *A Trap for Judges I* (1910), *A Trap for Judges II* (1913), and *The Three* (1913)), and few early texts which were printed in different literary journals.

[54] Viktor B. Shklovskii, "The Resurresction of the Word," in *If Judged Fairly: Articles - memoirs - essays (1914-1933),* edited by A. Iu. Galushkin, 30-68 (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990).

[55] Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984), literary scholar and writer, was one of the founders of Russian Formalist school in literary theory and history. Formalists focused on a literary text as a sum of "devices," formal means of telling a story or composing a poem, instead of concentrating on psychological or social critique, which dominated before. Shklovsky and other Formalist scholars, like Roman Jacobson, Boris Eihenbaum, Yury Tynianov, etc., were generally interested in Futurist poetry, although they also wrote major works on Russian and world classic literature.

modernist hopes to transform humanity and unite people, separated by modern individualism, and the rest of the world, into a family.

In the second chapter, I will show how the experience of being the non-human other and the experience of the human other's proximity are framed in Guro's works. I will examine how her understanding of the human/non-human communication is linked to other modernist and Futurist projects of renewal, which aimed to change human patterns of perception and to heal the painful split between the human and the natural and objective world. Next, I will show how questions of embodiment and disembodiment, the matter and the spirit, are presented by Guro as a paradoxical play of acceptance and refusal of corporeality. Finally, I will try to show how anxieties about the proximity and influence of the other are understood through gendered metaphors of purity (chastity), contagious disease, and sexual contact.

In my third chapter I will focus on the ways in which human/non-human contact, for Guro, differs in private and public spheres. I will show how Guro marks the domestic space as animated, friendly, creative, and safe both for both human and non-human characters. In the second part of the chapter, I will show how Guro presents urban life as automated and uniform, and how its uniformity does not allow for the genuine contact between human and non-human subjects. Finally, I will focus on how Guro depicts the city as a radically inhuman space and a space of gendered violence, where neither of the participants is human, and where women tend to be reduced to non-living or dead objects.

Chapter 1

"A mother to all things" and her beloved son: the human in the family of beings

Elena Guro belonged to a generation of writers and thinkers for whom the most crucial questions were those focusing on what it meant to be human in the changing world of the early 20th century, what it was that human beings needed to become, and how they needed to relate to each other and to the rest of the world. For Guro, the latter question was answered by metaphors of motherhood and sonship, which became a characteristic trait of her writing that distinguished her from other Futurist poets. My goal here will be to show how in her effort to redefine the human, to bring them into close contact with other living and non-living beings, which would resemble a familial relationship, Guro uses gendered binary metaphors of motherhood and sonship and a model of a heterosexual nuclear family, where the "mother"

and the "son" are connected by a sexless, although at times slightly eroticized, relationship. In this chapter, I will show how the human subject is positioned in the world within Guro's texts and how gender and sexuality inform the mode of relating to the world which Guro sees as ideal (namely, motherhood and sonship).

1.1. Masculinity of nature's "son"

The "mother"-"son" model of relationship is the aspect of Guro's texts that scholars have been the most attentive to.[56] The "myth of the youth-son," as Toporov calls it in his work on myths of Russian Symbolism and Futurism, is often perceived as one of the most characteristic traits of Guro's writing, particularly since her focus on motherhood was atypical for Silver age[57] women writers and strongly distinguishes her from them.[58] As Toporov captures this relationship, everything that suffers and dies is marked in Guro's texts as "filial," while compassion and care for it are presented as "maternal."[59] In this sense, the "mother"-

[56] See Vladimir Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation, his death and resurrection in the writings of Elena Guro," in *Peterburg text of Russian literature: Selected works* (Saint-Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2003), 556-582; Zara Mints, "Futurism and 'neo-romanticism.' On the problem of genesis and structure of the *History of the poor knight* by El. Guro," in *Poetics of Russian symbolism*, vol. 3 of *Blok and Russian symbolism: Selected works* (Saint-Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2004), 317-326; Ielena Tyryshkina, "Religious conception of E. Guro and principles of author's representation in the light of apocryphal tradition," *Studia Slavica Finlandensia* 16, no. 1 (1999): 150–160; V. Gekhtman, "The *Poor Knight* of Elena Guro and *Tertium organum* by P. D. Uspensky," *Works on Russian and Slavic philology. Literary criticism* 1 (1994): 156–167.

[57] This term refers to Russian modernist culture of 1890s - late 1910s, which witnessed a flowering of art and literature and set ground for the emergence of the Russian avant-garde (see more in John E. Bowlt, *Moscow and St. Petersburg 1900-1920: art, life, and culture of the Russian silver age* (New York: Vendome Press, 2008), 9-32).

[58] Tyryshkina, "Religious conception of E. Guro," 158. Tyryshkina points out in her work on textual sources of Guro's self-presentation as "all-mother," that other women poets of the time tended to stress rather demonic aspects of their femininity and exploit an image of the *femme fatale*, and to emphasize their poetic creativity instead of female reproductivity.

[59] Ibid., 561. Still, it is important to note that the outlined "mother" and "son" roles are not always organized in a neat and clear binary (contrary to how Toporov described this symbolic relationship) and are not strictly fixed and assigned to the female poet and her male characters. In some texts the lyrical heroine displays same social and physical awkwardness that is so characteristic to her "sons" (See, for instance, "She was depressed all day," in Guro, *The Little Camels of the* Sky, 74). In some texts written in the 1st person in masculine, the main character expresses the same concerns that the female lyrical heroine expresses in other prose fragments and Guro herself expressed - namely, her bitterness that she is turned down by publishers (Compare, e.g., "I'm dumb, I'm untalented, I'm clumsy" (ibid., 18), "At a Sand Mound on a Sky Blue Day" (ibid., 19), "Why don't you want to" (ibid., 50) and Guro's diary entries about working her way into the literary establishment and dealing with editors (Guro, *Notebooks*, 21-22, 27)). Finally, in Guro's drafts for the unpublished *The Poor Knight*, it is the heavenly "son" who teaches his earthly "mother" compassion and shows her how to alleviate other beings' suffering (Ibid., 34-36). These examples show that the two key human and non-human positions in the world - suffering and compassion - in Guro's texts are not always strictly gendered, and that the "mother" and "son" roles are sometimes interchangeable. Nevertheless, in the majority of Guro's poems and prose fragments suffering appears as an attribute of a young male character, and compassion and protection - as a function of an older female figure, either "Mother-Earth" or the female poet.

"son" relationship in her writings is in most cases not a relationship of actual kinship, but a form of interpersonal relationship that takes this familial bond as a model (this is the reason I use quotation marks to refer to the "mother" and the "son" as role positions). It is also important to note that this model is highly idealized, i.e., this is the way mothers and sons should or are meant to treat each other in Guro's view.

The myth centered on this relationship, and on the personality of the "son" character in particular, encompasses practically the whole body of Guro's work.[60] The figure of the "son" in Guro's texts is represented by various male characters that all share a number of common traits. These include the young man's physical clumsiness, vulnerability and powerlessness, which emphasize his purity and nobleness in an aggressive male world.[61] Typical "son" characters and the stories of their lives are at the center of the lyrical play "Autumn Dream" (1912) from an eponymous book, and the unpublished "new prose"[62] *The Poor Knight* (1913), which are both currently inaccessible to me. Nevertheless, as they are summarized and extensively analyzed in scholarship,[63] it is clear that these works in general do not diverge from Guro's overarching concepts of sonship and motherhood as represented by her poetry and prose poems from *Autumn Dream*, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, and publications in Futurist almanacs.[64] Here I will analyze only those that address the topic of the human/non-human contact most explicitly.

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60 Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation," 560.

61 Ibid., 573.

62 Ievgenii Binevich, "Introduction," in Ielena Guro, *From notebooks (1908-1913)*, ed. Ie. Binevich (Saint-Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo al'manakha "Petropol" i Fond russkoi poezii, 1997), 4.

63 See Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation," 556-582; Mints, "Futurism and 'neo-romanticism,' " 317-326; Gekhtman, "The *Poor Knight* of Elena Guro," 156-167; Tyryshkina, "Religious conception of E. Guro," 150-160; Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 17-18.

64 "And so he lay, quiet and good," "But in the autumn morning, in a humbly-pale hour...", "There is loneliness in his thumb," "In autumn they met Bulanka," "Grasshoppers sing" from *Autumn Dream* (1912); "Spring, Spring!", "I'm dumb, I'm untalented, I'm clumsy," "A Conversation," "Pine boughs bending," "Vasya," "The Evening [*Vecherneie*]," "Undoubtedly, when the Knight of the Rueful Countenance was flying from a sail-arm," "He is trustful," "Rain fell, it was cold," "A wise man approached a young madman," "Once upon a time there was another boy," "Oh you! your shirt's sticking out over your belt!", "On the Sand," "Clouds Pass Like Dreams," "A shy young man loved flowers," "This day was milky-gentle, quiet and damp," "June," "Do you love sand?", "Oh you tinder warrior!", "They were an enchanting married couple," "We gathered around a lamp in the living room," "At last they took in the poet," "They mistreated a boy's mother," "Spring," "I want to depict a head of a white mushroom," "Words of Love and Warmth," "I touch life with warm words," "Go far, far away my darling, my darling" from *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914); "A Gentle Fool," published in the Futurist almanac *A Trap for Judges II* (1913), "Fieldlings [*Polevunchiki*]" from the collective book *The Three* (1913), "The Crane Baron," printed in 1916 in a journal *Enchanted Wanderer*, and a "fairy-tale-poem" "Feast of the Earth," first published by Ie. Binevich in 1993 (see Ielena Guro, *From notebooks (1908-1913)*, ed. Ie. Binevich (Saint-Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo al'manakha "Petropol" i Fond russkoi poezii, 1997), 89-105).

In the prose poem "Spring, Spring!"[65] Guro introduces to the reader yet another "son" character, who is likened to a little camel and possesses all the listed characteristic features:

> How funny the little camel was! He prepared diligently for his exams, and then flunked out because of shyness and eccentricity. And at dawn, instead of poking his nose in his pillow, he wrote poems on the sly.
> […] Still, he couldn't manage to keep his pants from sliding above his belt or his shirt from bunching up... or to act right before strangers.
> He couldn't play tennis, and couldn't pretend he simply didn't want to. And everyone saw that he couldn't because of shyness... and that he wanted to hide his shyness and couldn't do that either. […]
> Yes, but the cranes' untouched dawns shine at the bottom of mirror-like lakes. Lonely pure skies.
> As the little camel looked at the sky, in that rosy sky a warm kindred region brimmed over.[66]

Similarly, the lyrical hero of another prose fragment confesses: "I'm dumb, I'm untalented, I'm clumsy, but I pray to you tall firs."[67] He is a "coward" unable to ride a bicycle because of his fear and to proudly tell people he is a poet; left alone, he prays to the trees.[68] All traits that mark these two characters as childish, weak, passive, and awkward both physically and socially, are presented as positive. Features that mark the similarity which the characters share with animals, or which signal their connection with nature[69] and animality, are positively marked, too. In both these texts this connection is stressed: the "cranes'" sky is the "little camel's" homeland, and the prayer to firs functions as a refrain in the second text. In contrast, ties with human society are weakened: the characters are lonely, their communication – faltering or broken. In this romantic conflict between nature and human world, being on the side of nature equals being sincere; it ultimately strengthens one's position as a poet and as a subject. And as breaking social conventions is seen as a sign of belonging to nature and

65 First published in *A Trap for Judges II* in 1913, then reprinted in *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914).

66 Guro, *The Little Camels of the* Sky, 17.

67 *A Trap for Judges II* (1913) - *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914).

68 Ibid., 18.

69 Here I am referring to the Romantic concept of nature as an "inscrutable... dynamic flux of vital energies, best engaged by an intuitive process of colloquy and sympathetic identification" (James C. McKusick, "Nature," in *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. Michael Ferber (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 414). Nature, in Romantic worldview, exists in opposition to contemporary society, technology, and civilization in general, which supposedly have corrupted human nature throughout the course of history (ibid., 415, 421). Therefore German and English Romantic poets imagine nature as their spiritual home, with which a poet seeks to reunite (ibid., 420, 422). This reunion, supposedly achievable through life in wild nature or in the countryside, was expected to ennoble humans, making them "more truly themselves" (ibid., 425, 431). Although Guro does not usually use the word "nature," the way in which she depicts human contact with the trees, the forest, the sea, the sky and the countryside in general, fully fits into this Romantic framework.

preserving one's purity, innocence, and infantile animality intact, non-conformity to conventional masculinity also appears as a sign of uncontaminated sincerity. The characters' timidity, shyness, weakness (their clumsiness at sports), lack of professional and social competence, and general childishness, all signify this positively understood non-conformity.

However, contact with nature is supposed to be the source of knowledge that will at the end compensate for this lack of masculinity. In the prose poem "The Gentle Fool,"[70] Guro describes the protagonist in a similar fashion as "a little man: weakish, sluggish, with nice eyes – a bit dirty, a bit sweaty," who is so helpless that even fleas offend him, and who is again likened to a child and a young foal.[71] But this time it is not him who prays to firs – it is them who decide to "nod" to him in front of his window. And it is suggested that since the firs' nodding makes one "see dreams" for the rest of one's life, this closeness with nature, which in this case is directly caused by the character's being "almost like a child," grants him access to some kind of intuitive level of reality. This point is made even more explicit in a fragment "A shy young man loved flowers,"[72] where at the end it is stated that being gentle and caring for plants is "a perfectly straight road into the sky... [...] Where boughs are like birds, like swords, crosses, and portents."[73] Swords and crosses evoke notions of idealized Christian knighthood and sacrifice, thus suggesting that kindness toward the living beings can serve as a way to excel in a spiritual feat. Therefore it may be seen as a promise that a "nobler" model of masculinity can be realized through supposedly less masculine sentimental feelings and activities like gardening.

Guro builds an image of masculinity, which evades modern expectations, grounding it instead in an idealized version of mediaeval knighthood.[74] Moreover, as Toporov points out,

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70 *A Trap for Judges II* (1913).

71 Ielena Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata. Izbrannoie* (Saint-Petersburg: Limbus-Press, 2001), 137.

72 *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914).

73 Guro, *The Little Camels of the* Sky, 57.

74 Analyzing patriotic writings by British and German poets during World War I, George Mosse argues that their poems are informed by the similar search for a source of a more "authentic" masculinity outside of the modern urban civilization, a desire to return to the simple and healthy primordial masculinity. At the same time, surprisingly, as Mosse points out, this was quite often not an aggressive predatory masculine ideal that the poets of the World War I wanted to recreate. On the contrary, they idealized an almost childishly pure and vulnerable version of masculinity, allegedly endangered by the "over-refined" bourgeois society. Innocence and abstinence were characteristic features of idealized male characters of this poetry (George L. Mosse, "War, Youth, and Beauty," in *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) 116-118). The fact that these characters belonged rather to the dreamy provincial countryside than to the city, stressed that they were true sons of the people, unspoiled by modernity (Ibid., 119-120). In Mosse's view, this tendency was part of the nationalist desire to root collective tradition in the past and to preserve connection with it in the changing modern world (Ibid., 129).

since in many other Guro's texts her "son" character dies, this embeds him into the Russian cultural myth of a young poet's death.[75] Participation in this important myth helps to restore the "son's" masculinity, but it also serves to write this character into national literary tradition and cultural mythology. The "son's" masculinity is thus not altogether refused, but rather constructed by alternative means. Being childish, vulnerable, and powerless appears to be a way of proving oneself worthy of a spiritual "sword."

1.2. Guro's quest for maternity to all things

Assuming a compassionate maternal stance is, for Guro, a way to approach these "son" characters, and the rest of the world. Her prose text "A Conversation"[76] presents the reader with a justification of this attitude. In the exposition, the reader is again reminded of how the lyrical heroine, a female poet identifiable with Guro herself, is lonely among people. She feels like an orphan, until the earth starts talking to her asking to protect her children:

> Listen, you're so near me now, you hear the voices of the air and of snow-drip... you can also hear me. You see, I have some worries. I have certain children I must entrust to someone. Search for, shelter my children - they're very clumsy and silent... instead of speaking loudly, proudly, they scarcely move their lips.
> Defend my children - others have offended them. They work in offices instead of writing poems... instead of enjoying me in freedom.[77]

Hearing things' voices, being attentive to them is associated here with being closer to nature and thus being able to substitute for "Mother-Earth" in her maternal function. Her children, whom the lyrical heroine has to find, are adult young men working as clerks, and the task to find and protect them resembles a knightly quest. In the closing lines the lyrical heroine says that after this conversation with the earth she felt like she "bore a treasure in [her] breast or went to stand sentry somewhere. From beyond the forest, the shrill whistles seemed resin-fresh and fearless."[78] The idea of a quest is further enforced by a military metaphor of "standing sentry" and by the suggestion of fearlessness needed to complete it. A female poet

[75] Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation," 563. This myth started with 37-year-old Alexander Pushkin's death on duel, which was followed by Mikhail Lermontov's poetry venerating the deceased. Lermontov himself was killed on duel in the age of 27, which only strengthened this myth. Its centrality in Russian literary tradition is most certainly due to the fact that Pushkin and Lermontov after him are perceived as Russia's biggest national poets.

[76] *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914).

[77] Guro, *The Little Camels of the* Sky, 24.

[78] Ibid., 25.

thus has to find and protect young and unsuccessful male poets by assuming the maternal position toward them. Being female is instrumental in completing the quest; on the other hand, it is through this quest and protection that the lyrical heroine can symbolically become a mother and thus strengthen her own femininity. By doing this, in turn, she would confirm her communication with the earth and the objective world – a lamplight, a semiphore, and tree twigs, which she had been listening to before the earth started talking to her. They appear to be those companions in communication with whom the lyrical heroine enters a process of being a mother to the earth's children. The subject is constituted as mother, as feminine, by practicing care, compassion, and attentiveness in contact with other beings who become mothered. Some of these beings are human, but originally these are non-human children of the earth: the poet needs to enter into communication with objects on a forest station and the earth prior to become a mother to suffering young men.

Two following prose texts provide more detail to explain why these young men need to be saved by a "mother" poet. "Vasya"[79] is the story of a boy who was taken to a military school instead of staying with his family and his pets – "his little animals, the only creatures that understood him."[80] He is, in Guro's view, crippled by the training, so that he has lost his gentle camel-like awkwardness and acquired a "bearing" instead.[81] This physical transformation mirrors a loss of individuality and of the possibility of happiness and creativity, which are substituted by career prospects. The second short fragment, "Once upon a time there was another boy,"[82] tells a similar, though less realistic story. Here, a boy from upper or upper-middle class is taken from his mother and thrown into prison, where he is laughed at by other jailers for being unaccustomed to bad living conditions.[83] In both these texts, the adult masculine world is presented as aggressive, violent, and crippling for boys and young men. The mother (or the substituting figure of the female poet) is the only one who sees its "true nature" and dares to voice a protest. The female world of maternal care is closer to nature, which in Vasya's case is represented by his animals and the countryside – "A field, a meadow, the sun, a stream and a boat..."[84] It is opposed to the masculine space of work or specifically male forms of leisure – "a pile of paper or a cardtable in some smoke-filled club, every night

79 *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914).
80 Ibid., 28.
81 Ibid.
82 *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914).
83 Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 62.
84 Guro, *The Little Camels of the* Sky, 26.

till dawn..."[85] It is a space where violence of rigid strict rules and rationally organized scarce city space (exemplified by the enclosed gray schoolyard) aims to curb natural gestures of a young man, who at first resembles a young animal (a yet another "tender little camel"[86]). This masculine space is thus the only one fully human, since it is not marked as natural or animal in any way: it consists of human-made things and social activities which evolve around these things. Paradoxically, this space also turns out to be inhuman, as it is presented as aggressively distorting and crippling the boys' original pure and creative "nature" and causing their unhappiness.[87]

The latter two texts are also good examples of how Guro's image of a "son," a poet, and an ideal human subject, is classed. Both Vasya and the boy put in jail come from well-to-do families who can afford sending their offspring to a military school. The fairy-tale-poem "Feast of the Earth"[88] presents a contrasting example of the author's attitude to young men and boys from the working class. Here, the protagonist is a young male poet trying to escape from the city. He is disgusted by a boy working in a shop – especially by the "back of his bestial head" and his "fleshy" protruding ears.[89] The rest of the city is no less abhorrent for the poet; among other things, coachmen remind him of "wild monkeys."[90] The "fleshiness" of these people of the streets contrasts the weak and sickly aristocratic bodies of Guro's "sons" I have described earlier in this chapter. It appears that there are more and less noble animals for a character to be compared to, camels, cranes, and foals constituting the former group, and monkeys and generalized "beasts" – the latter. These "beasts" signify animality but not nature, which remains pure and infused with spiritual values.[91]

This distinction adds interesting overtones to Agamben's concept of the anthropological machine. He argues that the human is always possible only as a "field of

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 By building this opposition between "original state of nature" and the corrupting effect of human society, Guro's texts conform to stereotypical Romantic patterns of representation (see McKusick, "Nature," 415).

88 First published by Ie. Binevich in 1993.

89 Elena Guro, *Selected Writings from the Archives*, edited by Anna Ljunggren and Nina Gourianova (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995), 45.

90 Ibid., 46.

91 Accordingly, as I have established that in Guro's texts spirituality and closeness to nature ultimately signify a more noble and authentic, aristocratic model of masculinity, it seems to logically follow that, since urban lower-class men are presented as "fleshy" and lacking in contact with nature, their masculinity is a fake. As pertains to female figures and the way in which they are presented as more or less noble, the distinction is drawn rather between urban and countryside women and their natural or artificial femininity. I will address these questions in more detail, as well as the general topic of the city as artifice, space of falseness, and even non-space, in my chapter on public\private dichotomies in Guro's writings.

dialectical tension" between their animal and human parts, body and soul, the natural and the divine. The process of becoming a human subject, from this perspective, presupposes refusal and even "destruction" of one's animality.[92] These distinctions allow for the existence of what Agamben calls a "mobile border," an "intimate caesura" within the human.[93] In Guro's case, apparently, this caesura is drawn within the animal part itself. The class border between working-class and middle-class men is presented not as a difference between animality and humanity, but as a contrast between base and noble animality.

Still, while some people seem to be unworthy to receive her compassion by virtue of being too "fleshy," Guro states that she tries to be the mother to everything in the world. She introduces the notion of motherhood as a form of relating to others in the closing lines of a short prose poem with no title:[94]

> I touch life with warm words, because how else can one touch something wounded? It seems to me that it's so cold, so cold for all creatures.
> You see, I have no children - perhaps that's why I love all that lives so unbearably.
> It sometimes seems that I'm a mother to all things.[95]

Here, the necessity to treat all beings in the world as one's children is justified by their common suffering: everything is wounded and "cold" (lonely?), Guro's love for "all that lives" is explained by the fact that she does not have children. It is also noteworthy that while first Guro mentions "all that lives" as an addressee of her love, it is then shifted to "all things,"[96] which can include both living and non-living beings. And the rhetorical question "how else can one touch something wounded?" suggests that this motherly compassion is the most desirable way in which humans can treat the world and each other. At the same time, this statement includes Guro's position on the function of poetry and the mission of poet. Poetry appears to have the possibility to enter into the closest contact with its subjects (to "touch" them), and apparently to influence their well-being. Therefore the poet has to be gentle enough not to harm them and to try to alleviate their suffering, as if she or he "has become the mother of all things."[97]

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92 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 12, 16.
93 Ibid., 14-15.
94 *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914).
95 Guro, *The Little Camels of the* Sky, 98.
96 *Mat' vsemu* in Russian original, which literally means 'a mother to everything.'
97 Guro, *Notebooks*, 43.

One of the few examples of Guro using transrational language (or coming close to using it) is her poem "Words of Love and Warmth" from *The Little Camels of the Sky* (1914). The addressee of this poem is Guro's cat:

> […] On the bog the whities were swinging,
> Once upon a time there lived
> Bummy-tummy,
> Purrie
> Sillik-billik
> Kitty-fuzzik,
> Fluffik,
> Whitieshik,
> Kittieshik -
> Potasik...[98]

The transrational language here is the language of communication between the human and her cat, the means necessary to capture affection between them. The made-up words signify almost nothing but pure tenderness. This is an entirely private language of affection and love, and thus a very "feminine" one. On the other hand, the very fact that these words are made up marks this communicative situation as creative, and the subject of speech – as a poet, who playfully masters her language. The subject becomes the poet in her contact with her companion animal. As human, she reaffirms her humanity by proving her mastery over language, the key sign of the human rational mind.[99] But this mastery is proved by an act of play with language, which neglects its rules and borders with transrational chaos of senseless children's babble. The language Guro introduces here is, in a sense, trans-human, in that it serves to establish an inter-species contact. This transformed language can function thus as a means to jump over the chasm between the species, who suffer alone in the cold, and to heal the wound of silence that separates them.[100]

[98] Verbiuzhata, 113-114. In this translation I tried to recreate the method Guro uses to construct these words. All of them, except for the last one ("potasik"), which I left untranslated, are made by adding affectionate diminutive suffixes to existing Russian word roots. In translation, I left the Russian affectionate diminutive suffix "-ik" in order to make it clear (as it is in the original text) that these words are invented by the author. An alternative translation can be found in Vera Kalina-Levine, "Through the Eyes of the Child: The Artistic Vision of Elena Guro," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 25, no. 2 (1981): 37: "Once upon a time there was/ Bootie-tummy/ Purly/ Dopey/ Kitty-fluffy/ Feathery/ Whitely/ Kit-catty/ Tussely" (apparently, Kalina-Levine derives the meaning of the last word, "potasik," from the Russian word for a tussle, "potasovka").

[99] Agamben calls language "man's identifying characteristic par excellence" (Agamben, *The Open*, 24; see also ibid., 34-36).

[100] What is paradoxical in Guro's use of Futurist techniques, is the stark contrast between her childishness or motherly tenderness, and the claim of Futurism's inherent masculinity, as it was stated in its several manifestos. Lack of masculinity was one of the apparent reasons why Futurists Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, in a manifesto

For Guro, there seems to be certain tension and anxiety regarding motherhood and femininity. Relating to all living beings as her children in Guro's case may serve as a way to resolve this tension. In her diary entry made on 13th of October, 1912, Guro asks: "Why would a woman not have many faces, why would she not be a nun, she has such light chasms between her sex and her life - when she is childless, or when her children have grown big and have sailed away."[101] From this perspective, loving all things in the world as the poet's children heals the gap between her sex and her life, thus restoring her as a whole and fully feminine. The poet's motherhood and femininity depend on her actively "performing" mothering in her poetry - "touching" her subjects, both human and non-human, with warm words. On the other hand, this motherly stance confirms Guro's status as a poet, according to her own views on a poet as someone who has to help other beings feel less cold and who is imagined as a "giver of life."[102]

1.3. Sexlessness and eroticism of the mother-son couple

Mother and son in Guro's texts form a heterosexual nuclear family, where a father is implied but always either absent or negatively marked (as in the case of "Vasya," where he initiates the protagonist's movement from the "natural" domestic space into the petty and violent masculine world, and supports his transformation from a "tender little camel" into a "confidential clerk"[103]). In the majority of texts this mother-son relationship is presented as asexual, and Guro constantly stresses the son's innocence. However, Guro's notebooks, as

from their booklet *The Word as Such* (1913), mocked pre-Futurist Russian poetry. Preponderance of not sufficiently masculine sounds, like *pe* or *pi*, made this poetry, their view, "anaemic" and "painted in jelly and milk" (Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos,* 59). Conventional requirements to poetic language in the past, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov claimed, demanded that it be feminine. Futurists, instead, wanted their poetry to remind of "the saw or the poisoned arrow of a savage" (ibid., 61) - in other words, of instruments of masculine and implicitly aggressive labor and violence. Moreover, in a manifesto from his poetic booklet *Explodity (Vzorval')*, printed in 1913, Kruchenykh boldly stated that "because of a foul/ contempt for/ women and/ children in our/ language there will be/ only the masculine/ gender" (ibid., 66). (This statement is especially paradoxical given that the child exemplified the freshness of perception and playfulness to which Futurists aspired – See more in Kalina-Levine, 36.) There was, therefore, a certain tension between Guro's poetic practice and Futurist masculinist theory of language. And it is further obvious that this tension reflected a contradiction within Futurist theory itself - a conflict between its longing to recreate primal masculinity in its pureness, and fascination with the childlike in art and life. However, what both of these tendencies shared in common was the uncertain humanity of the ideal subject: while both the savage and the child enjoyed the freshness of eternally young world, both of them appeared not entirely rational and self-conscious, and therefore not entirely human yet.

101 Guro, *Notebooks*, 19-20.

102 See Guro's 1914 prose fragment "At a Sand Mound on a Sky Blue Day," in Guro, *The Little Camels of the* Sky, 19.

103 Guro, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, 26-28.

well as her fairy-tale-poem "Feast of the Earth," show this relationship is implicitly erotic.[104]

There are also three entries starting with the word "eroticism," all most certainly from 1912, in Guro's diaries. Two of them speak of Eros as a form of spirituality, as a kind of "sacrament" and "feat."[105] In the third entry Guro imagines cadets being undressed before punishment and wonders whether punishers also removed their baptismal crosses from their "gentle necks" before whipping them.[106] In another notebook entry in 1912 addressed to a character strikingly similar to her "sons" – with long transparent hands and meek heavenly eyes – Guro admits that their relationship is "stained" with sadism and "all sins and shades of sins."[107] These diary notes show Guro's vision of "mother"-"son" (as role positions rather than actual kinship) relationship as possibly erotic and even slightly sadistic, since "mother's" love and compassion requires "son's" suffering. Still, in most published texts sexuality is excluded from Guro's understanding of ideal human relationships, and in the next chapters I will show how it is almost always marked negatively when mentioned.

This play of eroticism and innocence also, indirectly, works to outline the changing borders of the human and the non-human, that are at the center of Agamben's analysis. He invokes Walter Benjamin to speculate about the relationship between nature and the human.[108] According to Benjamin, it is sexuality that breaks the relationship between them, cutting "this secret bond that ties man to life."[109] As Benjamin puts it, "[the man's] beloved frees him from the mother's spell, the woman literally detaches his from Mother Earth - a midwife who cuts that umbilical cord which the mystery of nature has woven."[110] It thus appears that sexuality separates the man from the realm of nature, while the woman's relationship with it is not quite clear, and her own human status is questionable. From this perspective, the striking innocence of Guro's meek "sons" can be interpreted as a form of refusal to be separated from nature. Given Guro's repetitive images of boys being dragged out from home into a hostile masculine world, where they lose their precious closeness to other living beings, this interpretation seems plausible. It is ironical though that while the "son" is

[104] In the "Feast of the Earth," the poet flies through space lying on "Mother-Earth's" body, and the way this flight is depicted presupposes erotic subtext, since the poet snuggles up to her passionately, and answers to her words "with all his body" (Guro, *Selected Writings from the Archives*, 49).

[105] Guro, *Notebooks*, 25, 28.

[106] Ibid., 29.

[107] Ibid., 18.

[108] Agamben, *The Open*, 81.

[109] Ibid., 83.

[110] Cited in ibid., 84.

repeatedly granted animal traits, it is still the "mother" who is fully identified with nature. Accordingly, the feminine domestic space represents the protective space of nature from which Guro's male poet protagonists are separated and drawn into the world of humanity and masculinity.

On other hand, the sexlessness may be a characteristic trait Guro inherited from Russian Symbolism. As Olga Matich argues in her book on Russian Symbolists's utopian thinking about the nature of love, Symbolist writers and thinkers sought to enter a new era, to conquer death, and to transfigure their own bodies by refraining from heterosexual union and procreation.[111] It was believed that birth brought only a possibility of new death into the world, and that abstinence was an emancipatory practice for both genders.[112] At the same time, erotic desire itself was rehabilitated and considered ennobling, if "stored" and not realized in the heterosexual act.[113] This context may explain Guro's diary entries where she writes about eroticism as a "sacrament" and "feat."[114]

To sum up, Guro uses a model of one form of a heterosexual nuclear family to capture the (desired) place of the human among other beings. Being a mother to the world of living and non-living companions, and being a son to nature are seen in Guro's texts as ideal positions the human subject can occupy in relation to the world, since they allow for the most intimate contact between the human and other beings. "Son" characters are presented as vulnerable to an aggressive male world, which is devoid of contact with nature and poetry and from which the female poet aims to protect them. And while these male characters are granted animal traits to mark their innocence and closeness to nature, it is ultimately the female poet who is associated with "Mother-Earth" and literally has to substitute for it.

Both "mother's" and "son's" femininity and masculinity appear as challenged and reconfirmed in the process of writing. Guro's "sons" seem to lack in conventional masculinity, since they are infantile, timid, and awkward, but she constructs their closeness with nature as a sign of a more authentic and spiritually demanding masculinity. On the other hand, the female poet's femininity partly depends on her status as a mother "to all things," which is

111 Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's fin-de-siècle* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 3-4.

112 Ibid., 8.

113 Ibid., 7.

114 (This vocabulary also adds to the imagery of mediaeval knighthood which she uses and which Alexander Blok, a chief Russian Symbolist writer, famously employed in his book *Verses About the Beautiful Lady* (1904) and lyrical drama *The Rose ans the Cross* (1912), which both describe devotional and self-sacrificial spiritual love.)

being continuously reconfirmed in interaction with "son" characters, animals, and things, in the process of becoming together with them. Poetry which "touches" all the things with love and compassion, in this case, functions as a form of performance of motherhood, and therefore femininity. At the same time, while it is stated that the whole world is to receive the "mother's" compassion and love, it appears that certain characters, which happen to belong to urban working class, are not worthy of it. Unlike the "son" characters, who all belong to middle or upper-middle class, they are marked with negative animal traits, so that animality itself appears to be divided into more and less noble components.

Finally, sexuality, as well as the "father" character, seems absent from the image of an ideal "son"-"mother" union, while certain erotic and even sadistic overtones make this relationship more ambivalent. Exclusion of sexuality most likely results from the general Symbolist desire to overcome the boundaries of flesh and to spiritually transfigure human body in the quest for the renewed humanity. In the next chapter, I will address issues related to the displacement of boundaries, particularly boundaries of the body, between the human and other living and non-living beings, the openness to contact or its refusal. Specifically, I will focus on the ways in which vulnerability, that the openness to the others presupposes, and the related notions of purity and contamination, are presented in gendered terms.

Chapter 2

Being among others, being the other: contact, vulnerability, and contamination

In this chapter, I will focus on different ways in which Guro imagines the contact between the human and the non-human to be established, and different outcomes of this contact. In Haraway's view, the key to mutual respect between companion species, and the prerequisite for the most fruitful becoming together with them, is reciprocal and respectful look.[115] But in the world of Guro's texts, there is more to it: the look brings the possibility to *be* the other, whether human or non-human, living or non-living. However, the openness to this experience of being the other presupposes vulnerability of one or both parties to the other's actions and influence. This vulnerability, in turn, results in the fear of contamination that an unwanted influence may bring.

[115] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

2.1. To become a bluebell: contact with non-human other and the power of look

In a 1913 prose text "Pinewood" from *The Little Camels of the Sky*, Guro describes her walk alone in the wood not far from her country house, and a sudden moment of contact with other beings:

> [...] Then you see that an ordinary bluebell on a crooked stem has bent round and is staring at you. And a dark cleft in the bark of a birch, below which the pale-navy bluebell stands, also is staring at you...
> Then somewhere in your being you become partly bluebell, and it partly you. Now it doesn't occur to you to pluck it or tread on it with indifference. Then since you've become acquainted with one, other beings will respond.
> From everywhere now, the tiny sharp tails, little mounds of moss, leaves, dry twigs, spots on tree trunks are staring at you.
> Then you don't feel like leaving the forest.[116]

There are several important details that I need to highlight before moving to analyze this fragment. A startling detail is that it is the bluebell that first looks at the lyrical heroine and thus initiates the communication. This also implies the heroine's passivity, as she is being looked at. In this first interaction, she is the object and the bluebell, the subject. Finally, among other little beings that respond to her, Guro mentions some that are inanimate (like "dry twigs") and some that would not even be recognized as separate entities by other observer, like spots, which could rather appear to be part of a tree trunk and not an autonomous actor. One of Guro's diary entries may help to understand this possibly paradoxical way she animates all beings. After asking herself whether a dry twig has a soul, she answers: "...it has a different soul - a soul of a little crooked twig."[117] Similarly, every thing can have its own soul, no matter how tiny or apparently "dead" it is.

Haraway's notion of respectful reciprocal look as a formula of companion species may both help to illustrate this passage and be illustrated by it. For Haraway, the notion of the look is closely tied with the notion of response (which implies reciprocity of equal partners), and is crucially important for companion species to recognize each other as subjects in the interaction: "To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem: all of that is tied to polite greeting, to

[116] Guro, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, 72-73.

[117] Ielena Guro, *From notebooks (1908-1913),* ed. Ie. Binevich (Saint-Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo al'manakha "Petropol" i Fond russkoi poezii, 1997), 33.

constituting the polis, where and when species meet."[118] The look therefore opens a possibility of becoming together with one's companion species, which never has a predictable outcome, be that the human or the animal.[119]

Similarly, in Guro's text, the reciprocal look makes it possible (or maybe even inevitable) for the lyrical heroine to become "partly bluebell" "somewhere in [her] being." Furthermore, it is this experience of being the other which leads to respect and refraining from indifference and harm. In Haraway's terms, recognizing a bluebell as a subject makes it (her/him/them) not killable, but murderable, makes its destruction a crime.[120] And, as the reader can see, it is not the only consequence of the experience of being a bluebell and communicating with other creatures (and possibly being them too). The other consequence is feeling so comfortable and at home in the forest that the lyrical heroine doesn't want to leave it. This feeling might be interpreted as some kind of kinship. And it is especially interesting given that Derrida, whom Haraway refers to while speaking about killability and unkillability, argued that the only real crimes in Western cultural imagination are patricide and fratricide.[121] Kinship, therefore, appears as a prerequisite for unkillability, and as a result of being the other, which, in turn, follows from the experience of the reciprocal look.

Guro describes other little beings that look at her with tenderness, which invokes intimacy between her and them as well as their vulnerability.[122] In turn, this vulnerability implies how fragile the natural world is and how valuable the contact with it is for the narrator (and possibly, the reader). A similar notion of vulnerability appears in Guro's notebooks when she describes a birch: "...a face could be seen in a green branch. It bent friendly, trustingly and meekly - so meekly it appeared naked."[123] (Note also how this description of a tree is similar to the way Guro repeatedly refers to her "son" characters I analyzed in the previous chapter.) This passage shows that the birch's openness to contact, although this contact may result in its "unkillability," makes it utterly vulnerable before the human gaze.

At the same time trees appear to be able to influence and direct this gaze. In a different diary entry, Guro writes about a silver fir that "bent a bit toward the house with an affable

[118] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid., 80.
[121] Ibid., 79.
[122] This tenderness is partly lost in translation: Guro uses affectionate diminutive suffixes when she writes about "the tiny sharp tails, little mounds of moss, leaves, dry twigs" (*ostryie khvostiki, verkhushechki mkha, listiki, sukhiie tonkiie palochki*).
[123] Guro, *From notebooks*, 37.

gesture" and "patronized" the people living in it. The tree's "sympathy" for the people was the reason Guro started to like them too (despite the fact that she did not know them at all): "...as if the silver fir imparted some particularity to the ones that were running and playing there behind the windows."[124] Guro's attitude toward the people she doesn't know is shaped by the tree's proximity, by the feeling of intimacy existing between it and these people, as if these people are themselves shaped by this proximity and influenced by the fir's affection toward them. What, however, unites this example with the others I cited before is the impression of how fleeting and fragile the contact with these creatures is, and the feeling of its preciousness, which follows exactly from this fragility.

Being the other also entails sharing the other's language. This happens in one of the most famous examples of Guro using transrational language in her poetry - a poem "Finland," first published in a collective book *The Three* (1913):

Is it it? Is it not?
Pine brahches are shuuing, shuuing,[125]
Anna - Maria, Lisa - no?
Is it it? - Is it a lake?

Loolla, lolla, lalla-loo,
Lisa, lolla, loolla-li,
Pine branches are shuuing, shuuing,
tee-ee-ee, tee-ee-oo-oo.

Is it a forest, - is it a lake?
Is it it?

Eh, Anna, Maria, Lisa,
Hey-tara!
Tere-dere-dere... Hoo!
Hole-koole-ne-e-e.

Is it a lake? - Is it a forest?
Teeo-ee,
vee-ee... oo.[126]

The poem imitates the speech of several others. First, it is a creative "reconstruction" of the biological other's speech - the pinewood's speech, the language of the trees. Second, it is apparently an imitation of Finnish language, that of the ethnic other to a Russian poet or a

[124] Ibid., 61.
[125] In Anna Lawton's translation, this line sounds like "Whisser, whisser the pine trees" (Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos,* 58).
[126] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 140.

reader. The nature's language here merges with that of a people who inhabits this landscape. Such merging may possibly have certain colonizing overtones, as the assignment of the position on the side of nature may imply passivity and the need to be civilized – even if, as in Guro's neo-romantic poetic, this equation with nature takes a form of exoticizing fascination. On the other hand, what is more important to my analysis is that this idealized unity of nature and the people (and the poet herself too), is created in poetry, where female names are written into forest landscape as their "natural" part. The inability to distinguish between the two, this blessed confusion, is reflected in a repeated questions: "Is it a forest, - is it a lake?" The poem aims to depict (or to produce) by means of transrational language the chaotic and freely flowing speech of nature, of life itself, undivided and uncategorized.

2.2. Shape-shifting: sharing life with things

There are also some startling instances of being a thing in Guro's texts.[127] Probably the starkest example is her untitled prose fragment, which was published by the next generation of Futurists in 1920 in the Moscow journal called *Liren'*:

> Doctor Pacini entered the cattleshed and fed the people, who came from the streets, daubed with signboards. Then he went into the refined beaming glass of the door.
> And for a while he was a chest of drawers and experienced the novelty of the street, the spring, and the light breeze, and the melted snow.
> And he became a white tower. Rose-colored beams warmed his sides, as if all spring is pouring[128] into this gate.
> – And I didn't happen to be anything today, except for the ugly shining boot.[129]

In order to analyze this excerpt and to show what mode of relationship between the human and ordinary human-made things it could suggest in the context of the early Futurism of 1909-1914, I will refer to the notions of estrangement and de-familiarization introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, one of the key Russian Formalist literary critics.[130] In 1913 young Shklovsky

[127] The writer's general tendency to animate objects, on which I don't focus here, is extensively covered by Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 16; Kalina-Levine, "Through the Eyes of the Child," 34-38; Milica Banjanin, "Nature and the City in the Works of Elena Guro," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 30, no. 2 (1986): 240; and Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation," 564-568.

[128] This shift of tense happens in the original too.

[129] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 158.

[130] Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984), literary scholar and writer, was one of the founders of Russian Formalist school in literary theory and history. Formalists focused on a literary text as a sum of "devices," formal means of telling a story or composing a poem, instead of concentrating on psychological or social critique, which

sided with the Futurists and defended their art in public debates and his article "The Resurrection of the Word," where he captures the feeling of the world that informed Futurism and other avant-garde movements in art. Shklovsky argues that these movements' desire to shock their recipients is justified and even necessary, since only astonishment leads to de-familiarization of perception and thus makes people actually see the works of art, instead of just passively recognizing what they already know. Moreover, he claimes that unconscious, automated perception "killes" things, feelings and even other people; it makes them lose the "feeling of the world."[131] As Skhlovsky put it, "Automation eats up things, clothing, furniture, a wife and a fear of war."[132] The mission of the new art in general and Futurism in particular was therefore to save ordinary everyday things from this oblivion and "death," to bring them back to life by using radically new techniques and forms of performance.[133] Moreover, the task of poetry was also to reanimate words used to describe the world – the task that Futurist language practices were, according to him, best suited to complete.

In Guro's prose fragment about doctor Pachini, there are apparently two forms of de-familiarization simultaneously at work. First, this is the work of the text which aims to startle the reader with unpredictability and absurdity of the protagonist's transformations. But on the other hand, it is also the "novelty" of experience that he himself achieves by being a thing and seeing the world from its perspective. The frequency of transformations emphasizes the ordinariness of such shape-shifting on the doctor's part; moreover, it could be also argued that this ordinariness follows from the protagonist being a doctor (not a poet!).[134] The world "today" in the closing sentence suggests that this shape-shifting happens all the time and is possible for everyone. The other ironic detail is that the doctor ("the pharmacist") turns into a white tower (one of the most aristocratic poetical images of the Russian Symbolism[135]), and

dominated before. Shklovsky and other Formalist scholars, like Roman Jacobson, Boris Eihenbaum, Yury Tynianov, etc., were generally interested in Futurist poetry, although they also wrote major works on Russian and world classic literature.

[131] Viktor B. Shklovskii, "The Resurresction of the Word," in *If Judged Fairly: Articles - memoirs - essays (1914-1933),* edited by A. Iu. Galushkin (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), 40.

[132] Ibid., 63.

[133] Ibid., 40.

[134] And especially given the fact that Futurists used to call ordinary people, "the philistines," pharmacists, which is quite close to a doctor (see Anna Lawton and Herbesrt Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism Through Its Maifestos, 1912-1928* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 15).

[135] In Russian Symbolism of 1890s-1900s, the image of a tower was used to signify the artist's spiritual aristocratism and isolation from ordinary people and conventional morals (Aage A. Hansen-Love, *Russian Symbolism; a system of poetic motifs: mytho-poetical symbolism of the turn of the century: the cosmic symbolic* (Saint-Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2003), 579. See examples of how this image could be used in ibid., 70, 240, 437, 584, 611).

the narrator (presumably the poet, as the narrator is a poet in most Guro's texts) is able to turn only into an ugly boot. This playful "swap" also works to undo the reader's expectations about who should turn into what and removes, or at least reduces (Romantic) hierarchical distance between these two characters, the poet and the doctor. The experience of being a door, a boot, or a chest of drawers, helps therefore not only to animate and de-familiarize these things; it makes human "companions" closer to each other too.

However, the connections between the human and things that accompany them in their everyday life, as well as the relationship of "saving" between them, appear to be rather different in Guro's view from how Shklovsky imagined it. In her diary entries, the writer describes trees as the soul's last savior's that remain unnoticed by people indifferently passing by.[136] It is apparently the same logic of automated perception as in Shklovsky's article. Yet, it is not the human who has to save things from dying as a result of this automation; it is the trees that possess the ability to save humans' souls. However, still, in order to be able to be saved, people need to start noticing the trees. In another entry, Guro writes about her furniture covered with a "layer of empty thoughts without a certain aim," which was the reason why her "soul woke up in a pretty dirty environment."[137] Here, again, things' and the soul's well-being are closely tied.

How can this connection between things and the human be understood? A possible explanation may be found in Guro's saying that "objects, once created and thrown into the world, already interact like independent entities. Each object has its own soul, either put into it by its creator, the author, or received from later deposits upon it, from surrounding life."[138] This belief in a soul received from a creator or imprinted by environment (cf. the silver fir that influenced its human neighbors by its proximity) makes objects' independence more ambivalent: can it be said that they share the soul with their companion humans? The starkest example to support the latter conclusion is Guro's diary note made at the beginning of her illness, three months before her death: "God help me, Nothing, the cloudy yuk, wants to destroy me. Halves of the chairs, the closet, the table are already eaten up by this cloudy something with a yellowish tint. The half of my head is already dropping off."[139] The illness and close death of the human are mirrored by the dissolution of her environment, by the

[136] Guro, *From notebooks*, 24.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Quoted and translated in Banjanin, "Nature and the City in the Works of Elena Guro," 240.
[139] Guro, *From notebooks*, 75.

ordinary things falling apart. The human and her companion objects are made by their mutual proximity and cannot continue being the same (being "whole") without each other.

From this perspective, Guro's descriptions of the pinewood walk and doctor Pachini's transformations serve as examples of the process which may be able to heal the split between the human and the rest of the world. Openness to the (look of the) other, and experience of being the other, inevitably bring vulnerability and fragility, but also a possibility of a shared wholeness. Possibility of being the other, which results from the reciprocal look, allows for a deeper and more intense relationship with other beings; it works to ensure the respect emerging between them, to guarantee their recognition as subjects and kin and thus their unkillability. Accordingly, doctor Pachini's shape-shifting also has this "pedagogical" value. Being a chest of drawers or a pair of boots entails respect for them, recognition of their kinship, and their unkillability too.[140]

Scholars have shown how Guro's understanding of the human/non-human communication and her tendency to see souls in all things may have been informed by the influence of theosophy.[141] This analysis highlights how Guro's love for living beings and things was connected to the notions of disembodiment and dematerialization. In Guro's last unpublished prose work *The Poor Knight*, which Gekhtman analyzes in detail, the "son" character turns into different plants and objects (here Guro calls it not "being" a thing, as in the case of doctor Pachini, but "entering" a thing) in order to show his "mother" that material boundaries of things are mere illusion, and that the spirit permeates everything.[142] "Flesh" is therefore a boundary to overcome, in order to free the spiritual unity of the world.[143] Boundary is associated with embodiment, with "fleshiness," and the absence of boundaries –

[140] For the Silver age the question of one's unkillability, as a question of life and death, was apparently logically linked to "resurrectability," to being subject to the future salvation. Guro's husband Mikhail Matiushin talked about this in a collective Futurist book *The Three*, dedicated to his late wife, where he called this salvation the Futurists' aim: "a new, marvelous world, where even the objects will be resurrected" (Quoted in Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 125).

[141] As Gekhtman argues in his article, two books that have most certainly influenced Guro were *The Forth Dimension* (1909) and *Tertium Organum* (1912) by the theosophic thinker Piotr Uspensky (1878-1947), a Russian mathematician, theosoph and esoteric, whose treatises were popular among Russian artistic elites in 1910s. He claimed that every thing had consciousness and lived, which seemed untrue to human eyes yet, but was the reality in the 4th dimension (Gekhtman, "The Poor Knight of Elena Guro and Tertium organum by P. D. Uspensky," 158).

[142] Ibid., 158-159. There is a considerable list of things this character, the Knight, enters this way: white narcissi on the table, a slightly crooked birch, clouds, animals, trees, flowers and grass, "independent of their size," and a little fire lit in a small glass (ibid.).

[143] In the ideal four-dimensional space material reality and material form of things are, according to Uspensky, unstable and ever-changing, and there are no boundaries between things.

with transparency and permeability of an object or a human body. This is, Gekhtman argues, one of the reasons why Guro's "son" characters are usually so thin and pale, as they are symbolically lacking in flesh and therefore abundant in spirit.[144] Quite interestingly, it appears that for Guro the very real respect for the bluebell's corporeal well-being does not contradict this apparent devaluation of material reality.

2.3. Fear of contamination: avoiding the human touch

I will now show how this play between embodiment and disembodiment, between being open to the (look of the) other and being the other, are in Guro's texts presented in gendered terms, and how anxieties, related to the vulnerability before the other, are captured by metaphors of (sexual) purity and dirt. In her 1913 prose text "Forest Thoughts" from *The Little Camels of the Sky*, the writer describes her observations after she escaped to the forest from her own guests:

> Everything in the forest is clothed in its own special forest radiance. In the forest, with every second you're more foresty. Everything foresty is very exacting - very "Don't touch me." And hides far from the outsider's reach. Bright orange scales fallen from a dark fir, gray-haired twigs sacred with rain - these the enemy never saw, never touched... No one ever disturbed their tender radiant membrane of air. Demanding, forbidding, proud forest things…[145]

This notion of being "Don't touch me" leads Guro to remember and compare two young girls she knows. The first girl is taught to love her body: she "knows that she's a little lamb of the sky."[146] The other girl "didn't know she had a body and that it could be admired" – "a body was just an inconvenient thing you had to hide,"[147] and she was deeply offended when someone tried to touch her. Guro then says that she "bitterly envies"[148] one of the girls (presumably the second one), because the inviolability she possesses is easily lost and thus very precious. Guro admits she is sorry that both these girls would have the similar fate (which is life in the same society with the same norms, and probably the marriage), that

[144] Ibid., 160. Zara Mints in her analysis of neo-Romantic "traces" in Guro's "son" character in *The Poor Knight* also points out that his "lack of embodiment" (especially in this particular text, where he is a spirit) also serves to diminish the possibility to read his relationship with his "mother," a real, fully embodied woman, as an erotic one (Mints, "Futurism and 'neoromantism,' " 325).

[145] Guro, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, 91.

[146] Ibid., 92.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid., 93.

would mean totally different things for them. This inviolability is therefore associated with disdain for or indifference to one's body, and the fear of the other's touch, which is perceived as offensive. This fear, in turn, and refusal to find pleasure in one's body, are logically linked to sexual purity and chastity.

The most interesting detail in this text is juxtaposition of the girl's and the forest's form of "Don't touch me." It seems that the forest's unwillingness to be approached by a stranger, and the impossibility for a stranger to do so, is its natural state. At the same time, foresty things can project their "forestiness" on the observer ("with every second you're more foresty"), similarly to the way in which the fir tree in Guro's diary entry bestowed her sympathy on people. A combination of these two traits opens the way to the play of inapproachability and expansion, idealized pride and the narrator's openness to the other's influence.

Paradoxically, it appears that it is only human touch that is feared both by the young girl and the forest. This is possibly the reason why the narrator isn't frightened of becoming "more foresty." In this play of contact and refusal of contact, the human and the non-human positions are radically different. Animals, plants, and even non-living things (especially "natural" ones) bear ideal purity, they avoid and are normally free from contact. Non-human influence does not bring dirtiness with it, whereas human touch threatens to disturb purity, which is necessary to enter into contact with nature, as Guro shows in the closing lines of this text:

> And sometimes it happens the opposite way: someone comes up, and not asking whether you want it or not, teaches some dirty words, sings some ditty in your ear - and then you find the forest's no longer as foresty, the tiny flowers' forest candles aren't as sacred and magical, and there's less happiness.[149]

These notions of purity and dirt are in a complex way connected to the questions of embodiment and disembodiment of which I was talking earlier. The purity is understood as sexual (note "dirty words" and "ditty" used by a "transmitter"); more generally, it is the bodily purity, which explains the repeated reference to bathing: the lyrical heroine says she was thinking about these young girls in the bathtub, and she uses examples of their behavior during bathing to better describe their attitudes toward their own bodies. The body and bodily practices like bathing, are, therefore, at the center of Guro's attention (cf. also her continuous

[149] Ibid.

mentions of her "son" characters' corporeality, however "lacking in flesh" they are).[150] However, this focus on the body accompanies the belief in human, animal and things' souls permeating boundaries of their material forms and freely moving between and changing human and non-human bodies. Anxieties about bodily, and particularly sexual, purity (the desire not to be touched) echo openness of subjects entering into contact with each other (cf. nakedness of the birch bending her face to Guro in her diary note).

The last text that I will analyze here shows how, in Guro's view, fearful and penetrating a contact with another human being can be. In an early 1905 impressionistic prose sketch "Hysteria," Guro tells a a striking story of such an offending influence, perceived as an invasion and understood in terms of contagious disease. This text is even more interesting since it is so anxious in tone and so atypical for Guro, who in most cases aims to write from the perspective of a loving mother or a self-sacrificing young poet. In this story, the narrator hires a new housemaid and becomes victim to her debilitating influence. At first, the narrator imagined that this nameless Finnish housemaid will bring with her "the healthy air of lakes and pines," and associated her future presence with sun and straw chairs in the kitchen.[151] However, she turned out to be a mysteriously unpleasant old lady, whose presence the narrator describes as a "little draught," which managed to make everything on their dacha through and thus open to the housemaid's influence.[152] And the way Guro metaphorically portrays this influence presents a complicated knot of the notions of contagious disease, sexuality, and health.

But probably the most startling detail is how the housemaid's presence is understood as immaterial, though still very real. This immateriality of influence is captured by the metaphor of rays: "

> ...And [her] frightened moon rays did not enter me, the ones that echo in the heart and in the back with leadening, magnetic, moon pain. […] [She] emanates them with every her hurry-scurry unnecessary movement. […]

[150] This attention to bodily practices may partly follow from the context where Guro's texts were both written and set. This is typically the space of the Finnish summer cottage (*dacha*), where the inhabitants of the capital go on vacations to get rest, to do sports, and to heal (and, in Guro's personal case, also – to die). Dacha becomes a space where the biological, "vegetative" life of the subject comes into focus.

[151] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 179. This is the mechanism I've shown at work previously, which links the human to natural and objective world around her, but which in this case, where class differences come into picture, also seems close to objectification of the future housemaid.

[152] Ibid., 180.

> I feel... in all the world, from all living beings, from a body to a body rays diffuse.
> […] The ill emanates illness... It is a contagion. - It is painful... endless... and already suffocating... With her rays her body enters mine. The body soaks in, dirty, decayed with feeble-mindedness. - And already I cannot start doing anything, cannot decide anything.
> [...] The dark rays had touched [me], and all nerves became ill. The hands are flabby, the body is heavy, slimy, baggy, sweaty fatty body.[153]

The fear of contact and vulnerability to it are presented through the mix of bodily images and ephemeral rays. The immaterial (feeling of the) presence of the housemaid is captured by the image of rays which her body emanates and which transmit some of her characteristic traits (e.g., her "feeble-mindedness) to the lyrical heroine. Ultimately, the rays permeating the space result in the housemaid's body "entering" the body of the narrator. The fear of her presence appears as the fear of her body and its disturbing proximity, which possibly has erotic, this time homoerotic, connotations.

This eroticism is an important part of the housemaid's portrait, and an important reason why she is so unpleasant to the narrator. Her "little face" is "mokeyish" and "mincingly lustful"[154] when she starts an ambiguous conversation with her mistress: "Barin said you like when it's hard and firm? What is hard and firm?"[155] This erotic playfulness, which repels the lyrical heroine, is connected here with animality and lust, and is even more disturbing for the heroine since she is made to participate in it. The connection between the two women thus appears as erotic, and it is even more obvious in the sentence where the narrator is horrified to see her housemaid in bed in the morning, apparently after she was masturbating ("She had an appearance of a woman just after... viper... why do I have to guess your secret vices of a virgin?"[156]). The most disturbing part for the narrator here is that the woman was looking at her and smiling cunningly, as if she invited her mistress into this intimacy and was not ashamed to let her know. So while the narrator's openness to this undesired contact is presented as her permeability to the rays the other emanates, this contact also has overtones of

[153] Ibid., 181, 186.
[154] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 183.
[155] Ibid. One of the interesting details of this character is her "ugly broken language" (ibid., 180) in which she utters these ambiguous sentences. The irony here is that it is explicitly stated that the maid is Finnish (ibid., 179), so her incompetence in Russian can be explained simply by the fact that it is not her language, so she doesn't know it quite well enough. "Hysteria" is an early text, so it is understandable that the narrator's snobbery here doesn't conform to the Futurist taste for linguistic mistakes and slips of tongues. Still, it may be interesting to see this prose sketch as a reverse reflection of a 1913 transrational poem "Finland," which is all built on the fascination with the language of the other.
[156] Ibid., 187.

a (homo)sexual relationship, which contaminates the heroine's purity and from which she cannot protect herself.

Finally, this contact is also characterized as a contagious disease, a transmitted mental illness. The housemaid's hair is "dusty and dead. Disgusting, awful. The kind that the all mentally ill have."[157] Mental illness here is associated with physical dirtiness with which the housemaid apparently can soil the narrator. The latter is infuriated that her servant doesn't want to care for her own health and thus "dishonestly, dishonorably infects"[158] everyone around her, changing the other's perception of reality ("And the morning became like her scruffy skirt, bangled on one side"[159]). The hidden irony in this text, however, is that the lyrical heroine apparently had already been struggling with "hysteria" before she hired the maid: the narrator said that being freed from housework will make "the desired conquest of mental health" closer.[160] But the maid's presence only triggers the narrator's "hysteria" and makes her question her own sanity.[161]

The crucially important detail is that she clings to the "kind, firm, alive"[162] objects in her effort to protect herself from madness. Things function as signposts of reality and allies in the heroine's fight against contamination by her human companion. Proximity of the human other, different in class position and ethnicity, is thus threatening and able to distort the narrator's contact with her environment. Vulnerability to the woman's influence is apparently only increased by her sexual proximity and her erotically ambiguous behavior. At the same time, nature's ability to influence the human is perceived as benign, partly due to its (imagined) asexuality and inherent purity.

To summarize, there are different ways in which Guro captures human/non-human and human/human contact. While she depicts communications of both these types as being able to change and shape the participants, there is, broadly speaking, a major difference between these two types of contact. Human/plant, human/animal, and human/thing contact entails the possibility of being the other and endorsing the point of view of a bluebell or a chest of drawers, which ultimately helps to bridge a gap between the human and the rest of the world. This aim connects Guro's project to the one described by Viktor Shklovsky, that was

[157] Ibid., 182.
[158] Ibid., 186.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid., 179.
[161] Ibid., 182.
[162] Ibid., 183.

introduced as a way to "save" things and people from automation and indifference by the renewed patterns of perception, and particularly by the avant-garde practices in art.

The question of matter and spirit leads to the play of embodiment and disembodiment, the entanglement of immaterial and bodily metaphors in Guro's texts, particularly in the ones that focus on the human/human communication. In this case, contact is often perceived as problematic and presented in terms of contamination, contagion, transmitted mental disease, and especially sexual contact, which undermines the human's original purity and nature-like inapproachability. The feminine ideal of chastity and "vicious" (and animalized) female sexuality are key metaphoric devices that describe the subject's ability to enter into communication with non-human others and the instances of undesired human/human communication. In the next chapter, I will concentrate on the opposition of the domestic space and the countryside, on the one hand (the space of the human/non-human interaction), and the urban space (human-human interaction), on the other, in Guro's work.

Chapter 3

The nursery and the street:

Human and non-human in public and private spaces

In this chapter, I will examine how human/non-human distinctions in Guro's texts function in different social and symbolic spaces: in the countryside as the space of "nature," and in the city as the space of "human civilization"; or, in the private and public spheres, which often tend to overlap with the countryside-city divide. The city as the space of contact with "the other" is particularly important here. On the one hand, it is the space of machinery and technology, which represent the human side of the human/non-human, natural/artificial boundary. On the other hand, it is the space of intense human-human interaction, which, as I have shown in the previous chapter, is often seen as problematic and dangerous in Guro's works. In this chapter I will show how Guro's interpretation of certain spaces as childish, feminine, or masculine structures her understanding of the human/non-human interaction in these spaces.

3.1. Domestic space as a world of creativity and care

For Guro, domestic space, especially the one located in the countryside, is practically always positively marked. In most cases, this is a space of a Finnish dacha, where characters spend their summer vacations. This fact already makes the described domestic space festive and far from dull and ordinary urban life; this is quite often the space where miracles happen. Most of such spaces in Guro's texts seem to be centered on a nursery, and certain festivity of this space appears to follow from the fact that this is the space of contact: between mother and children, and between children and other living and non-living beings, real as well as imaginary.

In a prose fragment from her first printed book *The Hurdy-Gurdy* (1909), "Home Creatures" ("Domashniye"), Guro depicts the domestic world as animated and inhabited by all kinds of children's little companions, who care for them and assure the children's safety from any negative influence:

> The Hidden [or The Cherished - *Zavetnyie*] came out of the walls and sat down to take counsel in the storeroom, next to the pantry. Along the long corridor somebody was walking, as if big drops were falling. Under the wallpaper in the corridor there lived a completely gray, dirty with cobweb, wall man [*moujik*] Terentiy, as tall as a cat's paw. He *taranted*[163] and weaved a lace of little hay threads.
> From the bare board of the storeroom, from the dark knots little eyes were peeping. All Domestic came out of the walls and made their little ears.
> [...] They argued what color to make this Saturday: to make it dark blue - or with stripes? Then they held counsel about the dark ones that settled in the corner of the corridor, next to the nursery, and scared the little favorites. And about the dreams they will send to the nursery: flying blankets - or airplane-horses? They decided to consult the children's cats about this.
> […] The prick-eared sit in a circle, in the pantry, and guard the peace of the big house.[164]

This domestic space is not altogether friendly, since there are still some unnamed scary "dark ones." But the general impression is nevertheless that this space is full of different little creatures who work to make the children's life more interesting. From this perspective, Guro's view of the human/non-human communication appears as clearly anthropocentric, since all activities of the home creatures are centered on human children. On the other hand, interestingly enough, it is non-human creatures who act, and human children who are acted

[163] Guro's neologism *tarantit'* most certainly doesn't have any fixed meaning; it is possibly onomatopoeic and is meant to echo a sound "ta-ra-ta."
[164] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 23-24.

upon, who are the object of the home creatures' care and creativity (if one does not assume that they are originally a creation of children's imagination).

As Kalina-Levine captures it, "Guro was almost obsessively preoccupied with the world of the child."[165] This idealized vision of childhood was connected to the Futurist desire to recover the freshness of perception that people have lost in the course of civilization. Childhood was thus imagined as a "naturally" artistic state of mind, highly desirable for any artist (and ultimately, for every human) to achieve, or to discover anew.[166] In Guro's case, the child exemplifies the ability to enter into intense communication with the world and to perceive every its phenomenon as a miracle in itself.[167] To accomplish this task, Guro not only often assumes a child's perspective, but also tries to recreate children's speech.[168] The figure of the child in Guro's writings is closely linked to the notion of creativity and to the contact with the non-human world, which opens possibilities for creative fulfillment.[169]

In "Home Creatures," as well as in the later short prose text "Childhood" from the collective Futurist book *A Trap for Judges I* (1910), the dacha is a space of mutual and meaningful communication with things and with nature outside of the house. In "Childhood," this communication with nature even takes on a form of worship: the children offer strawberries as a sacrifice to the fir, which is called an erlking and a "sweet king."[170] Both domestic space and the space of nature are inhabited by different spirits: "many rain spirits above the washbasin"[171] in the nursery, or a nameless autumn spirit standing in the field.[172] The children's creative imagination makes the dacha almost merge with nature, and turns it into the boundless space of adventures: the nursery in the night flies in "interstellar spaces," and the children's beds turn into ships and travel over oceans.[173] Altogether, the nursery as the

[165] Kalina-Levine, "Through the Eyes of the Child," 30.
[166] Ibid., 31.
[167] Ibid., 32.
[168] See, for instance, a prose dialogue "A Child's Chatter," a little girl inquires her nanny whether her female cat has a soul and whether she can turn into an angel (Guro, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, 96).
[169] In a prose text "In a park" from *The Hurdy-Gurdy* (1909), the lyrical heroine tells smug urban women, who have come to the countryside for vacations, a recipe how to write poetry. Poems, she says, are made of a gob of "black earth" and rainwater. In an alternative recipe, which young girls from a neighboring dacha have shared with her, rainwater is replaced with saliva (Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 20). Poetry here is imagined as a mixture of childish play, raw substance of nature ("black earth" or rainwater), and bodily excreta, which together make poetry "real" and grounded.
[170] Ibid., 128.

[171] Ibid., 126.
[172] Ibid., 127.

center of a dacha in Guro's poetic imagination represents an important complex of values like creativity, play, care, safety, freedom (of imagination and play), and even spirituality.

3.2. Animated objects and the poetry in/of the private sphere

When adult human subjects act in the domestic space, its material reality serves as a source of irony to mimic and lower romantic poetical discourse. Guro uses lofty eulogic style to address things and locations in this space ("May your fame resound, balconies of vacant dachas, sand pits, slopes, little barns!"[174] or "Long live glorious galoshes!"[175]). Sometimes, like in the cited "May your fame resound" from *The Little Camels of the Sky*, she describes her characters' life by focusing on things and especially on parts of their dachas, almost using them as a focal point from which she tells a story of the human characters.[176] In general, things and activities of the dacha provide a friendly but ironic context to purely poetical activities of the characters. In "May your fame resound," "a few bentwood chairs from the dacha furnishings listened with open mouths" while a "half-witted" poet with "enchanted blue eyes" recited his verses in a (stereotypical) "consumptive's muffled bass."[177]

Guro here brings into contact the figure of the poet, who in Russian tradition normally belongs to the public sphere (be it publishing business, public recitations, or literary gatherings), and the space where her characters mostly exist – that is, the dacha, the private sphere, associated with childhood and femininity (as a domestic space and a space of family vacations). The presence of material reality, often marked as domestic, questions the poet's status and masculinity. Similarly, in the prose fragment with the listening chairs, their animated attention serves to underscore the fact that there are very few human recipients of the poets' verses. Although these poets conform to the stereotypical image of an artist as consumptive, "enchanted," and "half-witted," they exist as poets in the safe space of their dachas, in the company of their friends, family, and sympathetic furniture, and not in the public space of the city. This positioning of the poets in the private sphere feminizes and infantilizes them. While Guro depicts domestic space and inherently creative, she also uses this locus to lovingly mock her characters' seriousness and masculinity. As domestic space is

[173] Ibid., 126.
[174] Guro, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, 48.
[175] Ibid., 41.

[176] See also "Balcony columns" from *The Autumn Dream* (Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 34-35) and "Sagamilia" from *The Little Camels of the Sky* (Guro, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, 82-83).
[177] Ibid., 48.

the space of childhood and motherhood, it transforms the poets into children, into Guro's typical awkward and lovable "sons."

This same tendency to privatize the public may be observed in genre organization of Guro's texts. Different scholars have addressed a specific mixture of genres in her creative practice. Some authors drew attention to the fact that Guro's diary entries, prose, poetry, philosophical ideas, and even her drawings, with which she decorated her books, constitute an inseparable unity, which needs to be taken into account when analyzing her writings.[178] This unity is paradoxically achieved by the use of miniature fragments,[179] which ultimately give an impression of one text flowing into another. This effect is also supported by ellipses and certain themes being repeated with minor variations,[180] – this is, for instance, the method by which Guro's "son" character is created and the story of his life (and death) is told.[181] This creative strategy of combining poetry with diary-looking prose was in itself constructed as specifically feminine writing style.[182]

Due to this strategy, the boundary between the author's private life and the world of her poetry becomes blurred. The combination of diary-like notes (a private form of writing), fictional prose, and poetry (public forms, literature per se), reflects on the generic level the conflation of public and private spaces. This conversationalization also weakens the symbolic boundary between art and life, the author and the reader, thus reducing implicit hierarchy between them. This also works to establish a more intimate contact with the author, as readers are practically invited to read her diary. Finally, another possible implication is that this mixture of private and public genres helps to shape an image of a poet who lives a whole, "undivided" life, being creative in domestic environment and childish in the public. This unity and free flow of one sphere into another echoes other boundaries Guro blurs in her texts: that

[178] Milica Banjanin, "Between Symbolism and Futurism: Impressions by Day and by Night in Elena Guro's City Series," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 37, no. 1 (1993): 81; Banjanin, "Nature and the City in the Works of Elena Guro," 234.

[179] Banjanin, "Between Symbolism and Futurism," 72, 81.

[180] Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation," 560.

[181] As already elaborated in chapter 1.

[182] Katharine Hodgson, "Women and gender in post-Symbolist poetry and the Stalin era," in *A History of Women's Writing in Russia*, ed. Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M Gheith (Cambridge: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2002), 209. As Hodgson points out in her overview of post-Symbolist Russian women writers, women poets of Guro's generation were famous of this strategy of "personalizing" their texts. Their poetry focused on the author's emotional experiences and, quite logically, often assumed a form of "lyric diaries, a form felt to be particularly feminine, giving the impression of unmediated self-expression."

between the human and the non-human, and, partly, that between the feminine and the masculine.[183]

3.3. The city as the space of non-communication and oppression of women

While the place of the dacha and private space in general in Guro's texts is clear, her attitude toward the city is much more ambivalent.[184] One of the most crucial negative traits of the city as Guro saw it was its mechanical nature, as opposed to "organic" life in the country.[185] Here I will concentrate on the texts that depict the city as a locus radically different to the country, in order to see how human/non-human contact, and humanity or inhumanity of human communication, are presented in this case.

In a poem "The City,"[186] urban life is depicted as a source of continuous humiliation and dehumanization, where animals are cruelly killed, and humans are turned into inanimate automatons. In the very first lines a slaughterhouse and a tailless dog with a "mocked stern"[187] are mentioned as the apparently most characteristic elements of the city life. "Peaceful" prisons appear as a sign of regimentation and control that distort the "natural" free flow of life. The chaos of urban traffic (already mechanized and represented by trams and automobiles) is the flip side of this peacefulness, which "doesn't allow to glance into the crying eyes." While the city is a space where animals are killed, crippled, and mocked, the very organization of urban life, according to Guro, does not allow for compassion and genuine emotional contact even between human beings themselves.

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[183] Gender difference is undermined by interchangeable use of feminine and masculine verb forms in the texts written from the first person, where protagonists share the same traits, except for their gender. See also chapter 1.

[184] Jensen's extensive study of Guro's urbanism shows that her interest to the city faded after her first book, *The Hurdy-Gurdy*, published in 1909. He also states that she did not write about the city at all after 1910 (Jensen, *Elena Guro and the urbanism of Russian modernism*, 81). He argues that in *The Hurdy-Gurdy*, which focuses on the topic of the modern urban life, the city is *not* opposed to the countryside - rather, the dull city during the day is juxtaposed to the liveliness of urban night life (ibid., 82, 89). On the other hand, Toporov names the opposition of the dirty and sinful city versus pure and loving nature, as characteristic for Guro's work in general (Toporov, "Myth of the youth-son's incarnation," 573); however, in his analysis he clearly focuses on her later texts, written between 1912 and 1914. This ambivalence toward the city is also pointed out by Banjanin, who mentions its roots in French and Russian Symbolism (Banjanin, "Nature and the City in the Works of Elena Guro," 236).

[185] Ibid., 233.

[186] Written most certainly in 1910, published in a collective book *Futurists. The Roaring Parnassus* in 1914, and later in the journal *Enchanted Wanderer* in 1916 (Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 237; see also its analysis in the context of Guro's earlier works in Jensen, *Elena Guro and the urbanism of Russian modernism*, 118-122).

[187] This and further quotes from this poem are translated from Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 152.

In this poem, there are only two forms of response city dwellers show: mocking laughter and indifference. Unnaturalness, uniformity, and superficiality of the city life are captured by the image of women's hats "with flowers in the lacy plume," and of people who pass by "never changing their cardboard look." In the final lines, these images are conflated in the "cardboard void" of female eyes that laugh at the poet without blinking from beneath a "fashionable hat." The lace of stylish women's hats only hides a scary void: even if they themselves don't slaughter anyone like "butchers," they thoughtlessly approve of the slaughter, because they are only cardboard, uniform automatons incapable of true emotions.

Male dominance and the oppression of women are the key aspects of Guro's conception of the city. For her, urban violence and the commodification of life are best seen in prostitution, which Guro presents as the crudest form of this commodification. Banjanin stresses that the male dominance in Guro's depiction of the city is closely linked to the exclusion of nature from the urban space.[188] While the countryside, in Guro's system of meanings, is associated with motherhood, care, and compassion,[189] the city with its depersonalized regimentation is a space of the "father's" power. As I have shown earlier in the first chapter, in the idealized countryside and in the private sphere in general, relationships between human and non-human subjects are (supposed to be) constructed according to the sexless matrix of a mother-son relationships. By contrast, the city in Guro's texts appears as a clearly sexualized space, a space of stark sexual inequality and violence.

Jensen extensively describes how gender inequality is thematized in Guro's prose sketch "That's Life" from *The Hurdy-Gurdy* (1909). Impressions of the city are presented from the point of view of a young girl, Nel'ka. Beaten by her stepfather, she roams in the streets and reflects on the city as a space of male dominance. The sketch shows how she herself starts to accept her submission and to justify it.[190] The city is beautiful and masculine at the same time, and the very tools by which men express their dominance are beautiful – the cane her step-father used to beat her, and canes other men carry in the streets. It is this beauty that enchants

[188] Banjanin, "Nature and the City in the Works of Elena Guro," 236.

[189] As an example of how motherly attitude is seen as "naturally" characteristic for women in the countryside, see, for instance, "Undoubtedly, when the Knight of the Rueful Countenance was flying from a sail-arm," from *The Little Camels of the Sky* (Guro, *The Little Camels of the Sky*, 57-58), where Guro imagines how Don Quixote would be lovingly treated by a Russian peasant woman.

[190] Jensen, *Elena Guro and the urbanism of Russian modernism*, 106.

Nel'ka and makes her so submissive to male power.[191] Eventually when a student becomes her boyfriend, she accepts him as her master and follows his orders like a dog.[192]

The story of a young girl walking in the streets and observing city life turns into a story of her transformation from a child into a woman, and the loss of her individuality in the process.[193] This contrast between a child as an individual and an urban woman as a de-individualized person is characteristic to Guro's imagination. As I have shown earlier, childhood and its spaces are seen as sources of creativity and freedom, and I will address the (imagined) uniformity of urban women later in this chapter. The topic of the look is central in "That's Life," too, particularly regarding questions of dominance and submission. Nel'ka's observations lead to her falling in love with the city and her submission to men, who have created the city and dominate it. On the other hand, male looks "stick to her like a hot pain and bend her down to the ground,"[194] making Nel'ka even more willing to accept her inferior position. This chemical reaction of the humiliating male gaze and her own marvelled look ultimately leads to her individuality dissolving in the will of her masters.

In the prose sketch "The Street," written in 1905-1906, Guro depicts city life as chaotic and aggressive, and sexual commodification appears an integral part of this aggression. The sketch opens with a description of an insane "herd" of people, "enslaved by lustre."[195] City dwellers run like ostriches with "fixed glass eyes."[196] This description doubly de-humanizes them, as they are compared both to animals (running in herd, i.e., irrational, easily suggestible) and to objects, dolls or manikins. Guro opposes private space, even the one located in the city, to the aggressive and confusing rush of the street: some people, "alien" and "lonely" "shrimps,"[197] are dragged out of their safe homes into the street, where they are immediately attacked by the insanely running crowd. The very urban environment is hostile to them: city lights "circumfuse" them with their uncanny "eyeless look," and the looks of fellow city dwellers examine them mockingly and rapaciously.

> Derisive eyes behind your back and on your flanks; thousands of examining inquisitivenesses abrase, tear apart your soul piece by piece. Rapaciously, boldly look over you; grab and throw you to the middle of the street, throw

[191] Ibid., 109-110.
[192] Ibid., 108.
[193] Ibid., 112.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 189.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid.

> you into the light, to the onrushing crowd. They grope you, toss you up, weigh the goods...[198]

The way the lyrical heroine is treated once again reminds of a butchery, where the meat on sale is tossed up, weighed and examined. Voices of the crowd address her in feminine gender (this is how the reader knows that the narrator is female) and laugh at her for having sat in the nursery for too long and for confusing the limited time of the city (the word "deadline" is repeated several times) with the peaceful eternal time of the nursery and its fairy-tales.[199] The city is compared to a hunt, where scared domestic "pets," thrown out into the street, lonely poets, dreamers and "worshippers" of art,[200] are cruelly mocked and crushed by the herd. In this description, both positive and negative characters, the poets and the "philistines" that bully them, are animalized. However, this animalization serves different ends in the two cases. In the case of the positive characters, comparison to a scared pet emphasizes their meekness and helplessness, which in Guro's view are crucial positive traits. On the other hand, other city dwellers are compared to a herd of ostriches, and later to bug-eyed rams,[201] which stresses their irrationality, suggestibility, and uniformity. Finally, in this "animal" conflict, the victims are represented as "meat," killed and sold by the rest of the city.

The street is then compared to a prostitute, to a woman who offers herself like a piece of meat, and images of prostitution and commodification of the female body proliferate in the rest of the text. The street is "well-groomedly pink," she wears blusher and is covered in scale of city lights. The topic of makeup and embellishment in general relates to advertising and more immediately refers to the hairdressing salon and a jewelry store that are located on this street. They mask the street's scales, the fact that it is a reptile, cold and dangerous. This gaudy makeup is used in Guro's text as a sign of commodification of sexual desire, since its main task is both to hide and to underscore that women who wear it to attract men are bare "meat."

The narrator finds herself among prostitutes who advertise themselves to a passer-by. Cosmetics which they wear and which are advertised in shop-windows, are a sign of these women's commodification and of the general artificiality of urban life: this makeup hides that all relations in the city are in fact reduced to bare economic and sexual exchange. (The same

[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid., 190.
[200] Ibid., 191-192.
[201] Ibid., 191.

commodifying logic is applied to art - apparently, to the heroine's own writings[202] – which she takes as an insult.) Rape and sexual domination, especially that where the victim is already willing to participate, is used as a metaphor for this economic logic of success in urban life: people in the animalized crowd are said to be rushing to "rape their own soul."[203] From this perspective, a brothel and a slaughterhouse together stand as a complex metaphor for the city as a whole. The brothel itself is compared to a slaughterhouse, and what happens there is described as a "competition of the well-groomed meat," when the prostitutes importunately expose the "shameless swinging"[204] of their breasts and buttocks. The narrator is stupefied by the persistent smell of their bodies and perfume, a mixture of "meat" and superficial cosmetic masking which captures the very nature of the city, as Guro imagines it.

Altogether, Guro represents urban women in both "The City" and "The Street" as non-human, and in both cases their outward appearance is a façade that hides a cardboard uniformity, a laughing void, or mere perfumed meat. There is nothing human in them, nothing rational, no sign of a soul or even of suffering. This is paradoxical, since Guro depicts city life as a source of constant suffering, pain, and death for all living beings. But apparently in her vision of the city, neither of the actors in this drama of modern life is imagined as fully human: "lonely dreamers" are compared to hapless pets, the "crowd," the ordinary bourgeois audience - to the herd of ostriches and rams, indifferent passers-by - to identical cardboard figures, bourgeois women are similarly cardboard and reduced to their fashionable outfits, and prostitutes, who are apparently also victims of the city – to (already dead) meat.[205]

Agamben defines the human as a never stable "conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element."[206] The tension between these elements is crucial for the human and explains why it always escapes definitions. The human only exist in the constant uncertainty over which one of these components prevails.[207] What Agamben calls anthropological machine is a mechanism of making a decision who is human and who is not, of separating the animal from the human *within* the human.[208] In Guro's image of city dwellers, de-humanization results

[202] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 190.
[203] Ibid., 191.
[204] Ibid., 192.
[205] Only the poet in "The City" was depicted as a conscious human being. However, his mission as an inspired savior of the city and a martyr who sacrifices himself borders with the divine and may thus be seen as not entirely human either.
[206] Agamben, *The Open*, 16.
[207] Ibid., 12.
[208] Ibid., 37-38.

from the radical separation of these elements. She depicts urban men as cardboard figures or ostriches, and women as void-eyed dolls in stylish bonnets: they are devoid of soul, or even of life itself. On the other hand, in the case of the poet, the spirit almost overcomes the flesh. It is not difficult to see, though, that women tend to be "more" de-humanized than men: while men are left with animal life, women appear to be rather non-living or dead objects that only pretend to be alive. Also, it is interesting why it is specifically prostitutes who are compared to meat: sex-work exposes their bodies, so that they cannot be reduced to a social function, a role represented by an outfit: a hat and a fashionable dress. Prostitutes are thus the most "fleshy" among other city-dwellers. However, compared to the bourgeois women, their de-humanization in the text bears also a trace of violence which has turned them into meat: they were alive, like others; now they are on the slaughterhouse. By contrast, bourgeois women appear to be "naturally" inhuman.

This situation when humanity is principally unattainable, conforms to Agamben's concept of the anthropological machine and the consequences of its work: the result of separation between the animal and the human is neither animal nor human, but "only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*."[209] In Guro's writings, it is the city (the nature of human relations in the city) that performs this separation. Prostitution, where mere body participates in the sexual exchange, while other human relations (the "soul") are excluded, and slaughter, which literally separates a body from a soul, are used as two major metaphors that describe this process and explain why city is a non-human and inhuman space.

As I have shown in this chapter, the way human subjects are positioned in Guro's texts is connected with social spaces where they interact with each other, with animals, plants, and things. In Guro's works, there is a link between being in the private domestic space, being a child or a mother, and being a creative individual, emotionally connected and compassionate to others. On the other hand, existence in the open public space in the city turns a subject into a de-humanized and de-individualized object. The metaphor of look organizes relations between human and non-human actors in both these spaces. The look which operates in the domestic space animates things and recognizes living and non-living companions as equal partners in the play of being together. By contrast, the indifferent and commodifying (male) look of urban dwellers does not allow for the independent being of things and animals. On the

[209] Ibid., 38.

contrary, it turns even human others, women and lonely poets, into goods and animals to be used and slaughtered.

The city for Guro appears a space where sexual hierarchy is negotiated; but most importantly, these are the spaces where the anthropological machine works to separate the human from the non-human, and the living from the non-living. The whole public sphere in the city is understood as such space, where the (male) consumer is defined as bestial, and the (female) consumed – as meat. The ending of "The Street" is particularly telling in this regard. The narrator returns home to her nursery, where animated chairs wait for her, and the bookcase "thinks about the timelessness,"[210] and hides into the silence and calmness of her nursery bed. Domestic space with its stopped time, and particularly the children's space, presumably still free of sexuality and sexual difference, appears as a safe haven. It is the space where borders between the human and the things are not drawn, and so that they can live together in peace.

Altogether, private and public space, the city and the countryside, appear to be radically opposed in Guro's works. The private space of an apartment, or of a dacha located in the countryside, provides a ground for genuine emotional contact between human and non-human companions, including objects that exist in this space. This space is alive, ever-changing, and caring toward the human beings who inhabit it. Private space serves as a source of creativity, spirituality, and poetry, realized particularly in interaction with non-human others. Domesticity often provides means for Guro to relativize romantic poetical discourse and to ironically play with it, de-centralizing the human subject and bringing forth companionship of things that surround the poet.

On the contrary, urban public space, in Guro's view, does not allow for intense contact between the human and the objective world, for automated perception prevents the human gaze from animating things and from recognizing suffering of other humans. This lack of contact in Guro's depiction of the city is combined with gendered sexual violence and commodification of women, which goes beyond the general commodification of other human relations. As a result of these relations, all city dwellers appear to be de-humanized, and women are compared to the dead meat or artificial cardboard figures. Private and public, feminine and masculine spaces overlap with spaces where participants of communication are human(ized) and inhuman (de-humanized), respectively. In the masculine public spaces, anthropological machine works to separate the human from the non-human, which leads to all

[210] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 193.

subjects being de-humanized eventually. By contrast, the feminine domestic space is that locus where anthropological machines stops and allows for the inclusion of non-human others as equal partners in their mutual play of becoming.

Conclusion

Elena Guro, as well as other Russian modernist and especially Futurist writers, aspired to offer new ways of being in the world and of positioning the human among other living and non-living beings. Although her project may seem gender-neutral and universal, close analysis shows that underlying gender dichotomies and sexual imagery organize her vision of the human/non-human communication. Guro's vision of the desired relationship between the human and the rest of the world, particularly nature, is captured by a specific form of a heterosexual nuclear family – a mother-son couple. Being "a mother to all things"[211] and being a son to the earth are thus ideal subject positions of the human, as they (re)create a tie of kinship between the human and the non-human.

At the same time, in accord with Haraway's notion of *becoming with,*[212] both "mother" and "son" are constituted as feminine and masculine in the process of their communication with non-human others. For the "sons," contact with nature compensates for their lack of conventional masculinity, as they are represented as knights who serve nature with their lives. Their closeness to nature is conveyed by them being compared to animals that signify innocence and childishness. In this case, Agamben's anthropological machine seems to stop from excluding animality from the human.[213] But other male characters, mainly working-class urban men, are granted with negative animal traits, so that the caesura that cuts through the human, according to Agamben,[214] in this case is situated within the animal itself.

The "mother," too, gains her femininity as a result of her performance of care and love toward all living and non-living things. Meanwhile, in the poetical performance of motherhood, Futurist experimentation with the "words of love and warmth"[215] constitutes her as a poet too. Moreover, this experimental translational language appears necessary to bridge the gap of communication and to establish an affectionate contact with one's companion species. While male characters may be compared to animals, the "mother" is associated with

[211] Guro, *The Little Camels of the* Sky, 98.
[212] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 165.
[213] Agamben, *The Open*, 37-38.
[214] Ibid., 15.
[215] Guro, *Nebesnyie verbliuzhata*, 113-114.

caring nature, with "Mother-Earth," which makes her human status more ambivalent. Both "father" character, that bears conventional masculinity, and sexuality are mostly excluded from this vision of "mother"-"son" relationship, as they signify the burden of flesh that needs to be overcome in order for all beings to unite spiritually.

Guro focuses on possible kinds of communication which may lead to such union. The intimate human/non-human contact, according to both Guro and Haraway, is established by the act of reciprocal look. The look allows for entering into space of shared life and play, where partners are changed and shaped anew. [216] Guro captures this change by the metaphor of shape-shifting, which helps her human and non-human characters to share each other's point of view. Avant-garde language practices are the means to do this "in real life," as they help to creatively reconstruct and share the non-human language, to enter into intense and intimate contact with things, and to show the possibility of the dissolution of boundaries between the self and the other. However, when it comes to the human-human communication, it is far from this idyllic vision. Guro often grants unwanted human proximity with erotic overtones and depicts it as contaminating and contagious, while gendered notions of (feminine) chastity or looseness convey the meaning of sin and dirt that human-human contact may bring.

As spaces where the human and the non-human meet, the public and the private radically differ in Guro's texts. The private is in most cases represented by Finnish dacha in the countryside, and appears the space which facilitates intimate contact between humans, animals, plants, and things. Fluidity and safety of this space, as well as the fact that it is associated with children's summer vacations, makes it fertile ground for both human and non-human creativity. The proximity of ordinary domestic things helps to relativize human power over them and to presents them rather as companions at play. In contrast, the public, represented by the city streets, appears as a fearful space where any emotional contact is hampered by the mechanical organization of life, and where human gaze sees things without noticing them. The city is compared to a slaughterhouse and a butcher's, where animals are killed, and women's bodies are commodified and turned into mere meat. All city dwellers lack in humanity and sometimes even in life: some of them are turned to meat, others seem to be made of cardboard. According to Agamben, the city here can be interpreted as a space where anthropological machine works restlessly and finally deems almost everyone not human enough. Thus the city, which is explicitly presented as a realm of male dominance, de-

[216] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 19.

humanizes its inhabitants, whereas in the feminine domestic spaces anthropological machine stops. In the private sphere, animality may be harmlessly incorporated into human identity, and the boundaries between the human and the non-human companions become blurred, thus allowing them for being equally animalized and humanized in their play of becoming together.

Further research on Guro's strategies of gendering the human and the non-human may include a detailed separate exploration of specific topics, which I have mapped in my thesis. These are, first of all, figures of the "mother," the "son," or "the prostitute", with their symbolic meaning and with established tradition of usage and interpretation of such gendered figures in Russian and European modernisms. The topic of the sexless and eroticized "mother"-"son" relationship, of course, invites an attempt at a psychoanalytic reading. Cubo-Futurist transrational language, as used by Guro and other poets, may constitute a separate topic that would focus on its trans-human status in relation to its ambivalent gendering as both masculine (virile and primeval) and feminine (emotional). Finally, Guro's motif of shape-shifting and being an object or a plant can be explored in more detail using both post-humanist theory and feminist theory of the gaze.

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