

Metahaven  
**Sleep Walks the  
Street, Part 2**

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*Continued from “Sleep Walks the Street, Part 1”*

A child’s first speech acts do not consist of words so much as sounds. We measure the result that these sounds produce by something other than their effectiveness at transacting. While we tend to live by a working agreement that things in the world correspond to their names, we rejoice in a small person voiding that agreement, and allowing us to join in a nascent speech where each word is new. In this way, things in the world are made anew each time through words. While remaking things in the world, the process of play reveals that names, concepts, and their outward purposes are merely under the illusion of our control. Kornei Chukovsky (1882–1969), one of Russia’s foremost children’s poets, saw young children as linguistic geniuses and effective critics of adult speech. For example, an adult exclaims: “I’m dying to hear that concert!” “Then why don’t you die?” the child responds.<sup>1</sup>

Language in the child’s world is always in the making, and children often take language more seriously than adults do. Even when they become aware of the system of (social) rules and contexts that people use to give value to statements, they may ignore it. Adults often manipulate their message to get a point across, and in doing so violate whatever brittle contract existed between language and reality in subtle yet essential ways. For example:

Y (me, waiting for red traffic light, with X, on bike): “Ah, this takes *forever*.”

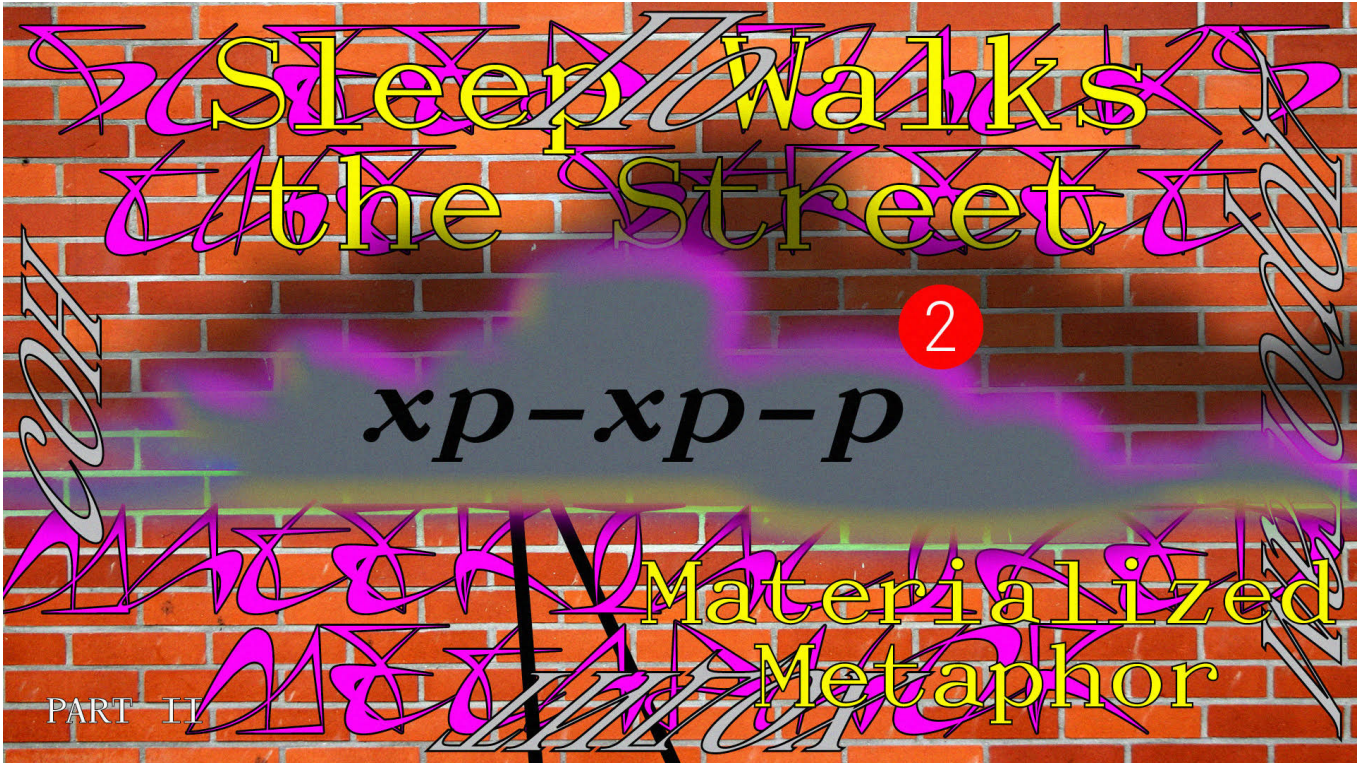
X (six years old): “No, it takes a few minutes.”

Chukovsky explains that “adults think in terms of allegories and metaphors, whereas children think in terms of objects perceived in their world of objects.”<sup>2</sup> Cluttering our sentences with words like “totally,” “always,” and “never,” adult senders assume that the receiving side will be capable of reading *socially* between the lines of their utterances, and decode these statements into something that they “meant.”

So, when I’m using the word “forever” to augment a finite quantity of time into something that is supposed to illustrate the way I feel about that time taking too long, X will correct me. At her age, she appears to act on what I forgot: that by the inflation of something through a likeness of an image of scale, size, or higher-dimensional order, we train ourselves in approaching reality with descriptions that have nothing in common with it.

The often-diagnosed breakdown of objective facts in our society is more related to such happenstance manipulations than we might assume: to say that an event of a finite

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Metahaven, *Hometown*, 2018. Two-channel digital film, 31", color. Installation view of "Turnarounds," e-flux, New York, October 2019. Photo: Gustavo Murillo Fernández-Valdés.

duration is endless is not entirely dissimilar from saying that an event that happened never did. In young children we appear to find some kind of cognitive elixir against rhetoric – one that, as several authors have insisted, tends to dissolve when children come of age and get used to speaking “adult” language. Children are specialists of speech play and nonsense, operating adjacently but not identically to the poetic genre known as absurdism.

In his lyrical observations, Chukovsky situated unique linguistic abilities in the young child that he found were missing in most adults. “All around me, without a moment’s pause, sounded the melodic speech of children,” he writes. “At first it seemed merely diverting. It took me some time to realize that, not only splendid in itself, this speech also had an intrinsically high instructive value. By studying it, it is possible to discover the whimsical and elusive laws of childhood speech.”<sup>3</sup>

The absurdists did not glorify children in the same way as Chukovsky did. While at times using childlike motifs, absurdism and *bessmyslitsa* (“meaninglessness”) went considerably further than speech play, building from it a philosophical inquiry into epistemology itself: an inquiry into the way in which we may say that we know or don’t know something.

### Emotional Rollercoaster

In Part 1, we discussed Victor Klemperer’s field studies of Nazi language and phraseology, and discussed the scalable political technology that is the metaphor. As an oratory form, metaphor today exceeds its original polity (the city-state) and instead applies to the “cloud polities” that are served by digital platforms and their interfaces (in a complex interplay with their algorithmic push functions, and with audiences united or divided by language and/or time zone). Serving simultaneous processes of amplification and reduction, the political technology of rhetoric, described by the writer and researcher Flavia Dzodan as “the right to name as an interface of the political,”<sup>4</sup> replaces cognitive plurality with “meaning.” All language that is – like rhetoric – uttered simply to be believed on the level of “meaning” sooner or later finds its arch nemesis to be the irreverence of play, of which absurdism is the genre name. Yet, absurdism confronts every rhetoric unarmed. It undoes violence. It is not a “weapon.” It is a way to resist with words and thus with thought, a method to produce joy, a coping tactic, and a philosophical shelter that’s as unsettling as any home can be.

Rarely can absurdism ever be elevated into a scalable model. Rarely can it be separated from personal experience. In the double time of

X’s blossoming childhood and the mortal sickness of her grandfather, while living through painful personal events and what felt like reality’s political unmaking across the planet, we were drawn to absurdist children’s poetry. It was a language that seemed to already know this super-versioned reality inside out. Our first encounter with anonymous Russian children’s rhymes called “turnarounds” or “topsy-turvies” (*perevortyschi*) happened over the course of this emotional rollercoaster. X was three then. These self-negating verses seemed to us the one thing that made perfect sense of our world:

In January, on the 5th of April,  
In dry weather – with knee-high puddles.  
On a brick street – made of wooden planks  
Walked a tall man – of short height  
Curly with no hair – thin like a barrel.  
With no children – only a son and a daughter.  
Writes a letter home:  
I’m healthy – in a hospital,  
Fed up – and hungry,  
All come visit me – I don’t want to see you.<sup>5</sup>

Дело было в январе, пятого апреля,  
Сухо было на дворе - лужи по колено,  
По кирпичной мостовой, сделанной из досок,  
Шел высокий гражданин низенького роста,  
Кучерявый, без волос; худенький, как бочка.  
У него детишек нет, только сын да дочка.  
Пишет он домой письмо:  
Жив здоров - лежу в больнице,  
Сыт по горло - есть хочу,  
Приходите все родные - я вас видеть не хочу.

In an email to us, the artist and theorist Alex Anikina said that these kinds of verses are “definitely a genre in itself. You would make them up on the go usually. One that was popular in my childhood was

По реке плывет кирпич,  
Деревянный как стекло,  
Ну и пусть себе плывет,  
Нам не нужен пенопласт.”

Anikina continued: “It takes well to translation. It’s so expressive because the emphasis falls very strongly on the last syllable but at the same time there is no rhyme. I would translate it:

Down the river floats a brick,



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Metahaven, *Elektra*, 2019. Set photo. The image features a "stolen sun" inspired by Chukovsky's children's poetry.

Wooden like a sheet of glass,  
Let it do its own thing,  
We don't need styrofoam."<sup>6</sup>

In 2017, while working on our film *Hometown*, we began to talk about these poems with the Ukrainian curator, writer, and translator, Lesia Prokopenko. She mentioned that

the *perevortyschi* concept is very precise. I've been referring to absurdism a lot myself when trying to describe the present atmosphere. And you know of course that these phenomena, especially in their partly anonymous form of nursery rhymes, are very typical of settings that struggle with ideological languages ... This is typical both for Russia and for Ukraine at the moment.<sup>7</sup>

We became bothered by the question of who made these *perevortyschi* before they became canonized into literature. There had been absurd children's tales called *nebylitsy*, for example.

Indeed, the very term *perevortyschi* had been Chukovsky's invention. In 1988 Elena Hellberg argued that while a rich set of precursors existed in oral Russian folk culture, their coinage as "turnarounds" had been Chukovsky's way of making anti-normal poetic images easily accessible for kids.<sup>8</sup> But if indeed their poetic techniques had older origins, how might they relate, as Prokopenko had suggested, to struggles with ideological languages? Chukovsky insisted that "these odd poetic creations" had been offered to new generations of children "in the course of ... many centuries."<sup>9</sup> He believed that the turnarounds, as well as fiction and fantasy in a broader sense, had a way of teaching children about falsehood and truth. When bringing his own Russian translation of Rudolf Erich Raspe's *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia* to a children's sanatorium in Crimea in 1929, Chukovsky found himself confronted by a young man in uniform demanding to know "what right do you have to read this trash to our children?" To which the poet replied that "it is indeed through its fantasy that this fairy tale emphasizes to the children reality."<sup>10</sup>

### Sesame Street or Nevsky Prospekt

The title of this essay is a citation from "Lullaby," a verse for children by the Russian poet Alexander Vvedensky, who was a member of OBERIU (*Obedinenie real'nogo iskusstva*, the "Union for Real Art"). OBERIU's members worked in St. Petersburg from the 1920s to the early 1940s. Most of them met their end in prison trains, psychiatric wards, and in front of firing squads; the poet and translator Eugene

Ostashevsky notes that "the Russian avant-garde did not die of natural causes."<sup>11</sup> Vvedensky and other OBERIU poets are often grouped under the label of "absurdism," yet they did not use this word themselves. Instead, they used terms such as *bessmyslitsa* and *chin* ("spiritual rank"); the *chinars* ("those of spiritual rank") formed a specific grouping within OBERIU. According to Ostashevsky, the word *chin* appears in OBERIU poetry as a way of recalling the nine ranks of angels designated by a fifth-century Neoplatonic mystic who went by the name of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>12</sup> Though Vvedensky had no known religious affiliations, the influence of mysticism on his work feels all-encompassing. Like other OBERIU members, he also created poems for children, published in magazines such as *Yozh* (еж, "Hedgehog").

In "Lullaby," Vvedensky is persuading the listener to fall asleep, using the word сон (*son*), which can mean both "dream" and "sleep." По дорогам ходит сон (*po darogam godyt son*) can thus picture a dream walking the street, as well as sleep itself doing the same thing; it is up to the reader to decide. In the poem's Dutch version, the translator had chosen "dream."<sup>13</sup> If a dream walks the street, we may imagine something like a cloud walking on long thin sticks. In this vision, the cloud is hand-drawn or vectorized like a thought bubble; its thin legs are black lines on which the dream probes forward through streets that look, schematically, like 1980s America. In spite of the fact that a cloud doesn't need legs to move about, only wind, the entity proceeds on thin black sticks through a graphic version of a US East Coast downtown alley, more Sesame Street than Nevsky Prospekt.

Yet still it is possible that Vvedensky wanted to materialize the impossible and the unimaginable for child listeners, and had meant "sleep" instead of "dream." The filmmaker Anna Petrova weighs in:

Yes, it is not a dream definitely (you're right that the translator apparently decided to romanticize it, it is no doubt Sleep in humanized form :) I would say that is also that type of sleep that is pure, like the one kids have, that comes and goes like a cloud, or that covers you on lazy sunny day.<sup>14</sup>

In materialized metaphor, rhetoric becomes literal, and the context in which metaphorical statements once appeared to make sense is now destroyed. In that way, OBERIU is something of a truth-making operation: in absurdism, an adult who says that they are dying to hear that concert *does die* following the strictly literal logic of the child. The poetic application of this approach is

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Metahaven, *Hometown*, 2018. Film still.

one that Vvedensky came to shape to perfection in spite of having relatively little time to do so. In 1930, Vvedensky writes “Snow Lies,” a long poem that pictures the resurrection of a dead girl in ways that lead from the abyss to joy, and back:

snow lies  
earth flies  
lights flip  
to pigments night has come  
on a rug of stars it lies  
is it night or a demon?

In a series of hallucinatory twists, Vvedensky takes the listener along alogisms like “black gold cages,” the world flying “around the universe,” time that is “as poor as a night,” and “the universe” being “alone.” He offers these images at such breakneck speed that many listeners will feel prompted to ask what this poem is actually about. This is a straightforward question that is unanswerable for a work that attempts to reverse the hierarchy between description and subject, and subvert the constative capacity of almost every sentence to a degree that a listener could, at almost every turn, just surmise (wrongly) that the text is about *nothing* and that its purpose is merely to confuse. What is central to the poem is something called “apophasis,” a mode of speech that uses negation and alogism to appreciate the unknowability of reality and God to the human linguistic-cognitive apparatus. In his day and age, Pseudo-Dionysius, the Neoplatonic mysticist, used apophasis to demonstrate this same paradigm. With striking resemblance to Vvedensky’s later poetry, Pseudo-Dionysius wrote that “the godhead is no more ‘spirit,’ ‘sonship,’ and ‘fatherhood’ than it is ‘intellect’ or ‘asleep.’”<sup>15</sup> In “Snow Lies,” Vvedensky pictures “God languished behind bars / with no eyes no legs no arms,” displaying apophasis by expressing what God does not have. However, for those who fear we will from now on be lost in a mess of Hieronymus-Bosch-meets-*Starship-Troopers* and H. R.-Giger-meets-Jacques-Tati, the verse has a way of slowly twisting its dark notes towards the light:

so that maiden in tears  
sees all this in the heavens  
sees sundry eagles  
appear out of night  
and fly sullen  
and flash silent  
this is so depressing  
the dead maiden will say  
serenely amazed  
God will inquire  
what’s depressing? what’s  
depressing, God, life

what are you talking about  
what O noon do you know  
you press pleasure and Paris  
to your impetuous breast  
you dress like music  
you undress like a statue

As the poem proceeds towards its protagonist’s resurrection, the epic turns brazenly modern. Rested, the maiden rises from the dead and – yawningly – concedes that she had merely been asleep. She had a dream, and dreams are “worse than macaroni,” rhyming сон (*son*, sleep) and макарон (*macaron*, macaroni/pasta). She was “not at all dying,” she was “undulating and crying,” so:

let’s enjoy ourselves really  
let’s gallop to the cinema  
she sped off like a she-ass  
to satisfy her innermost  
lights glint<sup>16</sup> in the heaven  
is it night or a demon<sup>17</sup>

OBERIU speaks to the political circumstances of the first half of the twentieth century as much as it does to the beginning of the twenty-first. It is considered distinct from Soviet futurism, with which it differed on at least one crucial point: it lacked any sense of utopian teleology. The work of Vvedensky, Daniil Kharms, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Nikolai Oleinikov, Leonid Lipavsky, and Yakov Druskin came into being during the transition from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union, and was heavily influenced by the preexisting literary canon. It remained largely lost, and unpublished, through the transition from Lenin to Stalin and into World War II. In order to illustrate the political shifts during OBERIU’s inception, translator Yolanda Bloemen produced the following allegory of the life of Daniil Kharms in a manner resembling one of his own humorous theatrical scenes: “A man fell asleep a citizen of St. Petersburg, and woke up the next day a citizen of Petrograd ... Later he went to sleep a citizen of Petrograd, and the next day woke up a citizen of Leningrad.”<sup>18</sup>

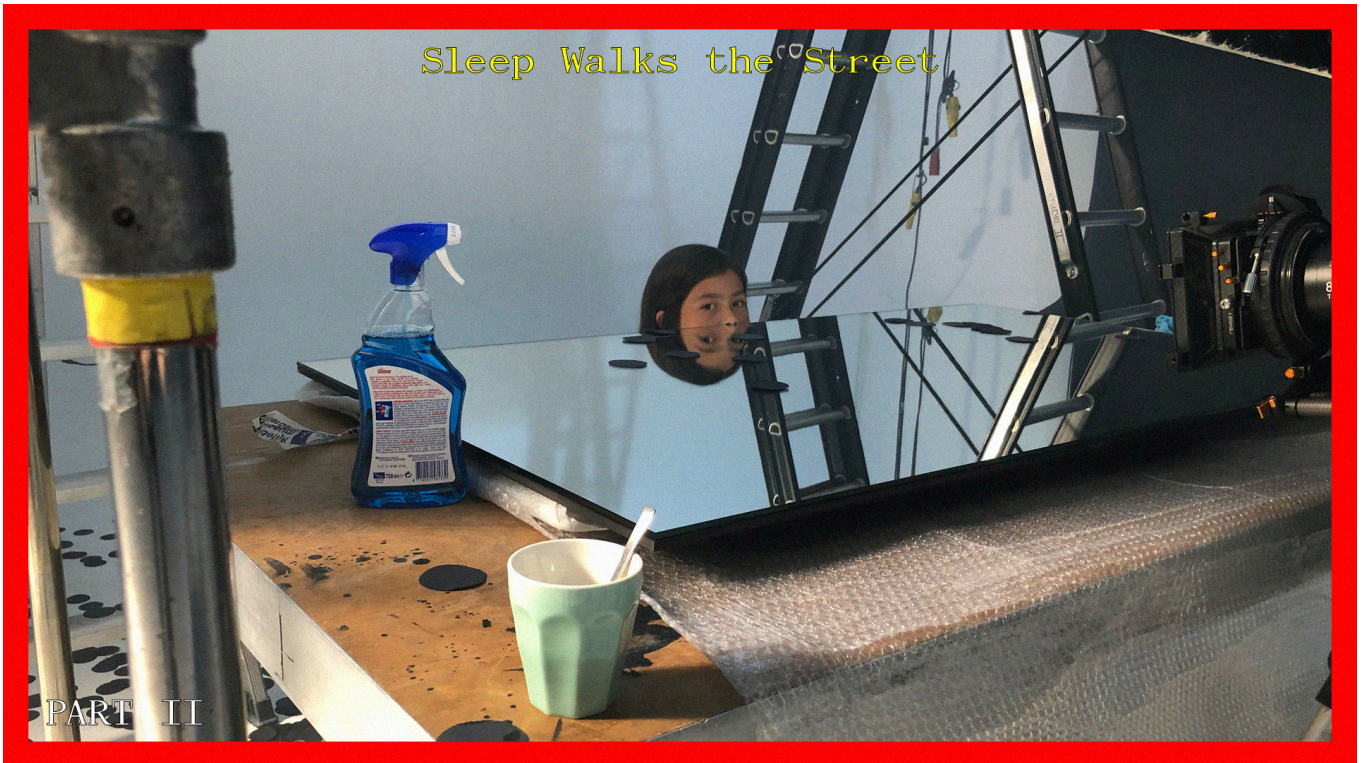
Why should we talk about absurdism today? The citation about Kharms provides one reason. For readers today, a story like this may bring to mind Brexit, a lived reality in which we do not know which geopolitical constellation we will be waking up in tomorrow, and in which the epistemic indeterminacy of its day-to-day reality is itself an instrument of power. Absurdism was an art form that emerged in the context of a similarly explicit sense of political uncertainty. And yet, absurdism is not parody. Indeed, absurdism is not a category that itself belongs to the absurd. Eugene Ostashevsky emphasizes

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Metahaven, *Elektra*, 2019. Set photo.

that absurdism is a way of trying to speak about the things that matter while at the same time trying not to commodify them. Whilst today some may feel tempted to equate this or that bizarre internet meme or Trump quote with a form of contemporary “online” absurdism, these digital objects or utterances aren’t absurdism just because they’re absurd. Absurdism ultimately comprises literacy about meaninglessness and a ruthless criticism of language. Ostashevsky confirms that in the work of the *chinars* “narrative, simile, and metaphor fall by the wayside,” subsequently “destroying protocols of semantic coherence and linguistic realism.”<sup>19</sup> Conversely, from the vantage point of literacy about meaninglessness, any lack of a trustworthy episteme is unsurprising, and the upside-down world of Chukovsky’s *perevortyshi* an everyday reality.

There exist several interpretative frameworks around the overlaps between children’s speech play, “nonsense,” and the artistic genre of absurdism and its reliance on apophasis, which links it to mysticism. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Joel Scherzer contend that “nonsense and speech play ... represent a radical alternative to the tyranny of propositional meaning and instrumentality,”<sup>20</sup> a reasoning that seems in tune with Ostashevsky’s assessment of the work of the *chinars*. Susan Stewart attests to the cognitive aspect of speech play when she proposes that it manifests “epistemological paradoxes in which the mind, by its own operation, says something about its own operation, or the way in which language speaks in metalanguage or fictions through metafiction.”<sup>21</sup> In Stewart’s understanding, it does not suffice for turnaround language to criticize constative statements or the tyranny of propositional meaning; it matters whether or not the turnaround narrator is actually speaking the truth. Since in a phrase like “In January, on the 5th of April” we are being given two different points in time that, in everyday language and everyday understandings of temporality, cannot correspond or refer to the same moment, one of them has to be the “wrong” time. The phrase raises questions about the reliability of its narrator. In this manner, turnarounds are connected to a paradox attributed to a Cretan named Epiminides. The Epiminides paradox goes: “All Cretans are liars, said the Cretan.”<sup>22</sup>

The core element of this statement is its self-referentiality, which arises because the narrator is included. The cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, taking on the paradox in *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, called such self-referentiality a “strange loop.” Hofstadter mused:

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“This statement is false” ... It is a statement that rudely violates the usually assumed dichotomy of statements into true and false, because if you tentatively think it is true, then it immediately backfires on you and makes you think it is false. But once you’ve decided it is false, a similar backfiring returns you to the idea that it must be true. Try it!<sup>23</sup>

Stewart proposed that “both play and the Epiminides paradox involve negative statements containing implicit negative metastatements, the negative metastatements having to do with a different domain of reality.”<sup>24</sup> Yet – interestingly – the Epiminides paradox is not a negative statement but an undecidable proposition. The paradox disappears when the the statement is inverted: “No Cretans are liars, said the Cretan,” which is effectively the same as “All Cretans speak the truth, said the Cretan.” The statement is no longer undecidable, but merely unverifiable. Another way of disarming the Epiminides paradox is by folding it into itself as hearsay. If the Epiminides paradox was once, indeed, uttered by a Cretan, there’s no reason why another Cretan can’t cite it too: “A Cretan once said that all Cretans are liars, said the Cretan.”

There’s also a nice variation of the Epiminides paradox in the rhetorical technique of the conclusion which denies premises. It is hilariously easy to debunk:

“Son, because nothing is certain in this world we have to hold on to what experience tells us.”

“Are you sure, Dad?”

“Yes, son. I’m certain.”<sup>25</sup>

Susan Stewart called a turnaround rhyme “ironic.” She argued that the conflicting statements in it precipitate a dividualization of their narrator into sub-entities, “talking in two contradictory voices at the same time. The narrator splits into two contradictory narrators, each denying each other’s discourse.”<sup>26</sup> But she also argues that “for children, play and fictions hold the fascination of something that is both a lie and not a lie. Thus they are as powerful as a taboo in an anomalous position – a taboo that attracts.”<sup>27</sup>

For Chukovsky, all this was just part of a (not just Russian, but still very Russian) passion for poetry. He recalls a letter sent to the poet Agnia Barto by the parents of a four-month-old kid asking when would be a good time for them to start with Pushkin.<sup>28</sup> In spite of his defenses of the Soviet model of education, in 1928 the regime’s campaign against “lack of message” targeted Chukovsky personally with an article in

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Metahaven, *Eurasia (Questions on Happiness)*, 2018. Film still. In the film, the dark gray keyboard scene, covered with industrial waste, initiates a rendition of Alexander Vvedensky's "Snow Lies."



*Pravda* by Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, titled "Chukovitis," likening the poet's name to an infectious disease. She targeted his epic "The Crocodile" for allegedly being "bourgeois fog"<sup>29</sup> and "'incredible rubbish' that says nothing about the real life of crocodiles."<sup>30</sup> While Chukovsky managed to escape further scrutiny, three years later Vvedensky and Kharms were jailed for writing children's poetry. Unlike Chukovsky, they had almost no powerful allies to protect them.

X so loves "The Crocodile." Its protagonist, a crocodile, is an endearing, chain-smoking gangster, a brutal yet polite shapeshifter who eventually uses the latter quality to pacify his adversaries, who in turn pacify him. The poem's child hero Vanya nonetheless saves St. Petersburg from the reptile and gets rewarded with abundant chocolate and ice cream. At six, X knows much of this long poem by heart. I wonder if there will be a time when she rejects it and discards the book as rubbish. Is the gift of absurdism subject to an age limit, or can it indeed be more of a philosophy?

For Vvedensky, *bessmyslitsa* ("meaninglessness") had nothing to do with irony or parody, let alone with dividualization of the narrator. His materialized metaphors and alogisms were meant as "the end of poetic utterance and not as a means to convey content more effectively."<sup>31</sup> The cycle "The Gray Notebook" (1932–33) contains both poems and short essays. In some of the poems, Vvedensky displays outright humor, for example when he performs analogical fallacies in "The Song of the Notebook." But no matter how much fun is being had in these lines, there's always a thoughtful, deeper turn at hand:

Sea, O sea, you're the homeland of waves,  
the waves are sea-children.  
The sea is their mother  
and their sister's the notebook,  
it's been that way now for many a century.  
And they lived very well.  
And they prayed often.  
The sea to God  
and the children to God.  
And later they resettled in the sky  
from where they sprayed rain,  
and on that rainy spot a house grew.  
The house lived well.  
It taught the doors and windows to play  
shore, immortality, dream, and notebook.  
Once upon a time.<sup>32</sup>

Vvedensky developed a way of writing that undermined the constative capacity of rhetorical expression, yet he was increasingly reaping the fruits of radiant poetics: a strong mode of lyricity achieved through a radical method of

thinking and writing. The wilder the poem, the more clear the undermining; the less wild, the more foregrounded the poetics. The short essays in "The Gray Notebook" provide for an intermediate stage between both, calling into question the way we qualify and quantify things by giving names to units that then "stand for" what we can no longer encounter because of the interface that was provided by the name. These essays are entirely personal in character and we need to think of the fact that Vvedensky never saw any of this material appear in print in his lifetime. This is quite the opposite of a tweet or Facebook or Medium post that offers forms of immediate reward. Vvedensky writes,

Let us think about simple things. We say: tomorrow, today, evening. Thursday, month, year, during the course of the week. We count the hours in a day. We point to their increase. Earlier, we saw only half the day, now we have noticed the movement within the whole of the day. But when the next day comes, we begin counting the hours anew.

Strikingly, he seems to feel no need to point the reader to any of his previous work. Every encounter with language is a fresh demonstration of the point. He continues:

In the case of time, its addition differs from all other addition. You can't compare three months you lived through to three trees that have grown again. The trees are right there, their leaves glimmer dimly. Of months you can't say the same with confidence. The names of minutes, seconds, hours, days, weeks, and months distract us from even our superficial understanding of time. All these names are analogous either to objects, or to concepts and measures of space. As a result, a week gone by lies before us like a killed deer.<sup>33</sup>

This is so Vvedensky. He destroys the illusion of epistemic control offered by metaphor and analogy, and yet offers a "killed deer" in return, with all of its poetic potentiality and logical fallacy. He exposes the fallacy and uses it. He catches us red-handed in picturing the metaphor that he's prepared, which he also deeply criticizes at the same time. Yes: our phone calendars are now like killed deer.

### Verses Like Drugs

With absurdism as a method of non-commodification of the things that matter, and turnarounds as a linguistic rendering of disbelief paying a kind of mystic tribute to reality, we are back at our earlier question about the links



between these poetic forms, their origins, and the ideological and political environments that gave rise to them. Denis the Carthusian, a fifteenth-century mystic scholar from present-day Belgium, had written in turnaround language when he pictured God's "super-light darkness."<sup>34</sup> Surely, Denis was building on the work of his main intellectual source and namesake, Pseudo-Dionysius. By contrast, in Europe and the US in the twentieth century, these poetic forms are interpreted in relative isolation from their cultural networks. While still collected as folklore, they are now seen as belonging to play behavior, and indexed according to aspects of phonology, rhyme, and meter that supposedly determine their attractiveness to children. For example, the researchers Iona and Peter Opie in the late 1950s recorded a turnaround poem in the UK, as created by a twelve-year-old girl:

'Twas in the month of Liverpool  
In the city of July,  
The snow was raining heavily,  
The streets were very dry.  
The flowers were sweetly singing,  
The birds were in full bloom,  
As I went down the cellar  
To sweep an upstairs room.<sup>35</sup>

The verse contains the same patterns as some of the earlier examples, but it is contextualized by the researchers as an example of play, or "tangletalk," denoting "the deliberate display of incongruities' in children's ditties and rhymes."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, when looked at as playful experimentation, a turnaround may appear as harmless yet virtuoso, to the extent that its inventiveness risks becoming a measure of linguistic virtue, a kind of school grade for the child that invented it. But this was never actually the point of these poems.

Political questions press themselves to the foreground once again when absurdist speech acts, merging lyricality and critique, are considered in relation to speech acts carrying authority and power. The Russian writer Aleksei Salnikov, in his 2019 novel *Oposredovanno* ("Indirectly"), pictures a world in which one distinguishes between "literature" and *stishki*, a diminutive of *stikhi* ("verses"). In this world – which is otherwise a replica of contemporary Russia – literature is legal, official, and boring, while verses are an illegal drug.

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This ongoing series would not be possible without the invaluable help, guidance, and direction provided, in various forms, by Anna Petrova, Alex Anikina, Lesia Prokopenko, Eugene Ostashevsky, Flavia Dzodan, Anastassia Smirnova, Natasha Tyshkevych, and Anastasia Kubrak. We thank the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and especially Richard Birkett, for hosting the poetry seminar "The Way of

Comets," which we organized with them in early 2019 as part of our exhibition "Version History," and which greatly influenced this work. An earlier version of "Sleep Walks the Street" was presented, at the invitation of Slavs & Tatars, at the 2019 Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, which they curated. We also thank Strelka Institute, Moscow, which hosted our seminar on Alexander Vvedensky as part of "The New Normal." We extend special thanks to Tatiana Efrussi as our research collaborator on this series.

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1  
Kornei Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, trans. Miriam Morton (University of California Press, 1968), 11.

2  
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, 12.

3  
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, xv.

4  
See <https://twitter.com/redlightvoices/status/1182596992981180422>.

5  
Translated from the Russian by Alex Anikina, email to author, January 2017.

6  
Alex Anikina, email to author, January 2017.

7  
Lesia Prokopenko, email to author, January 2017.

8  
See Elena F. Hellberg, "Folkloristic Puns" (фольклорные перевертыши), *Russian Linguistics* 12, no. 3 (1988): 293–301.

9  
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, 96.

10  
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, 115.

11  
Eugene Ostashevsky, "Alexander Vvedensky, An Invitation for Us to Think," in Alexander Vvedensky, *An Invitation for Me to Think*, ed. and trans. Eugene Ostashevsky (NYRB Poets, 2013), vii.

12  
Eugene Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," in *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, ed. E. Ostashevsky (Northwestern University Press, 2006), xv.

13  
See Alexander Vvedensky, "Slaapliedje," in *Bij mij op de maan: Russische kindergedichten*, trans. Robbert-Jan Henkes (Van Oorschot, 2016), 420.

14  
Anna Petrova, message to author, 2019.

15  
"Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/>.

16  
Vvedensky writes "сияние" (*siyaniye*), literally meaning "shine." During our class session on Vvedensky at Strelka Institute, Moscow, in 2019, the philosopher Natasha Tyshkevych suggested that an English translation should follow the literal meaning "shine" instead

of "glint," thus emphasizing the religious thematic of the poem.

17  
Vvedensky, "Snow Lies" (1930), in *An Invitation for Me to Think*, 13–15.

18  
Yolanda Bloemen, "Ik ben net als iedereen, alleen beter," afterword to *Charms: Werken* (Van Oorschot, 2019), 619. Translation of this fragment by Metahaven.

19  
Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," in *OBERIU*, xv.

20  
Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Joel Scherzer, "Introduction," in *Speech Play: Research and Resources for Studying Linguistic Creativity*, ed. B. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 10.

21  
Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 29.

22  
We have previously written about the Epiminides paradox in *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* (Strelka Press, 2013). That essay also referenced Susan Stewart's *Nonsense*. However, our take on the Epiminides paradox in this essay is distinct from its earlier treatment in the context of (political) internet memes.

23  
Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Basic Books, 1999), 17.

24  
Stewart, *Nonsense*, 29.

25  
See Madsen Pirie, *How to Win Every Argument: The Use and Abuse of Logic* (Continuum, 2006), 36.

26  
Stewart, *Nonsense*, 73.

27  
Stewart, *Nonsense*, 72.

28  
Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, 57.

29  
See <https://reddomino.typepad.com/newfirstunexpected/2009/04/ive-just-been-told-about-the-krupskaya-article-poor-me-poor-me-so-its-poverty-again-im-writing-a-response-to-kr.html>.

30  
Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," in *OBERIU*, xviii.

31  
Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," in *OBERIU*, xvi.

32  
Vvedensky, "The Song of the Notebook" (1932–33), in *An Invitation for Me to Think*, 69.

33  
Vvedensky, "Simple Things" (1932–33), in *An Invitation for Me to Think*, 74.

34  
Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 257.

35  
Mary Sanches and Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Children's Traditional Speech Play and Child Language," in *Speech Play*, 93.

36  
See Karen Gallas, *Sometimes I Can Be Anything: Power, Gender, and Identity in a Primary Classroom* (Teachers College Press, 1997), 67.

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