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**NETWORK AND SACRIFICE IN THE NOVEL I/E_RUS.OLIM BY
ELIZAVETA MIKHAILICHENKO AND YURY NESIS**

Among many poetry collections, novels, short stories, plays, and film scripts by Elizaveta Mikhailichenko (Elisheva Nesis) and Yury Nesis, I will focus here on the second novel in their Jerusalem cycle, which is composed of *A Noble Man of Jerusalem (Ierusalimsky dvorianin, 1997)*, *I/e_rus.olim (2004)*, and *Preemptive Revenge (3BI, 2006)*.¹ These books reflect the construction of a new indigenous Jerusalem identity by immigrants from the former Soviet Union, against the background of the vicissitudes and catastrophes that Israeli society underwent at the turn of the millennium. As will be shown, *I/e_rus.olim* links this process to the process of the constitution of literature and the conception of the network. This new Israeli native identity (neo-indigeneity) presumes assimilation into the soil of the Land of Israel, into its stones, its symbols, its memory.² But

¹ Elizaveta Mikhailichenko and Yury Nesis emigrated from the Soviet Union to Israel in 1990. During the four years preceding her move, Mikhailichenko, born in 1962, published two books of poetry, a prose work *Garmoniia po Deribasovu* (Harmony According to Deribasov), that she co-authored with Yury Nesis, and another prose work written together with Nesis and Sergei Dolgov *Triokhkoliosny velosiped* (The Tricycle). She continued to publish after her arrival in Israel—fifteen poetry collections of her own, along with ten novels, short stories, plays, and film scripts written in collaboration with Yury Nesis. In Israel, they have published their writing mostly as digital literature.

² Neo-indigeneity can be viewed as an opposite of the phenomenon that is widely discussed nowadays and can be called neo-diasporism or diasporic transnationalism. See the works of Khachig Tölölyan and his fellows: (Tölölyan 2002), (Alfonso, Kokot and Tölölyan 2004). See also: (Gal, Leoussi and Smith 2010), (Clifford 2013). The nature of the Russian emigrant literature in Israel had been discussed ((Генделев 1986), (Генделев 1991))

it also involves a circumvention of the local language and a transcendental exit from the present. This is accomplished via a transgressive gesture— theft, murder, sacrifice, nomadism, and translation. In other words, the new indigenous identity has an inverted character, from the end to the beginning. Its growth is reversed, moving from blood to seed. The return to the land arouses neo-indigenous heroism as death and sacrifice. Neo-indigeneity is the reverse side—opposed and complementary—to neo-diasporism. As I will argue, the writings of the Nesises unites two ostensibly contradictory approaches—native identity and the network, localism and universalism.³

The Nesises' virtual novel, *I/e_rus.olim* (written in 2003), recounts Jerusalem adventures of five companions from their school days—Bella, David, Grisha the painter, Kinolog, and the nouveau tycoon Lin. Another central figures in the story are their new friends Ortik and Lea, a red-coated cat named Allergen and a pair of writers, doubles of the authors, whose names appear as ©.⁴ The novel is framed as the recollections of Jerusalem's stones, beginning when wine is spilled on them and then licked up by a kitten, who is picked up by David. It ends when David kills the cat at the end. David sabotages Grisha's project of painting all 1,000 of King Solomon's wives. David cannot shake off his conviction that a monster, something like a lion and something like a sphinx, is roaming the streets of Jerusalem, seeking victims. In the meantime, Lin resolves to finance a mystical-genetic project conjured up by one of the group's friends, Ortik. Ortik intends to map the genome of the Messiah and engineers his birth. Lin freezes his sperm and writes in his will that Bella will receive the inheritance if she gives birth to his child. No one knows that she already is pregnant (from David or Lin). In another

until the very concept of the Russian emigrant literature ostensibly became irrelevant (justifiably or not) after the dismemberment of the Soviet Union.

³ For the survey and discussion of centuries long struggle between Jewish localism (and particularism) and universalism, see: (Lundgren 2001), (Hughes 2014).

⁴ In Russian, the letter C is read as the phoneme 's', the letter that appears twice in the family name Nesis. As well as, the name © hints to the problem of authority and "the death of author" in post-structuralism and postmodernism. And at last, it embodies the 2500 years old philosophical problem of copy and original.

storyline, the authors devote themselves to writing on the network and to discussions in which they create a new virtual character, Allergen the cat-poet, who quickly becomes hugely popular. The companions also have a hobby, playing a game they call “Historical Extreme [Sports].” They assume paramilitary roles or simply go on journeys based on biblical stories that take place in Jerusalem. During one of these journeys a woman is mysteriously murdered. Attempts are also made on the lives of Bella and her friend Leah, David’s girlfriend. David accelerates the search for a sacrificial victim, and in the end finds one—Allergen the red cat and his virtual avatar. The story lines interweave and develop and suspense builds up until the novel’s tragic denouement—David murders the cat and is killed himself adjacent to the Western Wall before the eyes of his helpless friends.

Thus, one of the main characters in the novel is the virtual cat Allergen, an avatar created for writing the novel and as a method of searching the truth.⁵ Network activity, posts, and conversations on LiveJournal, are all directed at the writing of the novel (the cat drawings by Elisheva Nesis should also be added to this, but require a separate discussion). They raise two questions: what is the literary-philosophical method being used here? And what happens when a virtual character becomes a character in a novel? The virtual character cannot and does not want to remain in the network’s entropic, anonymous limbo—it aspires to be embodied in a living personality. This means that the character wishes to become part of a narrative, a chronotope. Existence in a story enables the creation of a world, a myth, a symbol, an organism.⁶ In this sense, every story, even in the pre-network era, is the actualization of a virtual character formed in the consciousness of its creator as his avatar, as a perfect and free double at the height of its humanity, as a transcendental subjectivity that actualizes its transcendental purpose. Allergen the cat is thus thought or thinking itself, the pure reason that

⁵ See: (Михайличенко и Несис, Краткая автобиография виртуального кота Аллергена б.д.).

⁶ According to Alexei Losev, a symbol is a living organism, and this involves the understanding of myth as the infusing of life into all (Losev 2003, 166-167). For Losev, myth is a miraculous story of a personality, when a miracle is understood as realization of the transcendental purpose of the personality in the empirical history (ibid. 185-186).

constitutes the source of the created—familiar world of knowledge. The network models the human brain, a Platonic ideal world of potential, pure possibility, the Torah as the blueprint of the created world.

It is no coincidence that pure reason gets actualized in a novel rather than some other kind of text. The modern novel was born along with modern idealism, Kant's critical idealism, and with the same purpose—to create, simultaneously, the modern transcendental and historical subject. This subject can be individual (a personality) or collective (a nation). In either case it constitutes itself in the thinking of its origin and foundation. A novel is thought personified in the body of history. The theology of the novel is fundamentally Christian, more precisely, this theology is constructed as a syllogism that justifies Greek mimesis with the help of Jewish redemption. That is, the God-idea is embodied in matter and sacrifices himself in order to create-redeem the world. Moreover, this theology is connected to the Jewish mystical concept of *tzimtzum* or “contraction,” which turns the novel into a microcosm not only of the world but also one of the creator. The novel is the magic crystal that harbors within it the secret of creation—the creation of man and the creation of space-time—and the secret of the sacrifice as a means of creation. René Girard has demonstrated the connection between the novel and the theology and anthropology of the sacrifice, and Eric Gans has turned this hypothesis into a linguistic and semiotic method.⁷ The appearance of a novel like the Nesises' at the beginning of the 21st century reinforces the presumption that we are situated at the peak of the novel's and romanticism's return to the forefront of the cultural stage.

That being the case, it is no coincidence that, at the center of the Nesises' novel on Jerusalem and on immigrants from the USSR, the character of the sacrificial victim stands as a subject and idea. This is not just because Jerusalem is a city of sacrifices, or because the nomadic-neophyte immigrants, in Hebrew “*olim*,” or ascenders (to the land and to the sacrifice) are the “natural,” organic factors of the “history allergy.” The person who ascends to be a sacrifice is the cat, the virtual character who becomes actualized in the novel. The transcendental subject, the embodiment of the network-reason,

⁷ See: (Girard 1979), (Gans 2011).

the idea, is one actualized in the martyr myth, that is the victim. The impression received in reading the novel is events could not happen otherwise. The cat is a miniature of the lion, the symbol of Jerusalem, of the tribe of Judah, of kingship and Messiah. But, in the novel, the lion is also a symbol of poetry, because Allergen is an Internet poet. The romantic image of the poet as martyr is united here with reason and the idea. This union produces the image of the genius, who differs from the romantic genius only in the surroundings in which it comes into existence—at the nexus of the network and the novel. The symbolic series “poet-genius-king-messiah” leads to the transfiguration-disappearance of the subject-victim. The cat returns to the anonymity of the network as to the ocean of mystical unity, the subject returns to its origin, and the origin, historical thinking, begins anew. It cannot begin in any other way, as the thinking is the thinking of the origin,⁸ that is, the thinking of the victim.

The connection between the virtual character and that in the novel also works in the opposite direction. The character of the cat in the novel brings with it the baggage of its creation outside the novel, that is, in the “reality” of the network. Poems, essays, and correspondence in Internet forums create a context that is not only the intertext or source of the novel; the novel and the works external to it are constructed within a unified space of invention on the network, especially as the novel itself was published on the Internet. They are parts of a single work. In this way the novel itself becomes the continuation and reproduction of the network. As in a matrix, doubles of the authors and their cat, the “real” cat, live in the novel. According to the storyline, the writers who are the novel’s protagonists create the virtual character of the Internet cat—a network within a network. Dialectically, however, the network, being both reproducing and negating, counteracts itself or, to be more precise, its own virtuality. The matrix becomes the “desert of reality,” and the postmodern novel is shown to be pseudo-realist-magical and pseudo-biographical. The authors return to reality, even if it is a “daughter reality,” as the cat refers to it in the poem “We’re the Red” (“My–ryzhye):

Burning in depression of the autumn blaze—

A deed the rabble delights in.

⁸ See (Cohen 2005, 36).

For me, however, it's too formulaic,
As I live in a daughter reality.⁹

But this is not a need for vulgar and schematic mimesis but rather for the historical-empirical actualization of a persona, of a transcendental and purposeful subject. In other words, it is the need for the creation of a myth. The novel-myth, like a generic Allergen, causes an allergy to history on the network. It creates temporality by means of the creation of a plot:

What is our life?
Delirium, of course,
But one that has a storyline.
“Things Unbalanced” (“*Neuravnoveshennoe*”)

Time is the plot of the journey, the adventure of the nomadic cat, the trickster and picaro, the mythical eternal voyager in the trash heap of history:

But the soul is always coated with thick layer of a vagabond's dust
From all roads, dumps, and times!
“Bathing of a Red Cat” (“*Kupanie ryzhego kota*”)

The “daughter reality” created by the virtual-ideal novel is far from being abstract and rational, scientific and pure, just as myth, according to Losev, is not a scheme or template:

Cats don't have friends, but are united
By feathers, claws, by glory and by luck.
The Muses of the humanities give way
To those of passions, rage, and lamentation.
“Drinking song” (“*Zastolnaia pesn*”)

⁹ All the poems cited here were published on the Internet: (Михайличенко и Несис, Поэтическое наследие виртуального кота Аллергена б.д.). See also: Михайличенко и Несис, *В реальности дочерней. Стихи кота Аллергена* (СПб.: Геликон плюс, 2001). All the texts by the Nesises translated by Yan Mazon.

Furthermore, the nature of the network, its words, creativity, birth, and history are all founded on a single principle, the culture instinct; Netneism (the Nesises' concept, meaning hyper-human existence in the network)¹⁰ is life itself:

Any being, if passionate and alive,
Wishes to procreate in words, in poems, offspring, too.

I love this passionate netneism
By light of day, of lantern, and in dusk.

“Pas-Passionate” (“*Netneistovoe*”)

An artisan by day,
By night I'm re-creator.

“Back into the Arena” (“*Snova na arene*”)

In a typical mythopoetic gesture, the entire world—space and time—are likened to a cat (for example, the sun and the autumn are like a cat with red fur), and via the cat, to the network. The virtual cat is a text that seeks to end with a period, even as the nullity that comes after the end appears as a multiplicity of periods:

I feel like a period
At the end of the text. And then ...

“Don't be Afraid” (“*Ne boysia*”)

In another poem, the cat, by this time almost suffering an allergic attack out of passion and jealousy, seeks to bolster the unity of myth, life, and history. He puts the following words in the mouth of the biblical Rebecca, as she sends Jacob instead of Esau into the tent of the elderly Isaac:

Lies, treachery, and blood—these underlie

All miracles!

“Catology” (“*Kotologiia*”)

¹⁰ See: (Михайличенко и Несис, Постмодернизм? Нет, нетнеизм! Русский Журнал, 16.03.03 // Кот Аллерген 2003).

History is actualized in costume, in a “circus and ring,” in “clowning and posing” (“*Snova na arene*”), in the fabrication of “cardboard scenery,” by theft, transgression, and the annulment of taboos, as in “Red and Black” (“*Krasnoe i chiornoye*”):

There, in the tent, Yitzhak was dying—

The last sphinx gone blind.

The first hack was thus engineered,

And the world hung up.

“Catology” (“*Kotologiia*”)

This witty versification, which bridges over thousands of years of history—Yitzhak (Isaac) and *hak* (hack)—likens the world to a computer. The establishment of history, which is not possible without the hacking of the primogeniture code, is identical to its end in the systemic collapse, the eternal apocalypse. Jacob is Allergen, the virus of history. More precisely, Jacob-Allergen-the-cat is what causes the world to break out in the allergic reaction that is history. Instead of sphinxes, the symbol of eternity, we have cats, the symbols of time. But, paradoxically, the historical world is likened to a stuck computer. At the center of the foundational myth is a built-in, organic, constitutive bug. The computer game produces a sick symmetry between creator and creation, and erases the boundary between them. In the endless reflections of parallel mirrors (*mise en abyme*) the game cannot end; the child can never be separated from its parent:

Umbilical cord of the game

Is sweeping the ground, bleeding.

Other worlds are cut open

By the swing of a hangman’s axe.

“Pas-Passionate” (“*Netneistovoe*”)

The creator of the game (that is, the computer user who creates an avatar) appears as a hangman, but if he is also the created character, he is the victim as well. Sin and blood are thus not only metaphors. The blade of the hack slices through the player, the theater turns into real life, and the pose into fate, into a moral imperative and responsibility that, epistemologically, obliges each side:

One must feel the integrity
Of body, warmth, and deeds.
“The Autumnal” (“*Osennee*”)

Now that we have become acquainted with the work and outlook of Allergen the virtual cat, who paved the way for and aided in the writing of the virtual novel, we can proceed to a discussion of the novel itself. *I/e_rus.olim* accords with the demands of network multiplicity. Like a sort of fractal Rashomon, it sets in motion further sets of micro-stories, which recount the story from the points of view of the various protagonists (the cat being one of them). The fragmentation is, however, bogus, as the stories are all placed within a unified fictional sequence. The network flowing with information is compared with the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey (Михайличенко и Несис, *I/e_рус.олим* 2004, II, 7, Kot-1, 26).¹¹

History too is viewed as a network, but also a network—as history. This explains the existential plight of the individual. The novel’s central characters are childhood friends, from the same class at school. Now they are in Jerusalem and one of them, Bella, experiences the existential alienation that is so characteristic of immigrants at the “middle of our life path”: “Kinolog quipped that last time when the present company had drunk some pop wine together was in the foyer of Grisha’s house. But now we’re outside—outside the foyer, childhood, city renamed, country fallen apart, each other, ourselves... We all are no longer ‘we,’ but for some reason, we came here... What for? And what the rest is for?” (ibid., I, 1, Bella-1, 25-26).

Like Leningrad, which expunged its name to become St. Petersburg, which expunged its name to become Petrograd which expunged its name to become Leningrad, Jerusalem has expunged-inscribed its past. On the ruins of its old names-myths rise new names-myths. Cities and lands, like

¹¹ The book exists only in electronic format without pagination. Therefore, the references will consist of the number of division (I or II), the number of part, the title of chapter and the number of paragraph. When the titles of chapters are names, they sometimes repeat within the same part. In these cases, they will be followed by sequence numbers of their appearance (for instance, David-2).

human beings, step outside themselves and are no longer identical to themselves. This leaving or exit creates the same duality and multiplicity of moments of historical time that can coexist only in the form of an epistemic network. Bella's feeling of alienation and self-alienation reflects "schizophrenia" in Gilles Deleuze's use of the term, the postmodern network sense that is at the same time romantic and existential, and which has no meaning without the concept of the subject-personality as a source. Meaning is defined by, as Deleuze names one of his books, the "difference and repetition" of series of signs on the network, but consciousness asks "what for?" and the web surfer remains always outside the network, transcendental to itself and to every difference or repetition, which enables it to imagine the network as history.

Bella's words in this passage reverberate in other things she says: "My schoolmate's face materialized before me with a gloomy but broad smile right here, in the center of Jerusalem's Old City. It could not be real, but it was" (ibid., I, 1, Bella-2, 29). Jerusalem is an alternative-parallel city, hallucinated and ecstatic, a drug-city that creates a different sort of consciousness that strips the ego of itself, an addiction that cannot be overcome (ibid., I, 6, Bella-1, 45). So Grisha says: "I like being a guest in my own home. In my own time. In my own body" (ibid., I, 1, Grisha-3, 2). The sense of alienation from the here-and-now is one of the most common topoi of immigration literature, and is especially prominent in Russian-Israeli fiction. It typifies, for example, Dina Rubina's characters, especially in her early novels. This sense can signify existential anxiety or hidden, almost forbidden pleasure, as in the case of Grisha, whatever the case it signifies a split in reality and the creation of an alternative-parallel historical multiplicity. This sense of being "a guest of oneself" is a version of the theme of the wandering Jew, the eternal nomad; it is also a version of the theme "I go forth toward myself," which can even have a catastrophic connotation, as in Agnon.¹² But the split in the subject that this involves is no more than an apparatus for constituting the subject, just as breaking biological determinism is a condition for creating history. History, all of it, is always an alternative history, just as in the rhetorical act every myth is always a deviation from another myth. Story and discourse are

¹² See (Hagbi 2009).

born by breaking the monolith of silence. Speech requires the speaker to step outside himself and his identity, and thus to be in more than one place—the exact opposite of the stillness of a historical archive. What exists is that which is not in its proper place. In other words, that which hosts itself, in a temporary and almost random way, is what is redeemed. Such auto-hospitality is the essence of the signification, according to the metaphysical ethics of Levinas, who in *Time and the Other* constructs the existence of the Self on the Other. This metaphysics is also the basics of the novel's dialogic nature, which can be monologic as well, but cannot but aspire to the infinity of reflections in the two parallel mirrors of thinking—the same infinity chosen by Oswald Spengler in his *The Decline of the West* as the central characteristic of Faustian European civilization. The Faust theme—that of the double, the copy, the other—is thus also tied to the issue of existential alienation and nomadic immigration literature. The Faust theme also reflects the experience of “the reality that cannot be but is,” that is the experience of the purely and truly possible, infinite (because it is) unrealized.¹³ In other words, the experience of “me hosting myself” is the Faustian, European foundation myth that constitutes the nucleus of the novelistic narrative that is central to European culture. It is also the nucleus of the nomadic-questing ethos that constitutes the novelistic narrative in all its possible chronotopes, including those described by Bakhtin and those that were not. It has already been said of the classical novel that all its characters are really one. But the novel under discussion here offers a chronotope that is more characteristic of the modern anti-novel, and it has its own uniqueness: the protagonist taking form on the network of himself as a contingent historic network.

Such networks extend within and around characters. Sometimes they merge with one another. Grisha's internal personality network is bound up with the network of his drawings, and since the drawings are of the characters, sites and historical subjects that appear in the novel, these two networks are bound up with the historical network. Grisha seems to try (fruitlessly) to capture time in the network: “On my historical canvasses, I caught time; I donned garments of the respective epochs; I charmed my endowment, as though it were a snake. The time, however, passed by the street magician

¹³ See (Epstein 2001).

on the roadside without even casting a fleet glance at him, without slowing down” (И/е_рус.олим 2004, II, 9, Grisha, 1).

When Grisha’s gesture of appropriating time fails, he merges into the network that commodifies time—he, as David puts it, “steals the past from King Solomon” by taking part in the smuggling and sale of archaeological artifacts from the Temple Mount (ibid., II, 9, David-2, 79). “He robs the city so as to buy a shroud with his ill-gotten earnings” (ibid., II, 10, David, 4). This tangle of networks merges into the network of relations among the protagonists, and between the relations between them as models of the paintings and the painted protagonists. Finally, it creates a network among their ideas, political opinions, the reality of Jerusalem today, and its almost-secret subterranean archaeological life. The novel’s protagonists call surfing this inconceivable network of networks “extreme history,” like one of extreme sports. The protagonists go on adventure hikes to historical sites, both physical and virtual. For this purpose they wear magic shoes made by a “mad Jewish shoemaker” from Jerusalem, shoes that sound like they come from the pages of Borges or Pavić. “Shoes like these can remind, stylize, change [their wearer], and lead to entirely different paths” (ibid., I, 1, Grisha-3, 12). On one of these outings, in a kind of “spiritual exercise” (ibid., I, 2, Miau!, 30), David and Grisha descend to the Gihon spring below Jerusalem’s walls dressed as King David and his chieftain Joab, on their way to capture Jebus, as Jerusalem was then known (ibid., I, 2, David-1, 8). The risk involved in this “extreme” game involves more than its players going to dangerous places. It is also inherent in the blurring of the psycho-cultural boundaries between the heroes of the novel and their doubles from other times—that is, other places on the network, such as between Grisha and his paintings of women on the one hand and King Solomon and his harem on the other. This blurring of boundaries also has a classical source—the blurring of the boundary between a person and the protagonist of a story, like that between the creator and his creation.

Grisha the painter calls himself “the Jerusalem master,” and one cannot but see the allusion to Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, especially as one of the storylines in that work takes place in ancient Jerusalem. It is also one of the only examples of an (imagined) Jerusalem as a presence in modern Russian literature. In fact, it could be thought of as one of the first network novels

(in the essential, not technical sense, of course). There is probably no book that wielded more influence on the generation that became active in the 1980s, when Bulgakov's novel was reissued in the Soviet Union after decades of suppression. It made a profound impression on other figures in Russian-Israeli fiction. We can easily see its footprints, for example, in the work of Dina Rubina and Nekoda Singer. Its greatest influence is evident in the widespread theme (or mytheme) of revival of history and narrative, making them present and actualized, when their price is making the artist a sacrifice. The creator must make room for his work, just as God must make room for the created world. Dualism comes into being and is immediately canceled out dialectically in a gesture of erasing the boundary or, more precisely, turning the boundary into the work's, that is the narrative's, living space. David says of his and his companions' "historical extreme sport" that "it had all that was needed to be a good adventure. Complications, a climax, catharsis, and even an epilogue. It was all there in abundance—experiences and adrenalin, play and not-play" (ibid., I, 2, David-2, 3). This boundary between play and not-play pervades the entire network, with the sacrificial victim at its center. More than in any other, this is embodied in the characters of the writers ©.

The writer couple, Anat and Max, the doubles of Elisheva and Yury Nesis in a sense, constitute the basic component of the temple, the network, the computer, and the text. This is one of the word and letter games the authors are play, although it is not possible to render it in English. In Russian, Nesis reads He-C-и-C (No-S-and-S or No-C-and-C). The name thus contains a pair of S's; the first one is preceded, as it were, by a minus sign, designating "no," while the second is preceded by a plus sign—the illogical syllogism of conjunction "and" of two opposed sentences. Negative and positive, feminine and masculine, anima and animus, no and yes, original and reproduction all are united in this name. This is the computer's language of 0s and 1s, the "binary state" of the writer-couple. "Every change in their relation can produce irrevocable results," we are told, but also "the balance between them is stable" (ibid., I, 4, David-2, 4). They are compared to the two valves of a bivalve mollusk shell, between which "is deposited the energy of joint creation, emerging between them as solely a text" (ibid.). All is written in the binary language of the computer-mollusk—the text and the universe.

It is to the home of this couple—the non-linear dynamic system, the human text-producing computer—that David brings an alley kitten with red fur. The kitten will find a home with ©, as well as a virtual double on the network, and at the end of the novel become a sacrifice. From the start, Max compares the cat to a “brand new text” (ibid., 23), marking the unity of the text, the network, and the sacrifice dynamic. The kitten lives in the pantheist and pan-textual pan-network as the embodiment of its own secret—as the Sphinx. Notably, the process is reversed here—rather than a human being querying the network, the network riddles the human being. This happens not only on the computer network but also, for example, on the telephone network, which is referred to as “pure magic,” with an incoming call or text message likened to the casting of lots or putting a question to the Urim and Tumim, the oracle contained in the breastplate of the Temple’s high priest (ibid., 42). This signifies the contingency of communication and understanding, as in Derrida’s concept of the postcard.¹⁴

The query/response or search/results relationship prevails between the writers © and the real world, and the medium in which the search takes place is language. Language is meant to provide answers to the riddles posed by the real world. Most of ©’s time is devoted to surfing the web suspended between words and things. This process is exemplified in translation, and it is in translation that it reaches the height of suspense and power, producing the thrill of discovery and innovation. Translation is the beating heart, the central server of the network, its unseen source. In one of their searches, the authors discover one of the Hebrew terms for “curb,” a pair of words that translates as “tongue [language] of the stone.” They are amused and astounded by the possibilities for word games, such as “stones’ language” and “language stone” (ibid., II, 1, Cat-1, 89). Jerusalem’s stones thus become the network and language itself. The network is first and foremost a language, the combinatorial grammar (in Chomsky’s terms) of reality and mind, a choice among many possibilities. Language is the network because it is always a translation—the translation of the act of choice into the chosen meaning, of putting together the puzzle of stones—into the character it constructs. Jerusalem—the riddle-city, the network-city—is built out of stone language or its curb-tongue stones. But this is

¹⁴ See (Derrida 1987).

how every text is constructed, poetic texts in particular. Jerusalem is thus a poetic creation that dictates to the writers who live there strict conditions of life and of writing. They must endlessly contend with it; their images and symbols vying with the images and symbols encoded in the names scattered around the city—the names of streets, neighborhoods, buildings, and historical sites—the artistic nature of which is fully revealed in trans-lingual translational space. The translation is not just from Hebrew to Russian and back; in a certain sense, every writer in Jerusalem is no more than a translator of the city’s language into other tongues. In this sense, Jerusalem symbolizes the source—the origin and final goal of every translation and every writing-discourse.¹⁵ Jerusalem’s metaphysical presence—sacred or heavenly Jerusalem—grants all language a metaphysical dimension, thus undermining the network and surface thinking of the Deleuzean kind. Or, to be more precise, it testifies to the fact that network thinking and combinatorial perception does not necessarily lead to relativism and to the refutation of the metaphysics of the origin. Multi-lingualism and translationalism, playfulness and alternativeness, simply expose their fundamental impulses—passion for Jerusalem and its stones, desire, the determined inner need to decipher the city, to read it, to dissolve the language of its stones in other languages so as to “surf” its sidewalks and roads undisturbed. Jerusalem is thus depicted as the antipode of Babel, and the possibility of translation contained within it as the antipode of the destruction of Derrida’s Babel. Furthermore, in the romantic Jerusalem night, under the influence of “Jerusalem’s impudent stars,” the writers © find themselves in an almost deterministic frame of mind, bound up with multiplicity and possibilism in such natural and buoyant way as to be nearly unbearable:

The new southern moon, lazily reclining like the man of the house, was anticipating the fullness of life and body. Under his narrow, childlike face facing toward the future, it somehow seemed that the firmament was extending

¹⁵ Compare Nekoda Singer’s view of this in his *Drafts of Jerusalem (Chernoviki Ierusalima, 2013)*, where all the world’s cities are in a sense rough drafts of Jerusalem, while at the same time being more real than the ideal they aspire to (Зингер 2013).

itself into a universe of omnipresent coincidences and possibilities—just like the Jerusalem stars, impertinent in their ubiquity; it somehow seemed that, in fact, one only had to look around and start living in the direction one liked. And everything would come true, as it must. Because if the starry sky exists above us, then the laws of harmony must ever apply, must spread, must suppress everything that stirs, thinks, and feels (И/е_рус.олим 2004, II, 1, ©, last para.).

Moreover, these “laws of harmony,” with or without the ironic quotation marks, acquit the virtual world as well. At about the midpoint in the novel, the authors © create the virtual Allergen the cat in a literary forum. This act is presented in a flexible and dramatic way: they grab the cat by the nape of his neck and cast him into “this crowd” (ibid., II, 2, Cat, 1). The cat breaches the boundary of the computer monitor and finds himself on the other side, in the virtual world, like Alice beyond the looking glass. From this point onward, that virtual world is perceived from two points of view—that of the writers ©, who compose the cat’s text in the forum, and that of the cat, who tells the readers about his experiences and adventures in this fantastical mirror-image world. From here on out it becomes clear that the cat’s monologues up until this point were spoken by the virtual cat. The result is a paradoxical loop: *the text creates the network that creates the text*. Such is the paradox of creation and of language: the artist does not exist prior to his art; a person does not speak a language, but rather the language speaks in/by the person. The ancient problem of *eidos* and *icon* returns in full force. The authors of the novel arrive at the Kantian solution (and dead end)—the cat (the idea, the network, the virtual—that is, true and possible—space-time) exists *a priori* as the authors’ source of subjectivity and consciousness, and the cat’s “projection” onto the network actualizes it in experience (that is, in empirical history) as an icon and thus returns it to its source. The casting of the cat into the network is the projector light of consciousness, a gesture of thinking and creation. The Nesises’ Kantian cat unites, as the Sphinx does, knowledge, desire, and beauty. The cat’s poetry grows out of this unity. Of course, the cat itself does not know where it gets all its knowledge and talent, because it is “no more” than the gaze of the authors ©, or more precisely the tracks of that gaze’s impact on the screen of experience. It is from such tracks that the network is composed, and they also actualize the

possibilities in what seems to be reality. This actualization is itself no more than mythopoesis, founded on miracle. It is no coincidence that the Kantian miracle instantiates in the creative production of ©—the couple’s two-part, bivalve structure is like an incubator constructed specially for human or even divine creation. This is the magic by which a grain of sand becomes a pearl, “turning chance into miracle” (ibid., II, 3, David-1, 3). The miracle is also symbolized as a cat in the act of casting of the cat into the network. His source is transcendent, ideal-purposeful, but its contingent and possibilist actualization is unpredictable and non-linear.

The orange cat’s consciousness splits, as does the consciousness of anyone who participates in an Internet forum under a moniker. In the case of the cat, however, the metaphor is actualized—the split is real, schizophrenic. From this point forward his conversation includes alien snatches of memory, quoted from sources he does not know. These are unfamiliar voices, but without any indication of polyphony. This is a state of illness that the cat himself defines as “an upset brain” (ibid., 82). Via this illness, the cat seems to become one with the computer. He suddenly understands, like S. Y. Agnon’s dog, Balak (*Only Yesterday*), that it is the world around him that is mad, not him. “They took me by the nape of the neck and cast me into a sick world,” he says (ibid.). He understands that it is the city itself that did this. The cat symbolizes the forlorn and caring consciousness caught in the network of knowledge-history, who is, as Heidegger conceived it, cast into the world. But, in contrast to Heidegger, this fact of having been cast into the world is not perceived in the novel as an existential state but rather as an illness.

There is another crack in this actualization of the Heideggerian concept of having been cast into the world—the undermining of the home. The home of © is violated from the moment its door opens to a Jerusalem street cat. The crack widens as the cat comes and goes at it wishes, without any loyalty to the home, until it defecates on the couch’s slipcover—a symbolic act that leads formally to its punishment, the act of grabbing it by the nape and casting it. This muddling of zones in the cat’s life leads directly to muddling the spheres of existence—authentic and virtual, transcendental and immanent. Moreover, the cat-city-network is a muddling of himself. David calls the soiled slipcover a “*plashchanitza*,” the shroud or robe in which Jesus was wrapped, the Shroud of Turin. At this point the

muddle is no longer just a muddle but a miracle, a union of the heavenly and the mundane (the ontological and the ontic, the software and the hardware) in the personality. And it is this that will be the sacrificed so that the home and the world can endure. This is what is going on in David's feverish brain, on the basis of the philosophical-artistic views of the authors ©, as he constructs his theology of the network. It constitutes itself and justifies itself by means of the sacrifice—the virtual character, despite the pagan mythology that envelops it, is built fundamentally on the basis of Christian theology, on the idea of the incarnation and suicide of God as a messianic avatar. The purpose is redemption—the establishment and resurrection of the network. Incarnation, the change in the divine nature becomes an expression of love, of which the sacrifice is a condition. This love is the same Eros that causes the growth and spread of the network—cosmic avatars connected by lines of libidinous-informational energy.

It's a pseudo-Platonic cosmos, in which information is the object of desire, the subject (the self) cannot be distinguished from the object, the other subject is no different from the self because it is made of the same desire. Only self-sacrifice redeems this cosmos, while at the same time transforming the economy of free exchange of information-desire into an ethic, that is an economy of hierarchical values. It resembles the transition from market to supermarket—the grotesque, fossilized, dead model of the network. This transition, like the transformation of atomic to mechanical energy, cannot transpire without an explosion. The network sacrificial victim absorbs most of the force of the explosion and in doing so protects the consumers of the “supermarket chain” from the shock of the loss of desire. They construe this as an expression of love. Network love conceals the painful truth, just as the Apollonian dream conceals Dionysian intoxication. Platonic Eros turns upside-down—on the network, the truth is no longer the goal of desire. Instead, the object is the goal of (imagined, alien) desire. Instead of an erotic, even if failed, gesture toward the object of desire, we get the mechanical gesture of an avatar—animation instead of life.

In this cosmology, myths are the code, the language in which the cosmic computer software is written. The binary 0-1 code (nonexistence-existence, destruction-creation) is the basis not only of all the cosmological computer programs but also of anthropological programs. First and foremost among

the latter is ethics—permitted-forbidden, good-evil. When David adopts this idea, he conceives the possibility of the coming of a virtual messiah (*ibid.*, II, 11, Kinolog, 72). This basic code creates the impression of binary dominance in the university. But it should not be forgotten that the myth of the 0-1 pair is but a development of initial unity that precedes it, and which has a variety of names—magical name, symbol, source, the Big Bang, pure possibility, the heavenly Torah, infinity. The cloud of quantum possibilities, in which wave and matter are one and in which that which is and that which is not are subsumed by the uncertainty principle, precedes to its miraculous actualization in word and experience. This may be the most precise mythical-mathematical model of the network.

The Nesises' poetics searches tirelessly for new metaphors for this model. One of the principal of these is motherhood or, more precisely, pregnancy. The pregnant woman is the basic cell, the model of the network, the foundation myth from which the anthropology of the network grows. There are several pregnancies in the novel—those of Bella and Leah, of the cat whelping in a cave in west Jerusalem, and finally the virtual pregnancy of the pair of authors ©, in whose seashell-womb the cat grain of sand turns into Allergen the pearl. What unifies all these pregnancies is their uncertain paternity and the destiny of the child. Bella thinks she has been impregnated by Lin, not directly but via kabalistic genetic engineering, and that her baby might well be the Messiah. But Lin is not the baby's father, although no one knows who is (*ibid.*, II, 9, David-1, 151). The connection between © and Allergen the virtual cat and his texts remains in doubt throughout the novel; the cat, like Gogol's nose, receives autonomy. In the end, a number of people write in his name: the authors © lend the cat to Bella—both the physical and the virtual cat (*ibid.*, II, 12, ©-1, 23), and Kinolog hacks the cat's password in the forum and, together with David, writes in his name. Furthermore, Leah's patients act in the network under Allergen's name under her guidance, as part of their psychotherapy (as well as in an effort to influence David indirectly). Leah becomes pregnant from David, but David fears that the Sphinx, not he, is the father, and that the fetus is a sphinx or cat. It is not even certain whether Leah will give birth to the baby, as she wonders whether to have an abortion. One thing is clear to her and the others: "Whatever was growing within her wanted very much to live" (*ibid.*, II, 9, David-1, 24). That being the case, the basic unit of the network-myth is not binary, nor even triadic (father-mother-

child). It is rather a cloud of possibilities, unstable and indeterminate. The motif of motherhood plays a unique role in this perception, and its centrality is similar to the use of the same motif by Dina Rubina. Furthermore, both in her work and in that of the Nesises, motherhood is connected to messianism and to the esthetic-mythic subject of the transformation of the inanimate into the animate. The more messianism is perceived as contingent or problematic, the more motherhood takes on a tragic cast, or at the very least a state of existential anxiety, leading to the tragedy at the end.

At the novel ends, with the double sacrifice of David and Allergen, the sacrificial blood is spilled on the stones of Jerusalem as if on an altar, and the recollection narrated by the stones, which began with the spilling of wine at the beginning of the novel, reaches its end. The Nesises close the circle, and the meaning of the novel becomes clear. The spilling of blood, like the spilling of wine or semen, does not necessarily lead to “the victory of life and of meaning” over chaos (ibid., II, 12, ©-4, 40). Remembrance, as a return to a source and as an extreme sport in the networks of history, does not promise redemption. It is only the beginning of the struggle for life that is the network novel’s *raison d’être*: “It’s not so easy to cope with the sprouting of veins; they grow, creep, and seize every opportunity for existence, every glimpse of it—to fill with living red warmth” (ibid.).

The transformation of the stones’ “veins” into a picture of the living body’s blood vessels, which lay out “existential logic” in the face of the fear of chaos (ibid.) remains beyond the novel as a pure, unrealized possibility. Beyond the novel remains also an analogy between living veins and the network. But we may presume that this analogical triad—stone-body-network—is the novel’s fundamental idea and point of reference. At the center of this mythical scheme lies the personality, the subject-object of sacrifice, and the network nature of the city-universe-consciousness does not deconstruct it but, on the contrary, serves as an old-new anthropological model of its constitution. From the time of Platonic idealism, existence has been perceived as a virtual network connecting a large number of avatars that are themselves consolidations of energy, material embodiments of the network of ideas. In ancient idealistic terms, virtual means true and eternal, and experience is simply perceived as a mimesis-realization of the virtual. If so, are current culture and thought fundamentally

different from their predecessors? According to this novel, the network culture is in fact etched in the stones of the eternal city and seeks to resurrect them with the blood of sacrifice.

Conclusions

The philosophical-poetic method of Mikhailichenko and Nesis consists of creation of a virtual network personality, which becomes the origin of thought and writing, the idea and hypothesis of any picture of reality. The world and text viewed through the network become network. However, the same origin initiates the process of myth-creation—the realization of the personality’s transcendental purpose in the empirical history, thus creating “hyper-human,” “netneistic” consciousness, and turning the network back into the “hyper-real” world. In the novel under discussion, this dynamic is found in the basis of the historical memory and its extreme surfing that produces the new virtual-mythical indigeneity of the characters—the Israeli immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Here, as in any semiotic and cultural mechanism, what unites the transcendental and the immanent is the sacrifice, which, under the influence of the Jerusalem Syndrome intoxication, becomes the sacral center of the network and myth, memory and the Land, avatar and Sphinx.

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