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The Place by Friedrich Gorenstein: An Epic Novel in the First Person¹

MIEJSCE FRYDERYKA GORENSTEINA: POWIEŚĆ EPICKĄ W PIERWSZEJ OSOBIE

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje powieść *Miejsce* Fryderyka Gorensteina jako wyjątkowy przykład dwudziestowiecznej powieści epickiej. Podważając autorską klasyfikację utworu jako „powieści politycznej”, badanie dowodzi, że *Miejsce* redefiniuje formę epicką w warunkach poststalinowskich, łącząc szeroką wizję historyczną z intensywnie subiektywną narracją pierwszoosobową. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono napięciu między ograniczoną świadomością bohatera-narratora, Goszy Cwibyszewa, a obecnością narratora epickiego formułującego szersze uogólnienia ideologiczne i filozoficzne. W artykule przeanalizowano sposób, w jaki powieść podejmuje temat stalinizmu, poststalinowskiego rozczarowania oraz antysemityzmu, ukazując, jak zagadnienia te funkcjonują jako strukturalne elementy jej epickiej poetyki. Utwór Gorensteina zostaje osadzony w tradycji rosyjskiej prozy epickiej, przy jednoczesnym podkreśleniu jego nowoczesnej złożoności psychologicznej i etycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: powieść epicka, gatunek, antysemityzm, postać, fabuła, styl

THE PLACE BY FRIEDRICH GORENSTEIN: AN EPIC NOVEL IN THE FIRST PERSON

Summary: The article examines Friedrich Gorenstein's novel *The Place* as a distinctive example of the twentieth-century epic novel. Challenging the author's own genre designation of the work as a "political novel," the research argues that *The Place* redefines epic form under post-Stalinist conditions by combining large-scale historical vision with an intensely subjective first-person narration. Particular attention is paid to the tension between the limited consciousness of the protagonist-narrator, Gosha Tsvibyshev, and the presence of an epic narrator articulating broader ideological and philosophical generalizations. The study analyzes the novel's treatment of Stalinism, post-Stalinist disillusionment, and antisemitism by demonstrating how these themes function as structural elements of its epic poetics. The article situates Gorenstein's novel within the tradition of Russian epic prose while highlighting its modern psychological and ethical complexity.

Keywords: epic novel, genre, antisemitism, character, plot, style

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МЕСТО ФРИДРИХА ГОРЕНШТЕЙНА: РОМАН-ЭПОПЕЯ ОТ ПЕРВОГО ЛИЦА

Аннотация: Статья рассматривает роман Фридриха Горенштейна *Место* как уникальный образец эпического романа XX века. Полемизируя с авторским жанровым определением произведения как «политического романа», исследование доказывает, что *Место* переосмысливает эпическую форму в условиях постсталинской эпохи, соединяя масштабное историческое видение с предельно субъективным повествованием от первого лица. Особое внимание уделяется противоречию между ограниченным сознанием героя-повествователя Гоши Цвибышева и присутствием эпического повествователя, выражающего широкие идеологические и философские обобщения. В статье анализируется художественное осмысление сталинизма, постсталинского разочарования и антисемитизма, показывается, что эти темы выступают не только предметом изображения, но и структурными элементами эпической поэтики романа. Исследование помещает роман Горенштейна в контекст традиции русской эпической прозы, одновременно выявляя его современную психологическую и этическую сложность.

Ключевые слова: роман-эпопея, жанр, антисемитизм, персонаж, сюжет, стиль.

Introduction

Friedrich Gorenstein was always fascinated by the path from insignificance to dictatorship, even when that path existed only in one's imagination. Combining psychological depth with epic scale, Gorenstein gave form to this fascination in the novel *Place* (1976). This epic novel consists of four parts and an epilogue, all of which play with the word "place": "Bed-Place," "Place in Society," "Place Among the Thirsty," "Place Among the Working," and the epilogue entitled "Place Among the Living." This is the trajectory of the main character, Grigory Matveevich (Gosha) Tsvibyshhev.

The writer captures a broad panorama of opinions and interests in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death, when N. S. Khrushchev's denunciation of "the cult of personality and its consequences" and political reforms significantly affected Soviet social life. Due to unpreparedness, inconsistency, narrow-mindedness, and the lack of what we might call today's PR support, these reforms provoked a contradictory response from both elites and society at large. The easing of repression led to a revival of underground public life, splitting the society along political lines. Historian Yuri Valentinovich Aksyutin wrote about this period as follows:

The end of mass repressions contributed to a certain stabilization within society; however, public opinion continued to be shaped exclusively from above. Divergent nuances of social sentiment, even if no longer subject to persecution, were most often ignored. The violation of many human rights had not been brought to an end.²

² Yuri V. Aksyutin, *Khrushchevskaya оттепель' i obshchestvennyye nastroyeniya v SSSR v 1953–1964 gg.* (Fond "Prezidentskii tsentr B. N. El'tsina," 2010), 6. This passage and all other quotations from Russian were translated into English by Boris Lanin and Mateusz Jaworski.

In the first Russian three-volume edition in 1991, Friedrich Gorenstein gave his work the genre designation *A Political Novel About the Life of a Young Man* in the subtitle, which implies the close link between the individual fate of the main character and the historical time he is a part of. We argue that *The Place* is one of the 20th century's epic novels, covering a pivotal historical period and offering a precise, large-scale portrayal of the emotions of the time. Our attempt to define this work's genre does not aim to elevate it above other works by Gorenstein or other authors who have addressed historical and philosophical issues. Defining the genre to which this monumental text belongs will allow us to judge by the laws of the genre and better understand its reputation in the history of Russian literature. Thus, the aim of the article is to demonstrate that *The Place* transcends the framework of the Bildungsroman and becomes an original epic novel whose narrative structure is based on *Ich-Erzählung*.

On the Theory of the Epic Novel Genre

There are not many works that can be classified under this genre, but many of them have played a notable role in the development of Russian literature. If Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin spoke of the novel as an "unfinished genre," then this is even more applicable to its subtype—the epic novel, which has emerged relatively recently. Certainly, many epic novels became classics of Soviet literature during the totalitarian period. Galina Andreevna Belaya rightly pointed out that this genre label was often turned into a "brand," signifying the "special quality of social realist literature."³ However, some epic novels are free from the constraints of time, from the imposed frameworks of artistic representation dictated by officialdom. These works not only follow the best traditions of great Russian literature but also fill them with new content. According to our hypothesis, Gorenstein's *The Place* belongs to this type of epic novel.

An epic is thought to illuminate decisive moments for a nation. World War II, when the fates of the world's peoples, including Soviet citizens, were at stake, would seem an ideal time for the creation of new epics. They appeared somewhat later. *For Just Cause* and *Life and Fate* by V. S. Grossman, *The Living and the Dead* by K. M. Simonov, and other war novels were characterized by

³ Galina A. Belaya, "Fokusnicheskoe ustranenie real'nosti (o poniatii 'roman-epopeia')," *Voprosy literatury* no. 3 (1998): 180.

their epic sweep and multitude of characters. Their authors were all, in one way or another, influenced by the experience of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and their creative searches were driven by a desire to create a similar monument to their era.

Nikolai Nikolaevich Strakhov, who first called *War and Peace* an epic, highlighted its grandiose scale of creative power. Tolstoy populated his novel with a multitude of dissimilar characters, combined the private and the public, the intimate and the political, and attempted to embrace the whole social life of the depicted times. Strakhov described his astonishment with *War and Peace* with the following words:

What vastness and what harmony of structure! Nothing comparable can be found in any other literature. Thousands of faces, thousands of scenes, every sphere of public and private life, the history of wars, all the horrors that exist on earth, all passions, every moment of human life—from the cry of a newborn child to the final surge of feeling in a dying old man; all the joys and sorrows accessible to humankind; every state of the soul, from the sensation of a thief who has stolen gold coins from his comrade to the loftiest impulses of heroism and reflections of inner enlightenment—all of this is present in this picture.⁴

When the desire to cast the classics “from the ship of modernity” was replaced by the motto of learning from them, the first teacher for Soviet writers became Leo Tolstoy. Alongside the “dialectics of the soul,” writers were seized by the impulse to reflect revolutionary transformations in a grand, large-scale form akin to Tolstoy's epic novel. This idea, incidentally, also captivated Vasily Grossman, who in his epic about Stalingrad sought to follow Tolstoy's generic innovations. The accumulated literary experience surely called for scholarly reflection.

Clearly, *The Place* fits this definition perfectly, though here the emphasis is placed on the urban population. Liudmila Fedorovna Kiseleva introduced the concept of “novelistic epicness.” For her, an epic novel is not a quantitative description, but a qualitative one: It is not merely a large-scale work with a multitude of characters and events and a historically significant occurrence at its center. It is a fundamentally new genre structure endowed with broad artistic possibilities.⁵ Kiseleva discerned in this genre structure fundamentally new possibilities for the artistic exploration of both the individual and society.

⁴ Nikolai N. Strakhov, *Kriticheskie stat'i o I. S. Turgeneve i L. N. Tolstom (1862–1885)* (Tipografia Chokolova, 1901), 343.

⁵ Liudmila F. Kiseleva, “Khudozhestvennye otkrytiia sovetskogo klassicheskogo romana-epopei,” in *Sovetskii roman: Novatorstvo. Poetika. Tipologiya*, ed. G. I. Lomidze and S. M. Khitarova (Nauka, 1978), 275–76.

Vladimir Nikolaevich Sobolenko summarized these viewpoints and stated that epic novels are characterized by a complex relationship between the epic and the novelistic, understood as two styles of thought and epistemological positions:

[t]he artistic structures took shape at the intersection of two modes of artistic thinking—the epic and the novelistic. All the possibilities inherent in these two modes of apprehending reality were reinterpreted within the new genre in accordance with a new historical practice and synthesized from the perspective of a specific creative task. In addressing this task, the novelistic instrument for understanding history played no lesser—if not a greater—role than the epic one.⁶

The first typology of the Soviet epic novel was proposed by Aleksandr Alekseevich Svarichevsky. The classification includes three subdivisions: lyric and dramatic, philosophical and ideological, as well as tragic and psychological varieties of the genre. Following this typology, which has proven its worth in research, *The Place*, despite its deep psychological depth, can be classified as a philosophical-ideological novel. A. A. Svarichevsky formulated the definition of the epic novel as:

[...] the aspiration toward the constant interweaving and shifting of developing plot lines, the interruption and alternation of narrative planes, and the succession of episodes and situations diverse in content and character gives rise to an aesthetic model of the real world. Before us unfolds a dynamic, vividly colored, and mobile picture of a people's life at a particular turning point in history—one that enables us to grasp more profoundly the universal interconnectedness of reality, its contradictions, and the laws governing its development.⁷

The above formulation will serve as our working definition of the genre.

The Generic Structure of *The Place*

Gorenstein's *The Place* grew out of the novel. The first chapter, *Bed-Place*, is the most psychological and depends most heavily on the traditions of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Here, the initial processing and experiencing of the cult of personality and its consequences occur. Grigory Matveevich Tsvibyshev is the son of a repressed

⁶ Vladimir N. Sobolenko, *Zhanr romana-epopei* (Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1986), 111.

⁷ Aleksandr A. Svarichevskii, *Sovetskii roman-epopeia* (Tbilisskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1972), 11.

corps commander, a lieutenant general (according to a new ranking introduced during World War II). His father was shot, and he remembers him only from the arrest and farewell when the boy was three years old. His rootlessness in life originates from this arrest. Gosha's mother died when he was eleven years old. NKVD officers, now tasked with rehabilitating the wrongfully repressed, are surprised: why was the wife of the Red Army commander not arrested along with him? Avoiding arrest that night, Grigory's mother grabbed her son and disappeared, went into hiding. All their possessions disappeared, as did the apartment itself. Under the new "humane" laws, Grigory is not even entitled to a room, even though he grew up in a three-room apartment, where his father was arrested. While Dostoevsky's characters sought their "ron" (the writer's favorite geometric figure, according to Vladimir Nikolaevich Toporov), Gorenstein's characters search for their "place" in life. The struggle for it, which begins with a bed in a dormitory, acquires an epic scale as it encompasses various social groups. This mosaic forms a seething epic image of people discovering their new opportunities and new parameters of freedom. This is another important turning point: parting with the Stalinist era and receiving a new lease on life. Various groups emerge during this period, united by different interests. People are only beginning to learn how to publicly express these interests. The previous era taught them to whisper, hint, and use distant allusions.

A place in a dormitory, consisting of a bed and a small cabinet, becomes a symbol of human existence on Earth, secures Tsvibyshev's life "in the overall order of life in the country." All people are temporary, as they all cling to their temporary resting places on this earth. But for Tsvibyshev, the bed and food take on the status of fetishes. It is striking how he describes his meals, how much admiration he puts into his menus, and sleeping arrangements. Feeling "a kind of respectful confusion"⁸ before wealth, he tries to adapt to his constant battle with his own poverty. Through this image, Gorenstein destroys the once-common stereotype in Russian literature of the poor but noble hero. Poverty—terrible, humiliating poverty—provokes Tsvibyshev to the most ignoble acts and steps in his life. His material lack and insignificance are philosophically justified: the world is not arranged in his favor, and he is not treated well by this world. It should be stressed that his world is limited to Russia—there is no "abroad" here. Tsvibyshev decides to become the dictator of Russia. In this, he sees his calling, the justification for his

⁸ Friedrich Gorenstein, *Izbrannnye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1, *Mesto: Politicheskii roman iz zhizni odnogo molodogo cheloveka* (SP "Slovo," 1991), 95.

restlessness. He has no place on earth, for he is above the earth and above the people crawling on it. As the plot unfolds, the reader encounters situations in which comfortable everyday sensations overshadow—if not entirely nullify—dictatorial ambitions.

The key genre feature of *The Place* as an epic novel is the intertwining of two constant themes: the history of the country and fundamental ideology, seen and interpreted by the main character. Usually, history is presented through the narrator or a proxy narrator, who transitions to a new type of narrative with a new lexicon and rhythm appearing. The narrative features of the epic novel as a genre lie in the mobility of the narrative point of view, the variety of forms of authorial presence in the work, and, most importantly, the flexibility of the narrative structure, which can organically combine elements of the epic, novel, historical chronicle, sketch, and other narrative forms.

The relationship to Stalin, the exposure of Stalinist repressions, and the problem of antisemitism form the ideological foundation on which *The Place* is built as an epic novel. Philosophical reflections in the novel are often so deep that they reveal the hidden emotional underpinnings of everyday life. Various writers such as Vasily Grossman, Yuri Trifonov, Friedrich Gorenstein, Vasily Shukshin, and David Shrayer-Petrov, despite their radical differences in outlook, contributed to what might be called an “encyclopedia of Soviet life.”

When the time for conclusions and generalizations comes, the main character Gosha Tsvibyshev, is weak and small-minded, and at this point, he gives way to the epic narrator:

The late 1950s were marked, in certain circles, by genuine revolutionary illusions, though without a revolutionary situation. Hence, the sudden rupture affected not social foundations, but souls, minds, and personal relationships. A certain anarchism and disorder briefly seeped into relations between people, the iron authority that had bound society in purposeful unity vanished.⁹

By the time Gorenstein began working on *The Place*, he was a recognized screenwriter who had worked with Andrei Tarkovsky, Andron Konchalovsky, Ali Khamraev, and others, but he had published only one novella, *House with a Turret* (1964). All further attempts to publish were unsuccessful. Gorenstein soon realized that socialist realism was not for him and began writing freely, uninhibited, and boldly, without regard for censorship. He knew that his novel would not be published.

⁹ Friedrich Gorenstein, *Mesto* (Azбука-Attikus, 2012), 157. Subsequent citations of the novel refer to this edition.

The Narrative Structure and Tsvibyshev as a Narrator

The Place is one of the few Gorenstein's works in which the story is told in the first person, from the perspective of the main character, Gosha Tsvibyshev. At the beginning of the massive 800-page text, he practically revels in his own insignificance and worthlessness:

I speak so much about the cat because she, too, a voiceless creature, was drawn into the events and played a part in my fate. One day, when I approached her as usual and began to stroke her, she suddenly sprang up, sank her teeth into my fingers, and raked her hind claws deeply across my palm. Darya Pavlovna, who was present at the time, even cried out in fright. I left at once, holding my injured hand aloft. In my room, I poured triple cologne over the wound, from which blood was oozing, and wrapped my palm in a handkerchief. Besides the pain, I was tormented by resentment. Of course, it is foolish and ridiculous to take offense at animals—had I said so aloud, they would have laughed at me in the room. But this was an experienced, old cat, and she knew—I believe this—how one must behave if one wishes to live among people without rights. In three years, I do not recall her ever biting anyone, though she had been beaten, kicked, deprived of her kittens, and dragged by the tail. "So she sensed my powerlessness," I thought, lying on my bunk [...].¹⁰

Later, Gosha, so consumed by thoughts of his own humiliation and powerlessness, begins to climb toward self-assertion in society. From a restless and ill-adapted man, trembling for his bed-place in a dormitory, he rises to become a regular employee of the KGB and, eventually, a father, albeit of a child who is not biologically his. The child growing up in his family is the product of his wife's rape by an unknown assailant during a pogrom. His wife, Masha, a daughter of a well-known and wealthy journalist, does not even know which of the rapists is the father. In a shiny new gray Volga car, belonging to her father, Gosha experiences a smug and deceptive calm:

A private car, a specially paid chauffeur, a walnut cake—everything was solid and prosperous. For a moment, I closed my eyes and thought:

"So this is where life has already carried you along the path you chose... Where is it now, that bed-place? And yet it was all so recent."¹¹

However, Gosha's childlessness, like his fatherlessness, underscores his rootlessness and the illusory nature of his attainment of a *place* in life, the very place for which he had fought so hard.

Lazar Lazarev, in the preface to the first Russian edition of the novel, wrote: "The reader must bear in mind that this is the

¹⁰ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 23.

¹¹ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 606.

confession of a morally maimed man and that the world appears in the novel as he perceives it.”¹² However, Tsvibyshev is not the only narrator. Gosha was incapable of performing even basic tasks requiring intellectual effort. Not only could he not manage to make a phone call on time, but he also made a mess of a standard monthly report from the library to the KGB. As a narrator, Gosha proves to be stronger and more significant than his life’s essence. Of course, the author has magnified him. This is especially noticeable in the historical excursions, expanded philosophical and historical reflections, and observations fleetingly cast upon the landscape, in the narrative vignettes dedicated to minor characters. All of this clearly exceeds the abilities of Tsvibyshev. So, who stands behind all these reflections? According to the laws of the genre, it is the epic narrator, the figure closest to the author in the text. His speech is characterized by greater formality, regularity, and a distinctive rhythm. Such a narrator is an indispensable feature of the epic novel genre.

Aleksei Vladimirovich Chicherin made a significant contribution to the development of epic novel theory and wrote: “People, characters, living thoughts, passionate quests, feats, falls, hesitations, and irrevocable decisions, the relationships between people unfolding over many years—only from these does the genuine plot of the novel-epic grow.”¹³ Unlike many Soviet-era literary critics, he preferred to approach style as a universal key to literary analysis. Aleksei Chicherin convincingly demonstrated stylistic features dictated by the genre. He brilliantly illustrated these characteristics through the syntax of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. The Polish scholar of the first two decades of the twentieth century, later a Soviet academic, Alexander Mikhailovich Evlakhov, maintained that the syntax of Leo Tolstoy—its vast, extended periods—was the result of the writer’s latent epilepsy.¹⁴ According to Alexei Chicherin, Tolstoy’s syntax in *War and Peace* was determined by genre innovation.

Now we will endeavor to analyze one of Gorenstein’s periods, which is Tolstoyan in terms of scope and all-inclusiveness. The analysis starts with the following important fragment, which outlines the relevant aspect of the plot and narration:

¹² Lazar I. Lazarev, “O romane F. N. Gorenshteina ‘Mesto,’” in Friedrich Gorenstein, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, vol. 1 (SP “Slovo,” 1991), 10–11.

¹³ Aleksei V. Chicherin, *Vozniknovenie romana-epopei* (Sovetskii pisatel’, 1975), 364.

¹⁴ Aleksandr M. Evlakhov, *Iskusstvo Izhet ne pritivoriaias* (Parad, 2011), 331–414.

The tragedy of hundreds of thousands who had suffered unjustly failed to arouse mass sympathy [...] What had been taking place over many years lacked the simple and intelligible grandeur of suffering for truth, for faith, for love. The peculiarity of the early Stalinist despotism lay in the fact that, having been born of a nationwide and just struggle against a handful of oppressors, it was supported by the overwhelming majority of the people and thereby lost a mass internal enemy. Yet, like any despotism, it required mass victims. The peculiarity of those victims, in turn, was that most of them were set apart by society from its own flesh, cut off from the nationwide sufferings for the fatherland that enjoyed universal respect, and compelled to suffer for no reason at all. That is to say, their suffering was stripped of meaning and necessity—a futility that could in no way attract the sympathy of the people. During the period of rehabilitation, there began much that was not so much bitter as ridiculous and pitiable—a period incomprehensible to the people and one that irritated them [...] Those who had suffered directly or indirectly lived a separate, tense life, out of harmony with the masses. And what occurred at the end of the 1950s, and the manner in which it occurred, was not a triumph of justice but rather the final, concluding stage of a tragedy that had already been unfolding.¹⁵

The disjointed reflections of the narrator turn out to be self-incriminating. However, in discrediting himself and his status within the structure of the characters, the narrator seems to exceed his own individual fate by expanding the scope of the reflections and involving all of society (and sometimes the entire world). The storyteller is an uneducated person. For instance, he has only heard of Voltaire, Kant, Hegel, and other philosophers. Yet suddenly, in discussions, he shows himself to be knowledgeable in philosophy, sociology, social psychology, and the history of mores. How could this happen? The answer lies in one of the keys to the epic novel genre. The narrator's speech blends with the thoughts of the author himself. It is to this narrator that the author entrusts his doubts, reflections, and evaluations of historical events. Most often, the narrator reflects on Stalin and the changes in the country after his death.

The reflections on the state of public emotions could not belong to Gosha Tsvibyshev. Here, the epic narrator takes over, and his assessments become insightful and philosophically grounded:

Such a sharp turn away from firm ideological conviction and from the formation of ideals in a single centralized place, from which they were transmitted downward in strict, planned order, such a turn, of course, could not fail to have an impact. Yet it produced not the effect that Khrushchev had hoped for. The people's distrust and lack of respect began to spread not toward the deceased leader who had passed into eternity, but toward the living authorities—both local and higher-rank, all the way to the very top. This tendency, dangerous for

¹⁵ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 157.

a country such as Russia, nevertheless had a powerful spontaneous brake: the people themselves were somewhat afraid of, and uneasy with, their own disrespect toward authority, and sought ways to rid themselves of it [...].¹⁶

The desire to capture public emotions and the emergence of new habits among urban people are characteristic of the epic novel. When the characters travel to Novorossiysk, where the most dramatic events unfold, the epic nature of the work is confirmed by the shift in narrative point of view and the depiction of the working masses attempting to defend their rights at the cost of their lives.

Tsvibyshev Among Jews and Antisemites

Gosha's hidden Jewish identity, which he carefully camouflaged—since a Jew could never become the dictator of Russia—made him very sensitive to the problem of antisemitism. He notices all its manifestations, but he lacks both the courage and decisiveness to respond appropriately.

Gorenstein thoroughly explores the origins and psychological mechanisms of antisemitism in his book *Dresden Passions*. As a rule, a character's reaction to manifestations of antisemitism, various antisemitic outbursts, is what first characterizes them and determines their "ranking" in the narrator's "charts." Gorenstein's rhetoric did not allow him to view his characters with detachment. Psychological analysis in his works is often accompanied by emotional commentary, rhetorical interjections, abrupt changes in tone, and the sudden "overturning" of situations. Olga Chudova aptly observed:

In creating the image of Gosha, Gorenstein deliberately draws on Dostoevsky's protagonist, sharpening his recognizable traits and reproducing well-known plot situations; at the same time, however, he subjects them to a noticeable transformation, emphasizing fundamental differences in order to propose his own understanding of the key category of "living life" central to the classic writer.¹⁷

From a deep historical analysis of the history and current state of antisemitism in *Dresden Passions* to the psychological testing of human reactions to antisemitism in various scenes and episodes, this theme covers a broad range in Gorenstein's works.

¹⁶ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 244.

¹⁷ Olga I. Chudova, "Arkadii Dolgorukii kak literaturnyi prototip glavnogo geroia romana F. N. Gorensteina 'Mesto,'" *Vestnik Leningradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta im. A. S. Pushkina* no. 1 (2011): 74.

Gosha Tsvibyshev, as the narrator, possesses one very important trait. He is brutally honest and candid. He makes no effort to embellish himself or his actions and is all about self-revelation and self-humiliation.

Gosha judges himself so openly and harshly that no one else's judgment could frighten him anymore. However, the literary technique here lacks an extreme psychological subtext. Tsvibyshev is not a masochist. Suffering causes him pain, and pain brings suffering, but it does not bring pleasure. In his confession, which is mournful and plaintive, there is no self-flagellation or self-indulgence. He does not address anyone in particular. The purpose of his confession is simply the confession itself. Furthermore, Tsvibyshev initially is a man with an idea, or rather, a man of the idea. This idea is not formulated right away, but from the very first pages, it becomes clear that the narrator's humiliations are the opposite pole of this idea. The main thing Tsvibyshev lives for is the need to leap over the chasm between his current state and the "great idea" of his life. This idea is Napoleonic: he wants to become a dictator. "Sooner or later, the world will revolve around me as its own axis."¹⁸

The main philosophical idea of the novel *The Place* is Russian antisemitism. Although Gorenstein was a Russian writer, he never forgot that he was Jewish. When he did forget, he was reminded. If there is a central character across all his prose, it is Dan the Antichrist from the monumental novel *Psalm*. For Gorenstein, this character was the brother of Jesus, but while Jesus was the protector of those who broke the law, Dan stood up for the victims of these violations. As a religious philosopher, Gorenstein was both profound and contradictory:

A believing Jew, in committing evil, knows that he is acting against God. A believing Christian, in committing evil, preserves the harmony of the soul and, through ecclesiastical repentance, maintains his relationship with God for non-resistance to evil has long since been replaced by repentance for the sin committed. (*The Parable of the Rich Young Man*)¹⁹

The connection between the Old and New Testaments, for Gorenstein, is inseparable. In his novel *Psalm*, he focuses on a remark by the prophet Jeremiah, which later became the foundation of Christian non-resistance:

The path of non-resistance to evil in the face of a powerful wrongdoer is possible, however, with one important reservation indicated by Jeremiah. In essence,

¹⁸ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 73.

¹⁹ Friedrich Gorenstein, *Pritcha o bogatom iunoshe* (Vremia, 2018), 81.

it sounds as follows: let the wicked man take everything, but you, too, must take from the wicked as your spoil your own soul [...] The main thing, in the face of the wicked, is to preserve your soul as your spoil, for the wicked will sooner or later lose his own soul, and he will be unable to make use of the love with which you love him for his evil. You, however, will make use of it yourself.²⁰

The solitude of Gorenstein's Jewish characters is also visible in his novella *Champagne with Bile* (1986). The Yom Kippur War catches the main character, a film director named Y. at a sanatorium. Initially, the Israeli army suffered heavy losses that are particularly tangible if one takes into account the size of Israel's population. The people around him rejoice at this. But when "enemy voices" announce a turning point in the war, with Syria and Egypt being defeated, and as Y. rejoices in the salvation of a distant country, he realizes his own loneliness: even the only other Jew at the sanatorium is unkind to him.

Although Gorenstein, who grew up in Berdichev, did not need a particular "revival" of Jewish self-consciousness, it nevertheless influenced his works, their ethos, and the dramatic experience of cultural and political conflicts. The perception of the Six-Day War in 1967 was directly reflected, as we see, in *Champagne with Bile*, and another wave of emigration swept him away, though the reason for his departure was purely creative. The theme of anti-semitism is one of the central themes in Gorenstein's work, and his reflections on it approach the aphoristic philosophizing of the greatest thinkers of our era. Jews in Gorenstein's artistic world turn out to be travelers, like the writer Felix Zabrodsky in the novella *Fellow Travelers*, or failed dictators of Russia, like Gosha Tsvibyshev in *The Place*, or victims of historical cataclysms. But regardless of what they become, they remain "outsiders."

In an interview (1999) with his friend, the journalist Yuri Veksler, Gorenstein said:

Antisemites exist and will continue to exist. The main thing is that they should not be able to carry out their activities with impunity [...] The principal fault of the Jews in the twentieth century lay in their defenselessness, in their trust in humanity, in a one-sided humanism, in their disregard for the wisdom of Moses—"an eye for an eye." [...] And this is the only just law: no one should be hated, no one should be loved; one should relate to others only as they relate to you. There is no other way. So long as Jews do not overcome their ghetto complex, so long as they do not cease striving "to be good," better than others, in the sense of wanting to please everyone, their situation will remain the same: they will continue to depend on every antisemitic insult.²¹

²⁰ Friedrich Gorenstein, "Psalm," in *Strana i mir* (Das Land und die Welte Verlag, 1986), 21.

²¹ Friedrich Gorenstein, "Eto iz Biblii vzgliad," *Ierusalimskii zhurnal* no. 29 (2008): 262–64.

Gorenstein maintained active correspondence with publishers, theater figures, and journalists. A response to a letter from the Italian Slavic scholar Laura Spillani, who was researching his novel *Psalm*, reveals the global nature of Gorenstein's thinking and how epochs, names, and myths intertwined in his mind:

[w]hat does the "Soviet person" have to do with this, when the roots of the confrontation between Christianity and Judaism reach deep into the centuries? Yet this confrontation has been political rather than spiritual in nature. Everything creative in Christianity is closely bound to its biblical foremother. Christ created his teaching not for the sake of opposition, but for development and completion; however, Christ's premature death placed Christianity in the hands of the Grand Inquisitors, who required a dead, not a living, word of Christ. Read my novella *The Parable of the Rich Young Man* («Druzhba narodov», no. 7, 1994). There, the relationship between the Mosaic and the Evangelical is presented with sufficient clarity.²²

One of the central themes of Gorenstein's work, revealed in *The Place*, is the portrayal of Jews among other peoples, and most sharply, the relationship between Jews and Russians. For Gorenstein, this was a global conflict, one worthy of the epic novel genre due to its enormous scope. He did not idealize his people. In *Psalm*, he wrote:

Jews, as people, are as flawed as all the rest of humanity. But as a historical formation, as a biblical phenomenon, this is a people close to God; and since human beings, in their very essence, hate God, they therefore hate the Jews. For this reason, many Jews, as individuals, hate themselves and their biblical destiny. [...] And the further, in its present historical development, a given nation is from God, the stronger the hatred, and the more "natural" antisemitism appears as a national phantom.²³

He calls antisemitism the most natural language of the most backward, aggressive, and simultaneously weak people. In *The Place*, Gorenstein gives a metaphorical definition of antisemitism:

[...]there existed a kind of international language, a sort of political Esperanto, through which, in moments of crisis (and the situation was clearly one of crisis), it was possible to attempt negotiation and the reconciliation of contradictions. That international language was antisemitism, and the mythological foundation of this language proved quite fitting amid logical confusion. If in the age of mysticism and witches it clouded the consciousness of the people, then in the material age, in accordance with the needs of the time, it "clarified" the popular mind of confusions and contradictions, that is, it reduced all the complexities of the world to the simple notions of the kitchen and the servants' quarters.²⁴

²² Quoted in M. I. Polyanskaia, *Berlinskie zapiski o Fridrikhe Gorenshteine* (Demetra, 2011), 145.

²³ Gorenstein, "Psalm," 194–95.

²⁴ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 403.

Gosha Tsvibyshev unexpectedly makes a subtle observation about the correlation between demonstrating one's love for Stalin under Krushchev's rule and antisemitism:

In general, the authorities' attitude toward public, demonstrative expressions of love for Stalin during the period of official Khrushchevism resembled their attitude toward manifestations of public, street-level antisemitism. In both cases, their actions were marked by a certain ambiguous awkwardness [...] Of course, on the one hand, it was improper, seemingly against the law; yet on the other hand, was it really worth sharpening the issue and drawing attention to it? One might even provoke the opposite effect [...] Would it not be better to keep things quieter, not to dignify it with attention, and to proceed as though none of it existed at all? That, after all, might be preferable [...].²⁵

Masha, Gosha's future wife and the mother of a child born from rape, tells him that weak people in Russia inevitably turn to anti-semitism. The root of the problem, in her opinion, lies in the fact that "antisemitism in Russia is primarily fought by Jews themselves, but it should be the Russians."²⁶ One of these Russian fighters, named Ivanov, says:

The Jew came to occupy the place of a mythological figure that unifies a series of unclear phenomena, explains them simply and accessibly, and thereby facilitates the struggle for a place in life, for survival. The more deprived a person feels—and not necessarily in material terms, but sometimes even through sincere suffering for the fatherland or for humanity as a whole—the more he needs mythology. And if progress and enlightenment render his mind skeptical and unbelieving in supernatural forces, then he seizes upon the real figure of the Jew as upon manna from heaven, for such an enlightened thinker does not believe in a horned devil (for example, the enlightener Voltaire). This is why the development of progress and enlightenment in itself not only fails to diminish, but in certain cases even increases, the need for antisemitism. It is mythology, not everyday life or everyday actions—even the most unpleasant ones—that serves as the foundation of antisemitism.²⁷

Gorenstein did not achieve the recognition during his lifetime that a writer of his caliber might have expected. Gorenstein participated in the creation of the *Metropol* almanac, but later regretted it. However, his involvement in this project did not harm him. By then, nothing could harm him anymore. He had not been published since 1964. He continued to look back at the house with the turret from his childhood, which he remembered forever. He looked back at the novella *House with a Turret* throughout his entire writing career: it was his only Soviet publication in the

²⁵ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 430.

²⁶ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 635.

²⁷ Gorenstein, *Mesto*, 653.

magazine *Yunost*. He constantly complained about not being published, about being ignored, and about the intrigues being woven against him —yet his deep inner work never ceased.

Having written great novels, Gorenstein reached a point of incredible despair. He gathered his manuscripts and took them to the KGB with a naive question: “Why am I not being published?” After some time, they called him in. His manuscripts were returned. A captain said that he had read everything. “This cannot be published. You’d better leave.” Gorenstein had found his ideal reader.

The epic novel *The Place* was not published in Russia until 15 years after its creation. It should be understood as a fully realized epic novel of the twentieth century, one that rethinks the genre under post-Stalinist historical conditions. By combining an expansive historical vision with an intensely subjective first-person narrative, Gorenstein creates a complex epic structure in which private humiliation, ideological delusion, and collective trauma intersect. The novel’s epic width does not arise solely from its scale or multiplicity of characters, but from its capacity to capture a decisive historical turning point and to articulate the emotional, moral, and ideological atmosphere of Soviet society during the Khrushchev era.

Conclusion

Central to this epic structure is the tension between the limited consciousness of the narrator, Gosha Tsvibyshev, and the presence of an overarching epic narrator who articulates historical generalizations, philosophical reflections, and ideological diagnoses that exceed the protagonist’s intellectual and moral capacities. This narrative duality allows Gorenstein to expose the psychological mechanisms through which social marginalization, resentment, and ideological fantasy give rise to authoritarian aspirations. Tsvibyshev’s trajectory—from a desperate struggle for a bed-place to the illusion of power and belonging—thus becomes emblematic of broader historical processes, transforming an individual confession into a commentary on society as a whole.

The novel’s sustained engagement with Stalinism, post-Stalinist disillusionment, and, above all, antisemitism further reinforces its epic scope. Antisemitism functions in *The Place* not merely as a social prejudice but as a mythological language that simplifies historical contradictions and channels collective frustration.

By integrating this theme into the novel's ideological and philosophical framework, Gorenstein situates Jewish experience at the center of his interpretation of Russian history, revealing antisemitism as a structural element of social consciousness rather than a marginal phenomenon.

Ultimately, *The Place* exemplifies a form of epic novel that is liberated from the constraints of socialist realism and official ideology. It continues the great tradition of Russian epic prose—from Tolstoy to Grossman—while fundamentally reworking it through modern psychological analysis and ethical skepticism. Recognizing *The Place* as an epic novel not only clarifies its genre identity but also secures its place in the history of twentieth-century literature as a work that confronts the moral catastrophes of its time with uncompromising intellectual rigor and artistic ambition.

The text remained a unique instance of the epic novel in the first person. In *The Place* multiple plot lines intertwine, held together by the narrator-protagonist. The depictions of mass scenes in the opening chapter here give way to disputes in apartments and private gatherings. In the subsequent chapters, however, mass scenes once again break out onto the squares of Moscow and the streets of rebellious Novochoerkassk. The country stands at a critical juncture, and this is a typically epic situation. The society must choose between repudiating Stalinist repressions and renewing a latent process of re-Stalinization.

The insignificance of Gosha Tsvibyshev, who easily abandons the idea of dictatorship for the sake of everyday comfort, becomes a symbol of the degradation of the Soviet individual and of Soviet society itself. By leading the protagonist through humiliation marked by poverty and rootlessness, Gorenstein allegorically presents two stages in the development of Soviet society, which, each time, after devastation, essentially renounces its ideological commitments in favor of comfort. The portrayals of the people's life thus become depictions of a senseless rebellion and unstoppable cruelty.

All of the above constitute the generic premises of the epic novel. The first-person narration makes it possible to depict the degradation of the dreams of an insignificant man, from would-be dictator to well-fed philistine. Alas, the transformation of this insignificant man into an actual dictator of Russia remained beyond the lifespan of Friedrich Gorenstein, who died in Berlin in 2002.

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