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Baltic Nations in Soviet Dissident Literature: *The Compromise* by Sergei Dovlatov

Baltijas nācijas padomju disidentu literatūrā: Sergeja Dovlatova romāns *Kompromiss*

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Summary The article reflects on the images of the Baltic nations in the novel *The Compromise* (1981) by Soviet dissident author Sergei Dovlatov. The novel is analyzed within the framework of Baltic post-colonial studies, which are supplemented by the history of Soviet dissident literature of the early 1980s. The narrator, a Soviet journalist, acts in two roles: he is a Soviet subaltern and a dissident author, yet a staff member of a Soviet newspaper, and therefore a colonial tool. The narrator discovers his in-between status when he discovers his colonized status while at the same time his revelation does not produce any change in his image of the Baltic cultures. They, the Baltic nations, remain unknown to the narrator. His fragmented discovery of Estonian and Latvian history and culture leads to no real contact with the groups. Selected chapters of the novel analyzed in this paper suggest that the orientalized Estonians and Latvians remain as silenced groups with stories unknown to the narrator, as the language tools necessary for a dialogue are missing. The narrator also participates in the process of orientalizing the Baltic cultures, as the case of a milkmaid shows.

Kopsavilkums Raksts analizē Sergeja Dovlatova romānu *Kompromiss* (publicēts 1981. gadā). Izmantojot Baltijas koloniālo studiju atzinumus, raksta autors secina, ka romāna varonis – padomju avīzes žurnālists – cenšas ieturēt distanci no padomju ideoloģijas ar mērķi dekolonizēt sevi. Šim nolūkam žurnālists izmanto Citādo (Baltijas nāciju pārstāvjus) kā līdzekli sevis atbrīvošanai un disidentisma prakšu īstenošanai. Izmantojot apvērsto koloniālo skatienu, žurnālists kā kultūras kolonizācijas nesējs medijos veido kultūru hierarhiju, definējot igauņus un latviešus kā kultūras ziņā augstāku sociāli etnisko grupu. Igauņi un latvieši ir vēsturiski kultūras prakšu un dzimtes identitāšu ziņā kā atšķirīgie, vienlaicīgi veicot klusu vai publiski aktīvu pretošanos padomju ideoloģijai. Redakcijas darbā žurnālists pieredz padomju rasismu un antisemītismu, ko pieņem bez publiska protesta, toties izmantojot vairākas neredzamas pretošanas prakses. To vidū ir intensīva un regulāra alkohola lietošana kā iespēja īslaicīgi atbrīvoties no varas kontroles. Alkohols kā viena no centrālajām pretošanās praksēm veido īpašu situāciju, kurā žurnālists atklāj savas patiesās domas un ļaujas pašanalīzei.

A theoretical framework for reading Dovlatov's novel

In the fifth chapter of the novel *The Compromise* by Sergei Dovlatov (1941–1990), a Soviet journalist is busy writing an article on Estonian-Russian friendship in the early 1970s. A baby resulting from an Estonian- Russian interethnic marriage is the central hero of the article. The selection procedure of an eligible baby takes place in the office of Mikhel Teppe, the chief doctor of a maternity hospital. While waiting for a baby to be born, the journalist, Dovlatov-narrator, scrutinizes the Estonian doctor. The narrator admits that he can recognize Estonians at once. He describes Estonians as quiet – a precise depiction of subalterns in Soviet republics. A tie and well-ironed trousers are always worn, and the answers the doctor gives to the questions of the Russian journalist are extremely cautious. None of the Russians he knows would ever do gymnastics near an open window (Dovlatov 2019: 36). After a selection procedure over the phone, various babies and their parents are not included in the festive article dedicated to the "annual celebration of liberation" of Tallinn by the Soviet troops because of the babies' race or ethnic origin – one is Black, another is a Jew. None of them are acceptable for a Soviet newspaper which officially celebrates internationalism.

The Compromise was first published in 1981 in New York. Three years prior to the publication of the novel, its author was forced to leave the USSR, in order to avoid political persecution. The text to be analyzed in this article reflects on several issues of Soviet cultural politics in the Baltic states.

How to read the novel? Among various options, a post-colonial reading of the novel can add a new dimension to Baltic post-colonial studies. Soviet dissident literature can serve as a new, rather unexpected source of Soviet construction of the Baltics and their position as colonized nations – Dovlatov's, Solzhenitsyn's, and Brodsky's works include various characters and locations from the occupied Baltic republics. How are Estonians and Latvians imagined in *The Compromise*? Does the plot and characters bear colonial hierarchies introduced by the Soviet power, or is the dissident content able to alter or even deconstruct colonial structures in the literary space? Let us examine *The Compromise* as a case study of the construction of Baltic nations in Soviet dissident literature.

The reading will be undertaken within the studies of Soviet colonialism in the Baltics. Researchers such as Violeta Kelertas (Kelertas 2006), Epp Annus (Annus 2016), Kārlis Račevskis (Račevskis 2006), and Benedikts Kalnačs (Kalnačs 2011)

have for years analyzed the strategies of Soviet colonialism in cultural politics and literature. According to Annus:

> Strategies of Soviet colonialism are formed and expressed by colonial discourse – that is, by a network of interconnected statements, ideas, beliefs, and subject positions that are institutionally grounded and find expression in different colonial practices. Modern colonial discourse enunciates and continuously (re)creates the colonial situation through the pathos of progress and civilization, whereas the latter are (re)defined through value systems of the colonizing culture. In Soviet colonial discourse, the pathos of progress was presented in terms of a communist value system, which included not only a modification of the Marxist rejection of capitalism but also selected principles of the European Enlightenment embedded in Marxist values and rearticulated by Soviet ideologists (Annus 2016: 2).

Račevskis, in his analysis of the colonized Baltic states, stresses that Soviet colonization can be defined through language, history, and education politics aimed at forcing the consent of the colonized nations (Račevskis, 2006:168). Such definition includes the concept of colonialism as a set of hierarchical cultural practices which follow territorial inclusion into the colonizer state and refer to the establishment and acceptance of new networks of cultural meanings, which in a colonial framework bear the idea of hierarchy, even if not stated publicly in the politics of the colonial power.

Culturally legitimized hierarchy among Russians and the Baltic nations developed by the Soviet ideology is one of the key elements of *The Compromise* and is a part of the narrator's gaze towards the Baltic nations. As will be elaborated below, the very essence of Otherness of the Baltic nations was their history during the pre-occupation period and the period of Nazi occupation. Independent statehood was deemed capitalist and nationalistic, added by the concept of the Legion as Nazi collaboration during World War II, which indirectly is applied to all Estonians in the novel. These elements of Otherness cemented the subaltern status of the Baltic nations which thus came under control of their Soviet/Russian "older brother," who muted the cultural heritage of these nations and depraved the subalterns of their voices in literature. Various Latvian authors of the Soviet time, even those who were loyal to the system, suffered from stigmatisation, too, as Jānis Oga states in his research on Ēvalds Vilks memory and legacy (Oga 2022).

Twelve chapters of the novel allow to define the narrator's gaze as a gaze of a Soviet subaltern towards other subaltern groups – a Jewish dissident, the writer Dovlatov, looks at the silenced Baltic nations and discovers his own subaltern status through the eyes of a Soviet journalist. According to Spivak, subalterns are members of silenced groups for whom representatives of colonialism act and decide how and what to desire and what patterns of cultural habits to follow or to abandon. This muting is defined and legitimized in terms of enlightened culture and administration, which uses various instruments of power to force the cultural hierarchy upon the

silenced groups (Spivak 2010: 50, 51). One of the ways to establish subaltern status is to force the group to exit the production of cultural meanings, including a change of space and the revision of cultural memory. All these elements characterized the Soviet Baltic cultures. Collective memories were deleted and forbidden, while traditional cultures and habitats were forcefully altered – collectivization, censured historiography, and forbidden, exiled authors are some examples of the transformation of the Baltic societies into subaltern groups.

In the novel, Estonians and Latvians are subaltern groups. Throughout the book Dovlatov shows how cultural space and the meanings, memories, and traumas of Estonians have been interrupted and replaced. The groups were silenced within the framework of Soviet enlightenment, which for Annus is the basis of Soviet coloniality (Annus 2016: 4). The novel's narrator assumes an ambiguous role – he himself is a subaltern, yet at the same time he is a journalist participating in developing the subaltern status of Estonians and Latvians by producing Soviet media content.

On the one hand, the journalist is a representative of a Soviet newspaper – one of the tools of Soviet cultural colonialism aimed at creating a new political community of Soviet people by mandatory consumption of Soviet ideology. On the other hand, his other activities, views, and opinions in private space allow one to interpret his gaze as a deconstruction of his own colonial function. He tries to delegitimize the Soviet colonial discourse by using what can be described as a reversed gaze – a "returned" gaze of one of the actors in the colonial process who challenges the established hierarchy and discovers his own status of a subaltern but does not abolish the process of "looking down" (Tlostanova 2017: 143).

As culture is never a stable set of meanings and practices and is produced in contradictions, alternatives, and oppositions, as William H. Sewell Jr. states (Sewell 1999: 53), the concept of the colonial gaze of the narrator should be understood as the cultural practice of a bearer of colonial power who wants to escape his own condition of a subaltern partly colonized by the Soviet rule – a dissident himself. In each chapter, Soviet colonial politics is deconstructed through a Soviet dissident's gazing at Estonians and Latvians, thus changing the perspective, the hierarchy, and the direction of the colonial gaze. The journalist's gaze allows one to understand what subalterns think and speak or keep silent about Baltic history, everyday Soviet antisemitism, economics, politics, and sexual life. All these discussed and hidden issues are available to the narrator by executing a subaltern or a "deconstructed" gaze, which changes the hierarchy of those who participate in the colonization process: colonizing Soviet officials are looked down upon and colonized Baltic nations and dissident Russians take a higher symbolical position. This specific gaze will be addressed in the present study and conceptualized as a reverse gaze in three case studies. Only when

distancing from his own colonial function by rejecting Soviet colonialism towards himself, can the narrator become aware of his subaltern status, which remains a silenced position till the end of the novel but helps him discover the stories of other subalterns.

As one of the basic elements of post-colonial studies, a colonial gaze was a key notion in Edward Said's work *Orientalism* and was a term to describe multiple ways of making the Orient an exotic territory for the West in text and arts by looking at the East from the perspective of Western cultural space and meanings. The Orient was "orientalized" (Said 2003: 6) through culturally shaped projections of Western literary fantasies about the Orient. By viewing the Other of Europe as exotic, the notion of a potentially under-developed and silenced Other legitimized Western dominance towards the colonized territories. Thus colonies became "a victim of discoursive power and colonial dominance of Western countries [..]" (Turoma 2021: 179). Colonies were imagined as visually, sexually, and politically different from European culture, but colonial imagination is cultural process. Thus "[..] Orientalism is a cultural and a political fact [..]" states Said (Said 2003, 13). The difference between the West and the East was hierarchical in meaning and in cultural performance and was applied in terms of 18th century European Enlightenment debates on civilization as a process for the rest of the world to reach the level of the developed Europe. Later on, in the volume *Culture and Imperialism*, Said elaborated on specific areas and periods where the colonial gaze could be reversed in various ways. The colonized local elites, as in the case of Cairo Opera House and the opera *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi, can view themselves through the accepted colonial gaze from without (Said 1994: 187). They also reverse the colonial gaze and look at the colonizers as exotic but dominant, and discover and accept Western music and architecture as exotic but as a tool for their own development. Thus a reversed gaze is still a continuation of a colonial condition, though the colonized one is aware of the condition and accepts it as a better condition.

The concept of a reversed colonial gaze can be applied to *The Compromise*, as the narrator is a part of colonial media. Though the narrator discovers subaltern contents and some Estonians reveal to him silenced meanings, the journalist still produces colonial meanings in his articles and helps to replace the silenced content produced by the ethnic majority of the Baltic republics before the occupation. Thus, the journalist is both a subaltern and an actor of colonial culture. At the same time Dovlatov and his characters can be also seen as colonized, as Jews in the Soviet Union were discriminated against in various ways and deprived of their autonomy, their theatre, their education, and the development of their language. The colonized status of a Jew is repeatedly stated and experienced in the book, in acknowledging that there is anti-semitism in the Soviet Union. The status of a Jew is the status of a colonized ethnic and religious group.

Said saw the task of post-colonial studies as giving silenced groups an opportunity to speak in their own name in the history of ideas and arts, and as providing opportunities to narrate their colonized condition and encounter with Western military and cultural dominance (Said 1994: 112). In this case, in a new reading of the colonial experience, the colonial gaze changes its direction and is turned at the colonizer as the Other. However, the meaning is different from that in the colonized Cairo Opera House project. This gaze acquires a new meaning and becomes reversed by establishing a different distance now initiated and constructed by the colonized. A reversed gaze can include a new, reversed hierarchy in which the colonized can develop, invent, or remember their cultural superiority to challenge colonial power. Foreign cultural, military, administrative, and economic powers become politically exotic, namely "foreign," and their legitimacy diminishes. The awareness of a colonized condition is of critical importance for understanding the reversed gaze. It is *The Tempest* retold by Caliban who is aware of the fact that he was silenced by Prospero's magical or technological dominance and is about to start speaking in his own name. For Dovlatov's novel, a reversed colonial gaze – awareness of being colonized by the Soviet regime even while being its tool, a Soviet journalist – needs to be placed in the context of the reception of Western cultures in Russia and its politics of colonization.

In the case of Russia, since the beginning of the 18th century when Peter I presented the results of his rapid Westernization program to the world of European Enlightenment, Western debates on Russian society took place within a discourse of civilizing the uncivilized. Larry Wolff shows how European philosophers and travelers of the 18th century invented Russia by applying Western European mythology, literature, and drama to paint Russia as a rapidly changing but still uncivilized place, a brutal or morally deprived society far from European Enlightenment (Wolff 1994). These images were also sustained after the revolution of 1789 and in the early 19th century, as the latest research shows (Mitrofanov 2020), reaching a new intensity in the travelogue by Astolphe de Custine, *La Russie en 1839*, which provoked a negative reaction from the Russian imperial government. Russia's colonialism, boosted by the so-called Greek project of Catharine II after the annexation of Crimea, had its internal dimension as well, which was analyzed by Alexander Etkind who showed how literature and visual arts in the 19th century were used to discover and colonize peasants as the image of Russian folk (Etkind 2011: 86). Other studies on Russia's colonization politics show a link between empire and nation.

Since the early 1820s, after the Napoleonic Wars, Russia's growing cultural nationalism provoked imperial mental mapping and the geopolitical and cultural construction of occupied territories and remote Western neighbors, such as Germany, France, and Italy. Eugene Ponomarev clearly shows a new tendency of the period –

to change the discourse from the cultural inferiority of Russia to the West by constructing a spiritual dominance over the West (Ponomarev 2017: 39). It was a kind of reversed gaze which helped to change the cultural hierarchy that had existed in Russian literary discourse for the duration of the 18th century, forced upon public space by the rapid Westernization politics of Russian rulers. For most of the Slavophiles of the 19th century, Europe had been in cultural and spiritual decline since the liberal revolutions of 1830 and 1848, established the dominance of technologies shaped by middle-class culture, seen as inferior and even dangerous for the development of arts and education. The Russian alternative to this technologically based cultural decline was, according to Slavophile Konstantin Leontjew: aristocracy, army, and the Orthodox Church, with roots in the absolutist culture of Byzantium (Leontjew 1993: 157).

Russification politics, started in the 1860s, aimed to establish the Russian language, culture, and Russian Orthodoxy as the universal framework for the multiethnic society of the empire (Miller 2015: 309, 321, 327). Russian imperialism, as defined in another work by Alexey Miller, was shaped by the intense diversity of ethnic and religious groups which experienced hierarchies in the administrative, political, and judicial structures offered by the metropolis to the so-called okraini (ethnic periphery). These elements of the imperial rule provoked collective fears of assimilation in form of Russification (Miller 2006: 10–11). In the case of Russian colonial expansion and the politics of Russification, a part of its colonized Orient were Western territories of the expanded empire. Russian language was dominant in education process and became a tool of colonial practices during the administrative and cultural Russification of Western territories of the empire under Alexander III. The Russification of the education process and media space was also a part of the Soviet colonial rule in the Baltics after 1944, carried out by the Soviet print media in which Dovlatov's narrator also worked.

A Soviet journalist discovers the Baltic nations

A reversed colonial gaze in this article is understood as a set of practices performed by the narrator which leads to a discovery of a colonial hierarchy in Soviet Baltic societies. The discovery is not institutional or publicly announced. It is intimate and takes place in a private space, which is the space where Soviet ideology can be escaped – home parties, drinking in restaurants, and business trips away from the main office of the newspaper provided distance from ideological control. The discovery of the Baltic cultures is carried out as an observation of the narrator's moral transformation, not as a way of letting the subalterns speak their own language. The lack of knowledge of national languages as well as history makes the gap deep. As a result of the reversed gaze, used for his own transformation, the cultures of the Baltics become superior to

the narrator's "own" and "foreign" cultures (Russian and Soviet), but are not decolonized or made equal to the culture of the narrator in any public form.

Dovlatov allows the gaze of a Soviet journalist to be reversed by two tools. The first tool is the combination of two stories: the official article in the *Soviet Estonia* and the development of the story "behind the scenes" to show the discrepancy between the official interpretation of reality and the true story of certain people. This discrepancy is the space where scrutiny of the colonized Other occurs and is the basic and repetitive structure of the work – an Estonian doctor or a young Estonian girl from a provincial *kolkhoz*, a peasant or an emancipated urban scientist are scrutinized without any further political action. Dovlatov's narrator is a passive dissident, the one whose protest against Soviet rule is limited to talking, watching, and drinking in the kitchen or during parties in his friends and colleagues' flats. In these areas of reversed gaze, the narrator discovers Soviet people of various ethnic origins, among them also Russians, who are at the same time representatives of the colonizing culture. This status of in-between may seem schizophrenic, but the reader is put into the position of normalizing the abnormal when most persons in the novel accept the fact that Russian culture, too, is colonized by ethnically "us" but ideologically "them" Soviets, represented by the editor-in-chief Turonok. Silenced representatives of a colonial culture may be defined as a type of subaltern who are close to elite culture but are unable to articulate their meanings in public discourse. What remains are everyday gaps in totalitarian culture, where people like narrator can hide in private opposition without any real change.

The process of normalizing such a gap is a tool to create the reversed gaze. During the whole story the narrator aggravates his feeling of split reality by collecting experiences and opinions of his colleagues and friends who largely accept the parallel structures of society and carry out this duplicity by means of applying parallel levels of language, social practices, and thus also thinking. Dovlatov enhances the schizophrenic effect of the "true" reality by inventing most of the articles at the beginning of each compromise, with rare exceptions, and using the optimistic language of the Soviet press, reporting on success in all areas of economy and culture. His articles seem real in their semiotics of Soviet optimism, and the texts show no borders between fantasy and reality in the Soviet regime; both spaces are spaces of manipulation used also by the author to show the absurdity of the Soviet ideology (Yang 2012: 222).

The colonial gaze is redirected in discovering one's own subaltern status; the gaze then is diverted onto oneself and the Baltic nations as victims of the Soviet rule. The narrator and the Baltic nations sharing their status as victims allows the narrator to discover changes in his idea of the Baltic colonized nations – there is compassion mixed with admiration and jealousy. At the same time, as further examples will show, this is a partial action which does not culminate in a discoursive decolonization

of the local Baltic societies. Reversed hierarchy, in which the colonized Estonians and Latvians are seen as a more developed and sophisticated group, is a tool to oppose the regime as it exists in the self.

By means of deep mistrust and opposition to Soviet ideology, the narrator distances himself from the regime; the colonized Baltic cultures are treated as a means to install and practice individual opposition of the journalist to the regime. In this condition the narrator is situated outside of both cultural spaces, and only in this condition does he discover himself as an intellectual opposed to the regime. His participation in the Soviet regime is a formal, ritualized, empty participation aimed at receiving a salary. He does not enter the space of the colonized either, as their history and current situation remain unknown. But there is another, third space, imagined and sustained by alcoholic escape, which he shares with the both colonized communities – the Baltic societies and the Russians opposed to the Soviet ideology. In the following case studies, the concept of the reversed colonial gaze will be analyzed in detail.

Case Study I. How Soviet colonialism produced "normal" babies (5th Compromise)

Let us return to the Estonian doctor in the fifth compromise. The journalist named Dovlatov publishes an article with the title *A Human is Born* about the 400,000th inhabitant of Tallinn –he is named Lembit and is the first son of Maya and Grigory Kuzins. This is the official part of the story, the one which describes the Soviet ideology which acclaims the working class as the bearers of the futuristic, industrial development of the Baltic republics. As Epp Annus stresses, the topos of industrialization was an inherent element of the Soviet modernization and can be applied as a tool of the colonial supremacy of the Soviet regime framed in a civilizing discourse (Annus 2016: 4). Other researchers define European modernity as a set of colonizing practices which should become a part of the discourse on deconstructing European hegemony. This implies a reversed gaze and imaginative processes, too. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his attempt to provincialize Europe, stated that the West is "an imaginary entity" which still preserves its appeal or power (Chakrabarty 2000: 43).

The new civilization established under Soviet ideology in Estonia is shaped by factories, collective farms, and machine stations which "report to the state of their high productivity" (Dovlatov 2019: 29). The article in the *Soviet Estonia* ends with a hidden, sarcastic note that a human being is born who is "doomed to be happy." This anti-utopian tune of mandatory happiness is developed further in the plot. The editor-in-chief Turonok constructs the happiness of a child without consulting even

the parents. The early stage of the child's life resembles Huxley's factory of genetically modified babies who are to acquire certain qualities before they are born. Another tool of a colonial power is to decide what name to give to a baby. Even the birth itself is planned by Turonok who acquires the features of a divine being, bringing people to life according to the jubilee schedule (Dovlatov 2019: 31). Before the name is given, various children participate in the competition organized by Turonok. The narrator, like in a fairy tale, attempts three times to solve Turonok's riddle of what constitutes a suitable child. He is instructed by the editor how to choose a correct baby:

> – And remember – Turonok rose to end the conversation – the baby should be eligible for publication.
>
> – Meaning?
>
> – Meaning a full-fledged child. Nothing inferior, gloomy. No Caesarean section. No single mothers. Full set of parents. Healthy, socially full-fledged boy. (Dovlatov 2019: 31)

The first baby is the result of an international relationship and seems to be eligible. But soon the narrator discovers that there is racism in the Soviet press. The journalist reports to Turonok that the boy is large, healthy and that his father comes from Ethiopia and studies in Soviet Estonia. "'He is a Marxist,' I added, not knowing why." (Dovlatov 2019: 39). The rejection of the African baby develops rapidly but in various stages. First Turonok asks whether the journalist is drunk. When this option is denied by the offended journalist, the editor goes further to collect information on the father of the newly born baby and, after having confirmed his fears that the father was a "black," or *negr* in Soviet Russian language of the time, the editor claims he will fire the journalist for "discrediting all the best" and asks him to "leave in peace your shitty Ethiopian! Wait for a normal baby, a normal human baby!" (Dovlatov 2019: 39). The last quotation suggests the most severe form of verbal racism directed at the baby, whose parents are alleged not to be humans. Another baby is nominated by a team at the newspaper, but is rejected due to a "wrong" ethnic and religious identity, being a son of journalist Boris Stein, who is of a Jewish origin. When Boris reaches the maternity hospital, the narrator already knows that his son has been disqualified because, as he has been told by the staff photographer: "Each Jew is to be agreed upon" by party officials. This case stimulates a short dialogue between two representatives of the Soviet media on the fact that anti-semitism exists in the Soviet state. When this discovery is made by the Jewish journalist, the narrator calls the USSR a lie. The totality of the lie is presented by three facts – the unburied Lenin, the abbreviation of the USSR, and the Soviet journalism and Soviet poetry which produce a lie "which has dozens of nicknames" (Dovlatov 2019: 43).

Finally, the third baby is deemed worth writing about. The boy is a representative of the socialist elite in many ways: he is born of parents who both are workers, she

an Estonian driver, he a Russian turner, a member of the Communist Party. Turonok is finally satisfied and sends another request to the journalist: "Make sure that they call the baby Lembit." After the journalist begs not to call the baby Lembit, as the name is old-fashioned and comes from folklore, the editor becomes impatient and suggests to offer money to the parents to force them to call the baby by the name which would signify Estonian-Russian friendship. 25 rubles is the price of Soviet control over baby's very basic identity, offered to the father Kuzin who converts the sum immediately to two half litre bottles of vodka and some snacks. The father of the colonized baby is himself colonized already for decades by consuming party slogans; at the beginning of the conversation with the narrator, he immediately produces a sentence consisting solely of Soviet slogans: "We work hard, as it suits, we widen our horizon, we enjoy authority among [..]" (Dovlatov 2019: 43). The story ends with the predominant tool used by Dovlatov as a *deus ex machina* to resolve unresolvable conflicts, namely the split between the emptiness of the Soviet ideology and everyday life – an extensive consumption of alcohol. Only when drunk, both men reveal what they really think of the Soviet reality and themselves. Kuzin calls himself a drunkard and his son a piece of shit. The scene leads into a militia office, where Kuzin and the notes on the future article about the happy baby are lost after a drunken fight with the restaurant staff. In the next chapter I will analyze the motive of drinking as a unifying frame for most chapters of "The Compromise" and will clarify what role alcohol plays in practicing a reversed gaze.

Case Study II: Subaltern speak when drunk. Alcoholic oblivion as a decolonial tool (8th Compromise)

The eighth compromise reveals how the narrator first got to Tallinn – after an intense drinking party which resulted in his landing in Estonia with no job, flat, or money. This is how the professional career of the narrator started in Tallinn. And this is how it ends in the 12th compromise, after attending a meeting of former prisoners of Nazi camps in Tartu. The whole text is shaped by the social drinking of the narrator and his colleagues. One of the basic functions of alcohol lies in the attempt of the narrator as a subaltern to acquire a new language, which is opposed to the Soviet language. Alcohol helps him overcome the bitter aftertaste of each compromise and to free himself for a short moment from the omnipresence of Soviet ideology. Intoxication offers a new political grammar which allows the subaltern journalist to speak, though not very clearly, after many shots of vodka. It also helps him discover alternative stories presented by the colonized Baltic cultures, as some taboos vanish while drinking.

This type of decolonization can be described as a fake decolonization, as no real freedom is achieved. The narrator and various of his colleagues are constantly intoxicated. This condition does not prevent them from fulfilling their duties, even in a state of severe hangover. The chief editor Turonok is aware of this habit and accepts it as the natural condition of the narrator, saying: "When did it [drunkenness] prevent you [from working]," mentioning a past scandal of vomiting on the premises of a party office (Dovlatov 2019: 39). When work is done, in the form of quick and often made-up articles in order to earn money for a drink, the escape to the alcoholic oblivion may begin. In some cases, drinking in the early hours of the day helps the day pass quickly: "I knew well that three more glasses and work will be over. In that sense drinking in the morning makes sense. Have a drink and you are free for the rest of the day." (Dovlatov 2019: 47)

Drinking is a topos in other Dovlatov's works, too, such as *Zona* (The Zone, 1982) and *Zapovednik* (in English translation: *Pushkin Hills*, 1983). Alcoholism is treated as an individual escape policy which takes place in public and unites various persons. As Galina Dobrozrakova stats, the long-lasting period of drinking, called *zapoy* in Russian, which is experienced by various characters of the novel, is a practice which links Dovlatov's texts to Nikolai Gogol's play *Revizor* (Inspector), in which high officials are heavy drinkers. Gogol depicts alcohol consumption as a vice with no social reasons or individual conflicts behind it, but Dovlatov's narrator drinks to escape the absurdity of the reality around him (Dobrozrakova 2019: 169). Mikhail Okun' analyzes the theme of drinking in Dovlatov's other works and states that alcoholism represents a combination of art (in its practical aspects of consuming and enjoying alcohol when one is short of money or, on the contrary, suddenly "rich") and a frame for the philosophical reflections of drunken heroes (Okun' 2012: 81–82). In *The Compromise*, drinking means performing an alternative social networking. It often functions as a substitute for non-existing civic society, in the small kitchen of a flat. A colleague of the narrator, Vera Chlopina, enjoys organizing parties, buying wine, and preparing snacks. All these activities are aimed to compensate for her loneliness.

The first transformation undertaken by the alcoholic is the illusion of temporarily giving up lying to oneself and telling "the drunken truth" to others about others – such is the condition of Vera some hours after the beginning of a party. Alcohol plays an important role in internal rediscovery of a person who participates in regular ignorance as part of the Soviet regime; this only underlines the dominance of lying as a long-lasting social practice. Alcohol helps reveal the true thoughts, intentions, and secrets of the staff members of the newspaper, but after the drunkenness has abated they find themselves in the same colonized condition which aggravates them and leads to another drinking session, thus producing a *circulus vitiosus* of alcoholism.

Another effect of drunkenness is entering an imagined identity – the narrator and those who drink with him are transferred to the land of *might have been*, which is shaped by unfulfilled dreams, former achievements, that are now forgotten, and an intense feeling of senseless existence. Thus Zhbankov, the photographer of the newspaper, cries out each time he is drunk that he is an artist, compares himself to the famous 19th-century Russian artist Aivazovsky, and complains that he is forced to take pictures of veterans, cows, and other worthless objects for miserable honoraria of six rubles. Vera kisses the portrait of the 19th-century Russian writer Dobrolyubov, stating that this was a great man, but Alla, another tipsy lady present, starts boasting that Audrey Hepburn sent her a new type of hair shampoo (Dovlatov 2019: 21). Others, like the drunken Kuzin, become more political and reflect on the sad condition of Russia, shouting that "Russia had been sold out".

The narrator does not produce such megalomaniacal images of himself; he just longs to end another senseless day by passing out after another large portion of vodka. In Dovlatov's books drinking is an ambiguous issue – it grants a short relief but also releases deeper levels of sadness, which in turn aggravate the hangover both physically and emotionally, as the return to reality proves that no escape is possible. In this case the only tool to survive is to give up thinking. This is what Zhbankov suggests: "Do not think – that is it. I haven't thought for the last fifteen years. If you start thinking, you will not want to carry on any longer. All who think are unhappy." When both have drunk another shot of vodka, which Zhbankov suggested to be a universal tool against thinking, the narrator feels that the "drunken oblivion was about to come and the shape of life became less obvious and less sharp" (Dovlatov 2019: 105).

How is the condition of drunkenness related to the reception of the Baltic societies? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine one of the most sad and hilarious chapters of the novel – the eighth compromise. It deals with the staging of a feedback session from the Secretary General of the Communist Party, Brezhnev, to local peasant Linda Peips, who is the leading milkmaid of the Paide district. She has just been elected a member of the Communist Party. This fact gives Turonok the idea to stage a direct contact of the leader of the state with peasants. In this scenario, two drunken journalists are to play the role of storytellers. In the chapter, the transformations fostered by intoxication are most closely linked to the encounter with colonized Baltic societies. Both Dovlatov and Zhbankov leave Tallinn and go to the rural area, where one of the most important tools of colonization, the Russian language, is almost non-existent – the local peasants, including Peips, are not fluent in it. This brings two young women, who welcome both journalists and accompany them during their stay, into the role of interpreters between the Soviet journalists and local peasants. Both sides are ignorant of the other, and both are the Other in cultural terms.

Linda Peips is seen as an exotic creature in various ways: because of her lack of knowledge of Russian, she keeps silent both linguistically and symbolically, as a representative of a subaltern nation in whose name Soviet newspapers speak. The interpreter Bella, a young Komsomol member, turns out to be a false interpreter, transforming the short answers given by the nervous Peips into standard, pathetic answers for the journalist to use as clichés about the role of the Communist Party. This makes the narrator stop the questioning, as he is now free to participate in the invention of the story of a freshly elected communist. Zhbankov is mocking the milkmaid by asking her an irrelevant question: "What time is it?" This mockery is translated in the correct way and turned into a question on how she reached such high productivity with her cow. Thus Peips is a kind of ritualized doll, covered with orders and signs of her professional achievements, but these achievements are imposed on her by the colonizing powers. Even the symbol of her records, the cow, is not needed, as Zhbankov has a large collection of pictures of cows back in Tallinn to insert into the report. The political ritual of a direct communication between Brezhnev and Peips is staged in order to represent of the successful and efficient work of Brezhnev, but in fact it is sarcastically turned into a complete failure of the whole social drama of the communist society – while the narrator is still trying to finish the letter by Peips to Brezhnev, his answer comes before the initial letter is even sent. Such unbelievable efficiency shocks all the *dramatis personae* but most of all the local party leader, who is now busy contemplating whether the office of the leader of the state would accept the letter of the milkmaid with the date after the answer of Brezhnev. The subaltern becomes a speaking doll whose real speech is not necessary.

The session with a milkmaid is quick, and both journalists are glad to resume intense drinking in the company of the two beautiful escort women sent to please the representatives of the leading Soviet newspaper in Estonia. At the cottage where they both stay during the visit to Paide district, the encounter with the colonized Other takes on a changing role. The narrator accepts the higher intellectual and practical position of a young Estonian girl, Evi. The photographer follows this pattern, but alcohol directs him to act as a sensual man, choosing which girl is the prettiest. This choice dehumanizes both female counterparts as objects of lust. The narrator does not follow that pattern of intoxicated masculinity, but enjoys the sudden comfort provided by the cottage. The structure of the encounter with the two young Estonians reveals a pattern of critiques of Soviet Orientalism by Dovlatov, who uses a fairy-tale structure to uncover the colonialist practices of the fraudulent Soviet media. First, the remote area becomes exotic through the intensity of the Estonian language and the sudden, reversed exoticism of the Russian language. Another element of exoticism is the comfortable cottage and good drinks and food served by the two beautiful

females – Zhbankov is worried that this luxury and sensual encounter might be a provocation. Dovlatov places his heroes into a prototype of an enchanted castle, a widely used topos in fairy tales and epic poems of European chivalry. Bella and Evi resemble the sorceresses Alcina and her younger sister Morgana, seducing Christian knights in order to prevent them from fighting in Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, canto VI. Seduction is another form of lying, both in the 16th-century epic story and in *The Compromise*: The journalist becomes passive, does not move, enjoys close physical contact, although a sexual experience with the sorceress does not take place because of alcohol intoxication. The divergence from the basic pattern of the epic story, in which the knight is unaware of the seduction until it is over (Astolfo, rejected by Alcina, turns into a tree), is the fact that the journalist is still aware of the illusion that occurs at the cottage.

Alcohol here turns into the substance which, instead of deepening the illusion, restores the hero from the enchanted condition by providing an alternative type of oblivion. Instead of increasing sensuality, chemical intoxication brings an end to the seduction story, and the narrator once again passes out thanks to alcohol. While still relatively sober and capable of following the story told by Evi, the narrator is fascinated by the practical approach of the young girl whose aim is to obtain a more comfortable life and move to Tallinn. He calls Evi's generation "something fantastic" (Dovlatov 2019: 108). He admires her for her knowledge of what was considered to be Western life, a chaotic collection of fragmented pictures of the capitalist consumerism. The closeness of Estonia to Western media space, especially to Finland, has transformed Evi into a being superior to the narrator. She is a westernized Other in many ways and dominates the grown male colonial representative through how she follows the rules of sexual health, avoiding contact with men who ignore hygiene, and trying to stop the Russian journalist from heavy drinking, as it would harm his sexual function and would not give her the pleasure she desires. Despite the narrator's self-pity and poor economic condition, he is still attractive to Evi because of his spatial dominance – living in the capital of Estonia. Though admired, Evi remains for the narrator the Other who is not consumed. The colonial gaze, which disappears in the enchanted cottage, is restored by the intense consumption of alcohol which makes the Other a stranger, remote person, unattainable because the narrator is himself colonized by various actors. It is the Soviet editor who sends the journalist to the enchanted place, and the journalist is forced to experience his internal colonization as he remains part of the Soviet ideology, constantly dependent on the power in his material lack of prosperity – six rubles and the vague promise of a flat bind him to the regime. Thus, drinking remains the only short-term escape from the status of subaltern, allowing everyday life shortages to blur and hidden thoughts to be articulated.

A sexual encounter would, on the contrary, clearly show his deficiency: lack of finances, material goods, private space and many other things, including a clean pair of socks, a rare object in the wardrobe of the narrator.

When not exposed to the exceptional conditions of a cottage, the narrator experiences other forms of changed hierarchies in his contact with the representatives of the Baltic societies. This happens in different states of drunkenness, though sometimes also in a sober condition, and thus allows self-reflection to occur in form of admiration, jealousy, or discovery of the silenced history of the colonized nations. These reflections are present in almost all twelve chapters.

Case Study III: Spatial, cultural, and mnemonic hierarchy reversed

The Compromise can be described as a diary of encountering the Other on the way to one's new condition. The Otherness as a category of culturally based meanings and identities is present in various semiotic units, such as the physical body, material goods, views, and various performative practices which create a sense of difference between the Russian journalist and the Estonians and Latvians. To summarize the wide range of such differences, I will concentrate on 1) spatial, 2) physical, and 3) mnemonic issues, which are not neutral. The ethnically Other, experienced by a Russian, is not stripped of political, gender, and memory controversies and hidden history traumas. This produces in the narrator a sense of hierarchy in which the colonized Estonians and Latvians are superior to the journalist's ethnic group. As ethnicity is a political issue in the Soviet regime, producing hierarchies and forms of exclusion, superiority of the colonized is experienced in connection with their belonging to Western culture. In the early 1970s, it is a past belonging, but it is still present for a Russian journalist in the spaces and social practices of the locals. As he has never been and most probably would never be in the West, the imagined West is situated in Tallinn. A friend of Dovlatov, the writer Valery Popov, remembers his own impressions when visiting Tallinn:

> To get on the train [..] and wake up in the morning to see that city. Whole institutes travelled over the weekend, coming to the Rathaus Square, covered with Belgian blocks (already something exotic!), we stepped down into cosy half dark cafes (this semi-darkness, not allowed at our place, was intimate, promising, and forbidden). There was no other city as appealing as this. It seemed all of life is like this and can be only like this: polite, rational, and cosy! And we all had a joyous idea: What if there is no real Soviet power here? It cannot be so good under the Soviet power, can it? (Popov 2018:202)

Unfortunately for the narrator, the Soviet ideology is in constant battle against that fragmented and imagined Western culture and political history of the Baltic

societies occupied a quarter-century ago. This presupposes an existence of a generation which remembers the period of pre-war independence. The editor-in-chief, whom Dovlatov depicts as "unctuous, made of marzipan. A type of a shy, mischievous guy" (Dovlatov 2019: 9), is able to change the political geography, creating a new communist spatiality where countries are ranged not according to alphabet, which is proclaimed to be a politically wrong approach, but following a new geography aligning to a place's Cold War situation, in which the GDR is the new West and Japan is an almost non-existent country (Dovlatov 2019: 10, 28).

The narrator's Tallinn is small and cosy. There is an atmosphere of a *Biedermeier* city of the previous century, which makes the West an antiquity rather than a contemporary experience. Additional characteristics are produced by heroes of the articles which precede each story. Thus Alla from the third compromise describes the city as "cosy and solemn" and proud, and as one where antiquity and modernity are well-balanced. The topos of a small city or town is repetitive: the narrator describes Tallinn as intimate, but provincial town which is welcoming and even somewhat painted, unreal (Dovlatov 2019: 30, 85). The West, represented by the small Estonia, is opposed to Russia which is an abstract territory represented by Russians in Estonia – they drink, fight in restaurants, are not clean, are constantly hung-over, and are poor even by Soviet standards. This image is not the reflection of the locals (with the exception of Evi), but the self-portrait of the narrator who is well aware of his sad condition. Anthropological cleanliness and fashionable looks (Doctor Teppe, Evi) is the continuation of the Western Otherness of the space and takes the shape of a pragmatic sexual education and competence. Evi is not the only character to take care of her sexual life – Tallinn-based young researcher Tina Karu from the ninth compromise also represents a superior Other in sexual terms.

Tina represents the successful inclusion of an Other into the Soviet system – she comes from a loyal Estonian family and is a Secretary of Komsomol. Sexual education for her is a proof of the existence of sex in Soviet culture, and the crisis in the sexual life of the family is another scientific challenge. She is admired by the narrator for this practical attitude when, after having read and summarized *The Technology* – a guidebook for a successful sexual life – she asks for practical training, but not with her husband. This suggestion, which bewilders the narrator, is for Tina a further step in the project of improving her quality of life and is articulated in an "Estonian manner – down-to-earth and businesslike" (Dovlatov 2019: 114). Another sexual exoticism experienced by the narrator is homosexuality, criminalized during the Soviet regime. The tradition of excluding homosexuality in Soviet society has been so long that the narrator is unaware of the term *queer* (*goluboj*), and Turonok must explain its meaning to the narrator. The narrator, not having encountered a homosexual, is even

proud of the fact that homosexuality is a criminal offense. The sexuality of the narrator is heterosexual and is accompanied by regular intoxication as a kind of stimulus, which is seen by the narrator himself as inferior to the advanced sexuality of Estonian women or to the forbidden and exotic queer sexuality, but also as a part of Western culture, as he can talk about culturally divergent sexuality only with a French guy (Dovlatov 2019: 72–73).

Another dimension of Otherness is mnemonic and is linked to the experience of independent statehood in the 1930s, the participation of some Estonians on the side of Nazi troops against the Red Army during World War II, and national resistance after 1944. All these events were forbidden to be recollected in the Soviet Baltic republics. Thus, colonization was extended to the realm of collective memory. In the compromises, the concept of unstable cultural communities and the alternative reading of culture by Sewell Jr. can be identified in various cases: the narrator imagines that the son of Teppe, who is sentenced to prison, must be a member of an Estonian secret resistance organization and linked to the Russian Estonian dissident Sergei Soldatov, the founder of the Democratic movement in the USSR. Upon hearing that none of these heroic deeds were carried out by the son of the doctor, who is just a drunkard, the narrator is disappointed.

The forbidden past comes back in the form of two elderly men, a tailor and a director of a theatre. One of them is described by Turonok as a former *palach* (Soviet term describing locals who collaborated with the Nazi regime during 1941–1944 occupation), the other as former member of an SS Legion. Their biographies during the war are known, but are forbidden, and it is alcohol again which for a short time makes available forbidden memories and even sustains a short dialogue of memories and traumatic experience of former prisoners. In the 12th compromise, the image of the Soviet regime as a total prison is sketched: during the gathering of the former prisoners of Nazi concentration camps, Zhbankov encounters various elderly men who turn out to represent victims of both totalitarian regimes. Some men were imprisoned in Nazi camps, some in the Soviet camps – being Soviet soldiers who were captured by German troops. Individual stories reveal to the narrator the plurality of the history of World War II, which was suppressed by the Soviet ideology of victory. In the banned plurality, the head of the Nazi camp gives a prize to the Russian prisoner who won in chess, while another Russian soldier imprisoned in a Nazi camp is liberated by the French, but then arrested in Paris at the Soviet embassy and sent to Siberia by the representatives of his own state. Upon hearing the story of an Estonian named Walton about his arrest by the Nazis, which he thought was illegal as he was innocent, Zhbankov articulates one of the stereotypes depicting Estonians as admirers of Hitler. The ancient term *chuhonci* (Chucknas) is used to describe Estonians in pejorative manner:

> – "All Chucknas are like this," said Zhbankov. "Adolf is their best friend. But they look down on Russians."
>
> – "But what should they love us for?" interrupted Gurchenko. "For all that mess which we made in Estonia?" (Dovlatov 2019: 188)

No further comments follow on what kind of mess it is. Hitler, as a monster from the past, is also linked to the story of Kuzin's baby – in order to succeed in getting 25 rubles out of Turonok, the journalist uses the image of Hitler to state that if no money comes, Kuzin will call his son Adolf and not Lembit. The theatrical monstrosity of Hitler is efficient and the money follows. The alternative history offers a different story and shows the violence of Soviets towards their own nation within Stalinist repressions. The superiority of the Baltic societies is formulated through the idea of Soviets as intruders bringing chaos, arrests, and economic depravity, which is experienced in the early 1970s also in other regions of the Soviet state (in the village near Pskov where Kuzin's wife comes from, there has been no margarine for half a year). Another dimension of superiority is the position of the silent victim Teppe, who has survived repressions and got used to keeping silent until it is safe to speak. He exercises this strategy twice in the novel, even with a young Soviet journalist.

Another example of a superior colonized is a journalist of Latvian origin, Eric Bush, who was born in Riga and whose parents, like Teppe, have made a successful Soviet career. Bush is an example of the Other who is a tragicomic figure and is both pitied and admired by the narrator. Bush is a passionate anti-Soviet person, but his bravery depends on the amount of alcohol he has consumed prior to the ideological debates. During the debates, when intoxicated, he dismisses the whole Soviet system, its interpretation of the past, its contemporary situation, and all official narratives: there has been no victory over Nazi Germany, no free medicine, no Gagarin flight. He is a combination of radical non-conformity and the absence of principles, as the narrator describes him. But another feature makes him very appealing to elderly women. His sexuality, affected by drunkenness, is not appalling like that of the narrator. Bush then becomes even more charming for elderly ladies, as he starts to cite Silver Age poetry or criticize the regime. He is depicted as a trickster: he changes faces, identities and women, constantly declares his opposition to Soviet politics, and is a source of quotations from classical literature. This allows him to get through life by inventing stories and ignoring his journalist duties. Although the narrator follows the same pattern in order to quickly finish the detested duties, Bush acts as if he were constantly on stage. Even the perspective of being trapped by the KGB gives him an additional thrill to perform in a chivalric manner and to stage himself as a victim.

The most active Baltic opponent of the Soviet reality fails to achieve anything, because of advancing alcoholism and love for theatrical effects. His last deed – breaking a plate of glasses during an office party of *Soviet Estonia* – is described and explained later by Bush in terms of the absurdity of both reality and resistance against it: "Now it is to be decided: who am I? A knight, as Galka thinks, or a piece of shit, as others state?" (Dovlatov 2019: 149). The Latvian knight acquires features of a drunken Don Quixote who is in fact ignorant of the health problems of his mistress and is interested solely in sustaining his public image of the radical Other who is pitied by the narrator: "Where is he now – this dissident, beau, schizophrenic, poet and hero, the disturber of the peace?" A theatrical image, Bush vanishes in the oppressive era of Brezhnev.

Conclusion. No real encounter?

To sum up the major findings after reading *The Compromise*, I suggest the interpretation of the text in terms of Baltic post-colonial studies: as the story of colonized Baltic societies described by a dissident representative of the Soviet press who himself is a subaltern. To return to the suggestion of Said that a post-colonial reading of a novel would imply speaking to the suppressed and numb in the text and around it, in wider cultural context, I recapitulate the following. Dovlatov the author and Dovlatov the narrator, though different persons, are united in their non-reading of the story of the Baltic subalterns. It is not reading but rather scrolling through the history and contemporaneity of the other communities, which remain largely undiscovered. Partly the gaps are filled with easy-to-explain ethnic stereotypes, partly through comic encounters with non-responsive Other who remain strangers. Their cultural and political difference, to apply Bhabha's concept of mimicry as perpetual ambiguity of colonial rule (Bhabha 1994: 122), is never overcome by the narrator, but only partly disabled for the internal aims of the journalist – his discovery of himself as the Other of the Soviet regime. The Baltic societies and their past are presented as fragmented notions of the discrepancy of realities in the totalitarian Soviet regime, and as such are valuable experience for the narrator who intends to find ways to escape the totality of Soviet ideological frame. This frame is one of the side effects of his position – as a Soviet journalist, Dovlatov the narrator is faced with a duty to not only passively consume the ideological paradigm, but to actively reproduce it in his articles. The narrator accepts twelve compromises in which he produces new lies and sustains the Soviet ideology, though he discovers alternative history, memory, and everyday life (including different gender performances and concepts of sexuality) through Estonians and Latvians.

In this condition, to borrow Tlostanova's expression, a Russian journalist as a substitution for a white colonialist is "not so white" (Tlostanova 2017: 142). He is a nonconforming part of the colonial power and its internal opposition, and in such blurred condition he interacts with other subalterns. Various urban and rural characters do not really speak in their own name to the journalist – the Baltic nations remain subalterns in whose name Dovlatov's narrator speaks, as he cannot speak to them in many ways, including linguistically and politically. As a result, he is forced to invent their language, as he is unable to speak their real language and none of them are allowed to present their thoughts, anyway. He perceives their narrative through various gatekeepers, such as the Russian language stuffed with political clichés, and the Estonian language which remains an enigma to the narrator and a tool for hiding the past of the colonized (tailor, theatre director, the silent doctor). In such forms and quality, the subaltern status of the Baltic nations is hidden and not conveyed to the narrator by the locals. The only sources are hints, anecdotes, and memories of those who are allowed to speak because of the limited effect of their narrative (Russians, veterans, former camp prisoners, and fellow drunkards). The narrator approaches Baltic subalterns as far as they help reveal his own transformations; thus, their "true" message is to a large extent invented by the narrator who perpetuates speaking for subalterns without their participation.

The condition of drunkenness opens for a short time some of the memory spaces of the Other, but this does not lead the narrator closer to the cultural content of the colonized. This is partly because in such a condition he is not able to recollect stories. Baltic nations remain exotic, and as such are admired by the representative of the colonizing culture as bearers of more sophisticated cultures. The narrator, who has lost any conviction in the meaningfulness of the Soviet reality, is mostly preoccupied with intimate process of scrutinizing his emotional and physical decline. The repetitive statement "How stupid is my life!" is the notion of a senseless existence. Although the narrator is aware of no changes to come, he becomes a passive dissident in order to regain some sense in life. He participates in a harmless ritual of dissident language at work and among friends during drinking parties, but there is no radical breach of the system of ideological control, simply because the system is omnipotent in its social control – salary, business trips, and a flat are the symbols of dependency and silence bestowed upon both colonizers and colonized. To apply the concept of an *imperial travelogue* as a product of imperial consciousness which grants the West its cultural superiority later to be taken over by the Russian empire, (Ponomarev 2017: 34), these twelve compromises may be defined as a Soviet dissident travelogue, which deconstructs Soviet imperial space by granting the colonized a higher cultural status both in performative issues (social practices of the body)

and in terms of space, which consists of architecture and consumer and cultural places. Dovlatov creates the superiority of the Other in order to liberate himself from another Other – the Soviet ideology.

The narrator, defined by the following question, undergoes a deep emotional transformation: how to go on being a journalist if this profession is compromised by the ideology? Not being able to resolve this internal conflict, he develops a system of silent resistance when discovering his subaltern status. One of the tools of the resistance is to consume fragmented alternative cultural meanings of the Other. The Baltic past becomes a part of personal, intimate liberation, a re-discovery even if the liberation turns out to be a fake one. The Soviet journalist does not break from the system, because the system is too omnipresent to be shed. The narrator is aware that he is a part of the system and that his soft, internal decolonization is the space allowed and controlled by the system itself. Soon various repressions would end the imagined Western atmosphere of Tallinn and the narrator would return to Leningrad.

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