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Metamodernism in Liksom's Compartment No. 6

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Kasimir Sandbacka,
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Abstract: In his paper "Metamodernism in Liksom's Compartment no. 6" Kasimir Sandbacka examines Rosa Liksom's latest novel *Compartment No. 6* (2011). Liksom is considered to be one of the most prominent Finnish postmodernists. However, *Compartment No. 6* has been seen by critics as a shift or return towards modernism or even realism. Sandbacka concurs with this observation but maintains that this is an insufficient analysis of the change in Liksom's writing. He argues that the change is related to the transformation of the cultural dominant, namely postmodernism. In dialogue with Jameson's theory of postmodernism, Sandbacka discusses recent theories of post-postmodernism and metamodernism that suggest a new term is needed to describe the cultural dominant of our present era. He reads *Compartment No. 6* in light of these theories and suggests that the novel makes use of metamodernist techniques to suspend postmodern suspicion and to revive utopian desire.

Kasimir SANDBACKA

Metamodernism in Liksom's Compartment No. 6

Finnish author Rosa Liksom is arguably best known for her short prose that employs hyperbolic dark humor and irony to portray life on the fringes of society. Although her earlier works have been occasionally read as realism or even naturalism, their modernist and postmodernist features have not gone unnoticed (Kovala, "Introduction" <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1168>; Hosiaisluoma, "Postmodernismia" 258). Chris Pawling suggests that some of Liksom's short stories "stand on the cusp of an oblique postmodernism and a more 'committed' political standpoint" that reflects modernist poetics and irony (Liksom's <http://dx.doi.org /10.7771/1481-4374.1171>). Since the 1990s, Liksom has been regarded as one of the leading Finnish postmodernists (see e.g. Lyytikäinen, "Peiliin" 220). Her first two novels, *Kreisland* (1996) and *Reitari* (2002), are distinctly postmodern in their carnivalesque disregard for official history.

Contrastingly, Liksom's latest novel *Hytti Nro 6* (2011, *Compartment No. 6* [2014]) has been praised in various critiques for its accurate description of everyday life in the Soviet Union and is seen as a shift towards realism (e.g. Saurama, "Kuva" 15; Jama, "Lennä" 27), the orthodoxy of Russian literature, and as a kind of modern melancholy (Kantokorpi, "On the Trans-Siberian" <http://www.booksfromfinland.fi/2011/10/on-the-trans-siberian-express/>). It has been described as a work of "lighthearted darkness" that "embraces the mundane and the heroic in equal measure" (Simon, "Poignant" <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-adfb-Book-review-Poignant-trip-through-Soviet-demise#.VuFPEVKzngk>). The novel is set in the end times of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of which was o ne of the most dramatic turning points of the twentieth century. This historical juncture haunts *Compartment No. 6* as a not yet actualized but nonetheless immanent context. The novel details the train trip from Moscow to Mongolia taken by an unnamed Finnish girl, who resembles the author in her youth. On this journey through the vast steppes of Siberia, the girl is accompanied by an uncouth Russian man—Vadim Nikolayevich Ivanov—whose vulgar stories and sexual harassment she is forced to suffer because she happens to share a small train compartment with him. Against the odds, a hesitant friendship develops between the two travelers on their Trans-Siberian journey, as they attempt to make sense of their past, present, and future.

However, a return to realism or modernism is an insufficient analysis of the shift in Liksom's writing. Certainly, postmodern structures of ambiguity are more subdued in *Compartment No. 6* than in Liksom's previous novels. Finnish scholar Leena Kirstinä sees *Compartment No. 6* as a synthesis of the central themes of Liksom's previous works that further accentuates the "silence, lyricism, and gentleness that have been present since the beginning" of her works ("Rosa Liksom" 83-84). The protagonist girl of *Compartment No. 6* appears to be an atypically psychological character for Liksom, who usually employs caricatures rather than the complex subjects of modernism (82). A certain reorientation towards the past seems evident in the novel, though as Kirstinä points out, this is not the first time Liksom has recycled and rearranged parts and themes of her past texts (83). What I suggest is that Liksom's stylistic reorientation should be considered in the context of yet another juncture in history, namely the one we are presently experiencing: the transformation of the dominant paradigm of postmodernism, whether it is waning, or, as I am inclined to believe, intensifying.

This article examines how *Compartment No.6* acts as a metafictional commentary on Liksom's own postmodern style of writing, and how it, in a broader cultural context, attempts to glimpse something beyond postmodernism: namely, something that would be a more productive response to our present cultural and political condition. Liksom herself has stated that *Compartment No. 6* has three levels: the narrative level, that describes the girl's and Vadim's train trip; the intertextual level, on which the novel confers with the Russian literary tradition; and the allegorical level, on which the relationship between the girl and Vadim corresponds to the history of Finnish-Soviet relations (Mayow, "Suomineito" <http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/a1373254712226>). All of these levels are retrospective in nature. They deal with personal, literary, and political history respectively. Here, I propose that a fourth, metafictional level can be discerned in the injection of the girl as a stand-in for the author, and simultaneously as a diegetic audience to Vadim's stories. My aim is to explore this foregrounding of hitherto muted autobiographical and reflexive elements: how Liksom's own ways of writing and narrating are discussed on this metafictional level, and how this discussion develops into the hope of momentarily suspending postmodern suspicion. (By postmodern suspicion I refer to the irony, ambiguity, and skepticism that are central to Liksom's works.) I will use Fredric Jameson's periodization and theory of the postmodern as the starting point of this exploration, along with his recent reassessment and reaffirmation of his seminal argument. I will then complement and contrast Jameson's view with theories that suggest that a new term is required to replace postmodernism: Jeffrey T. Nealon's theory of *post-postmodernism*, and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's theory of *metamodernism*—both of which engage in dialogue with Jameson's theory. Alongside this theoretical discussion, I will discuss the juncture in Liksom's writing and the metafictional features of *Compartment No. 6* in light of these theories.

After the theoretical discussion, I will explore the two main means in which postmodern irony is counterbalanced by a sense of (perhaps modern) sincerity in *Compartment No. 6*. First, I will focus on the autobiographical ambiguity of the novel: how autobiographical connections point to artistic self-reflection and foreground a sense of sincerity rather than authenticity. Second, I will turn my attention to the way the postmodern epistemological skepticism and suspicion of historiography is accompanied by a tentative hope of suspending that suspicion. Finally, I will discuss the sense of communion that

develops between the girl and Vadim, and how this might be taken as a positive, productive force to counteract the postmodern reduction to the here-and now.

Jameson's central arguments concerning postmodernism were painstakingly presented in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. According to Jameson, postmodernism is what follows the completion of the process of modernization (ix). It is the result of "yet another systemic modification of capitalism" into what Jameson calls "late capitalism" (xii, xix). Whereas modernism had a "Utopian" interest in what becomes of our changing world, postmodernism focuses on "events rather than new worlds" (ix). Postmodernism lacks historicity, which it substitutes with "fantastic historiographies" in which historical agency is surrendered in favor of inventing unreal histories (368-69). While vestiges of modernity and even realism survive in postmodernism, they are "wrapped in the luxurious trappings of their putative successor." (xii) In his article "The Aesthetics of Singularity," Jameson concedes that postmodernism as an "artistic style" has "become outmoded" but maintains nonetheless that in the broader sense of culture, postmodernism and postmodernity are still crucial terms "in exploring this new moment in which we all live" (103-05).

As the title already indicates, in *Post-Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Nealon takes Jameson's "core observation" about late capitalism giving rise to postmodernism as his point of departure. He argues that capitalism has gone through a further mutation since Jameson's analysis: late capitalism has transformed or intensified into just-in-time capitalism, and therefore also a new cultural paradigm, *post-postmodernism*, has superseded postmodernism (xi-xii). A central feature of this transformation is the upsurge of finance capitalism, in which the ebb and flow of money are no longer mediated by commodities or services (27)—which is very similar to Jameson's recent analysis of the present condition ("The Aesthetics" 116). In fact, Nealon makes clear that he is not trying to overcome Jameson's original analysis, but rather to "follow along the path that Jameson has set out for thinking about the present and its relations to the recent past." Post-postmodernism is an intensified version of postmodernism (*Post-Postodernism* 8).

Both Jameson and Nealon bring up the fall of the Soviet system as the harbinger of globalization, which suggests that the historical context of *Compartment No. 6*'s narrative is very relevant today. According to Jameson, it was the collapse of the Soviet system that enabled the global expansion and deregulation of capitalism without any effective resistance. Since then, heavy industry has been increasingly overtaken by information technology as the ideal form of production ("The Aesthetics" 105). In *Compartment No. 6*, this process is already visible in the dilapidated industrial cities traversed by the railway train—itself suggestive here as a sculptural vestige of modernity, when technology still possessed a "capacity for representation" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 36). Nealon notes that the fall of Soviet power has left capitalism without a "dialectical other against which to define or test itself" (*Post-Postmodernism* 32). *Compartment No. 6*'s narrative unmistakably resonates with our present times: the era, which is about to end in the novel sets the stage for the era we live in. Indeed, Nealon notices a peculiar return of 1980s culture after the turn of the millennium. Fashion from the 1980s is back, Hollywood nostalgically looks back at the decade (e.g. *Wall Street* 2), and music of the era has become the soundtrack of recent TV commercials. Nealon goes on to suggest that "maybe it's not so much that the 1980s are back *culturally*, but that they never went anywhere *economically.*" Market capitalism that became the "secular monotheism" of the US during the 1980s has since developed into the "dominant logic" of globalization (*Post-Postmodernism* 2-4). *Compartment No. 6*'s journey through the end times of 1980s capitalism's dialectical other is also a journey into the beginnings of our present era and culture. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker also maintain that the new millennium has witnessed the emergence of a new cultural paradigm, which they call *Metamodernism* ("Notes on Metmoderism" <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677>; "Utopia" 55). They argue that many of the modern things that postmodernism professed to be coming to an end—such as history, social class, the subject, the grand narrative, and the agent—are returning in metamodernism ("Utopia" 55). In line with Jameson and Nealon, Vermeulen and van den Akker ground this change of paradigm to the transformation of capitalism from its "late" incarnation to a "global" one. ("Utopia" 56) Metamodernism is "characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment," as well as between related dichotomies such as "enthusiasm and … irony," or "totality and fragmentation" ("Notes" <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677>). Vermeulen and van den Akker recognize that metamodernism shares many features with postmodernism, but maintain that metamodernism uses postmodern techniques to "surpass the postmodern" ("Utopia" 62).

While Vermeulen and van den Akker's theory of metamodernism is not as meticulously historicized as Jameson's or Nealon's respective theories, it does attempt to answer some of the questions Nealon and Jameson have left open—especially in the political field after postmodernism. Jameson states that "in our current historical situation, a sense of history can only be reawakened by a Utopian vision lying beyond the horizon of our current globalized system, which appears too complex for representation in thought" ("The Aesthetics" 121). In postmodernism, temporality is reduced to the present (128).

Nealon describes how postmodern culture and theory have in fact become the mainstream of just-in-time-capitalist logic. The principles of liberation, self-fashioning, hybridity, and multiplicity endorsed by cultural postmodernism have been appropriated by neoliberal capitalism (*Post-Postmodernism* 23). "What happens to the critical discourse of deconstruction," Nealon asks "when capitalism in practice assumes the role of 'deconstructor' par excellence?" (122). Postmodernism seems to have lost whatever subversive power it wielded in the previous decades. Nealon particularly aims his critique at what he calls postmodern "hermeneutics of suspicion," which employ the "'weak' power of the false" that "performs the relentless work of the negative, always and everywhere hollowing out the true" (159). In its stead, he calls for a "post-postmodern hermeneutics of situation." (150) Based on Foucault's distinction between "the fabulous" and literature ("Lives of Infamous Men" 292-93), Nealon provides a

tentative prescription for a post-postmodernist reading of literature: "There is a 'strong' power of the false in literature (the one I'd like to harness to post-postmodernism), based on 'a decision of nontruth' that nevertheless 'produces effects of truth' in an alternative fashion. And this intensification of the power of the false as the engine for the emergence of another, different mode of speaking the truth. No longer merely serving as the interruptive or indecisive 'other' of philosophical or social power, literature here takes on a productive function of its own" (*Post-Postmodernism* 162).

Nealon suggests that we should redirect our interpretative (hermeneutic) efforts in order to produce alternatives to dominant truth discourses, instead of disrupting—again and again—totalizing claims to truth. These alternatives may be flawed and erroneous (that is to say false) but may nonetheless "produce effects of truth" in a given situation. Although Nealon seems to be avoiding the term utopia, it seems evident that there is an unuttered utopian element in this strong, productive power of the false: it is an attempt to think a different truth, to represent the unimaginable that lies, as Jameson puts it, "beyond the horizon of our globalized system" ("The Aesthetics" 121).

Vermeulen and van den Akker make it very clear that utopianism is "part and parcel" of metamodernism ("Utopia" 55, 57). In their analysis of contemporary art, they give—perhaps risking erring in the spirit of the strong power of the false—a more positive form to the tempered and restrained proposals of Jameson and Nealon: "Metamodern discourse … acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it as if it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility" ("Notes" <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677>). Like Nealon, they call for a partial suspension of suspicion, and like Jameson, they search for a possibility to transcend the reduction to the present, a possibility "of thinking the past, present and future as a meaningful whole" ("Utopia" 66). However, utopia might not be as absent in postmodernism as Vermeulen and van den Akker would have us believe. Elisabeth Wesseling, for example, has argued that postmodern historical fiction contains utopianism (*Writing History as a Prophet* 102). Perhaps metamodernist utopianism should be taken, then, as the appropriation or intensification of a dormant postmodern feature that is used to "surpass the postmodern"(Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Utopia" 62).

To sum up, both Jameson and Nealon see the present condition as an intensification of postmodernism or postmodernity—the latter to the point that he feels an added post-prefix is required to mark this intensification. Although Vermeulen and van den Akker insist on a completely new cultural paradigm, metamodernism, their analysis of the historical situation that gives rise to this paradigm does not differ significantly from Jameson's or Nealon's analysis. Their theory of metamodernism is an attempt to examine how contemporary artists have attempted to supersede postmodernism as a response to, and symptom of global capitalism, rather than a suggestion that this historical condition in itself is in any way being superseded. Although I have opted to use the term metamodernism in this article to account for the change in Liksom's writing, this should be not taken as an endorsement of Vermeulen and van den Akker's theory over Jameson's or Nealon's; rather, I intend this as a reading of metamodernism's features in Liksom's novel in order to discuss some of the questions raised by Jameson and Nealon.

Metamodernism attempts to think of "the past, present and future as a meaningful whole" knowing that such an enterprise will always, in one way or another, be incomplete. Early on in *Compartment No. 6*, one begins to suspect that the girl's journey on the Trans-Siberian railway is intended to be such a cognitive process: "She had wanted to get away from Moscow because she needed distance from her own life, but now she was already yearning to go back. She thought about Mitka, Mitka's mother Irina, Irina's father Zahar, and herself, how they were all doing. She thought about their temporarily shared home, which was empty now" (5). Oscillation between instances departure and arrival, irony and sincerity, absence and presence, takes turns in the dialectic of remembrance that permeates the novel. Before the girl can return to Moscow, she has to organize her "past, present and future" into "a meaningful whole." In order to do this, she needs to take some distance, both geographic and temporal, from her present, everyday life.

The past, the present, and the future of the Soviet Union are represented by the Muscovite family the girl has been living with. It is made up of three generations: Zahar, who has lost his brother to Stalin's purges and lived through the Stalinist reign of terror; Zahar's daughter Irina, a witness to post-Stalinist reform and stagnation; and Irina's son Mitka, a member of the last Soviet generation of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The girl's life in Moscow is accessed through her memories during her train trip, the present of the novel's story. Originally, the girl became romantically involved with Mitka, a sensitive and intelligent young man. As time went by, the girl fell in love with Mitka's mother Irina. When Mitka was sent to a mental institution for refusing conscription to the Soviet-Afghan War, the girl's and Irina's relationship became intimate. In the novel's present, Mitka has been released from hospital after eight months of confinement and drug treatment, and Irina has taken a holiday with her son to help him overcome his ordeal. Upon their impending return, the girl decides to take a train trip to Mongolia.

Compartment No. 6 is also a retrospective undertaking by Liksom, and this is discernible from the biographical and intertextual interplay in the novel. The unspecified present of *Compartment No. 6*'s story—perhaps sometime around 1986—coincides with the first years of Liksom's literary career. (The exact year of the girl's journey is never disclosed in *Compartment No. 6* and is not of crucial importance to the interpretation of the novel. If we opt to consider the autobiographical clues Liksom has provided in interviews, 1986 seems like the most probable year). Liksom also studied in Moscow in the late 1980s and wrote some of her early short fiction there. The early short fiction collections are Liksom's internationally best-known works and have been translated to more than a dozen languages. Liksom has alluded to additional biographical connections between the girl of *Compartment No. 6* and

herself: she has described the novel as a collage of all her train trips in the Soviet Union and said that Vadim's character is partly based on a man she travelled with through Siberia in 1986 (Mayow, "Suomi-neito" <http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/a1373254712226>). The Soviet Union—particularly Moscow, Siberia, and Mongolia—are recurring milieus of her fiction. *Compartment No. 6* revisits both locations and themes found in earlier works such as *Väliasema Gagarin* (1987, [Way Station Gagarin]), *Go Moskova* Go (1989, [Go Moscow Go]), *Bamalama* (1993), and *Kreisland* (1996, [Crazeland]) (see Kirstinä 83).

On her train trip, the girl has to share her compartment with Vadim, an overbearing man who insists on telling her vulgar anecdotes of his life. *Compartment No. 6*'s title draws our attention to the confining space in which the girl and the man are forced to travel. The journey in the shared compartment can be read allegorically as a representation of the encounter between the reader and the narrator—are the girl and Vadim not, after all, confined within the novel *Compartment No. 6* as well? The girl stands for the reader, who is bound by the confines of the texts and forced to suffer the encroachments of the narrator, represented by Vadim, if she or he wants to continue her or his journey. (Vadim is not the only narrator in *Compartment No. 6*, though; the main story is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator, while the girl acts as the focalizer of this narration.) At the very least, the arrangement playfully conflates the positions of character, narrator, reader, and even author that are embedded in the basic composition of the loquacious man and the attentive girl. Vadim and the girl are characters in a novel, but simultaneously, Vadim is the narrator of his autobiographical stories; the audience of Vadim's naration consists of both the girl and the reader of *Compartment No. 6*. Because the girl is the focalizer of the novel's narration, she is the lens through which the novel's world becomes visible to the reader, the character whose relationship with the reader is the most intimate. The girl's silence—save for one line of dialogue—adds to this effect, as it mimics the silence of the novel's reader.

Simultaneously, Liksom's repeated mentions of autobiographical sources of inspiration invite us to read the girl as the textual alter ego or stand-in for the author. The obvious subtext here is Anton Chekhov's short story "Ward Number Six" (1892) in which the protagonist, a doctor overseeing a mental hospital, finally ends up in the eponymous ward as a patient among his patients. In a similar manner, Liksom has implanted the girl, the author's own ambivalent image, as a character among her own characters.

This injection of a stand-in, in addition to its conflation with the position of the reader, is not only ironic play, but also a sincere opening to the ethical problematics of authorship, narration, remembrance, and even readership. It exposes something essential about the anatomy of Liksom's writing: the positioning of the author as an observer and mediator rather than a creative subject who produces fiction *ex nihilo*. According to Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction "foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both 'authentic' representation and 'inauthentic' copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality" (*A Poetics* 110). Though I am hesitant to classify *Compartment No. 6* as historiographic metafiction, this refusal to choose between authenticity and inauthenticity finds its expression in the author's alter-ego—and is a recurring theme in Liksom's works.

In *Compartment No. 6*, the oscillation between ironic detachment and sincere intimacy is intensified in order to produce an effect beyond ambiguity and the subversion of epistemological foundations. Despite alluding to the autobiographical foundations of *Compartment No. 6*, Liksom has denied that the girl depicts herself: "the girl is not me," Liksom states in an interview (Toivakka, "Kiskot vievät itään", 27). It seems the reader is invited closer only to be pushed away—reminiscent of the way the girl and Vadim alternatingly attract and deter each other.

The shifting attraction and repulsion between the main characters is a reflexive representation of the altering feelings of fascination and disgust felt by the reader of Liksom's texts. The girl is repeatedly offended by Vadim's sexual encroachments and his vulgar stories. Vadim's stories are melancholy, sexists, and vicious. His relation to women is particularly disturbing, but it is also polarized. At one point Vadim's abusive and boisterous virility voices his thorough contempt for women: "'Women used to know how to keep quiet. Nowadays they got their traps open all the time. One of the bitches used to put out and smoke at the same time, while I was fucking her. I wanted to strangle her'" (*Compartment* 13). Soon Vadim's bravado is replaced by fit of self-pity and longing for his wife Katinka, who has stayed in Moscow with their son while Vadim travels to work in Mongolia: "He glanced at her [the girl], sighed a little, shrugged his shoulders lamely. 'Katinka. My own Katinka'" (*Compartment* 13). There is something strangely recognizable about Vadim: the girl had "never met a Russian man like this before...Still, there was something familiar about him, his insolence, his way of drawing out his words, his smile, his tender, disdainful gaze" (*Compartment* 11).

Indeed, Vadim's offensive first person narration is familiar to the readers of Liksom's ironic short fiction, which is filled with hyperbolically violent, emotionally impaired, and hatemongering protagonists who, like Vadim, are often the first-person narrators of the stories. A homophobic narrator from Liksom's second short fiction collection *Unohdettu vartti* (1986), partly translated in the anthology *One Night Stands* (1993), is a particularly vile example. The two-page story consists of his twisted attempt to justify his killing of a man he suspected of being gay. "Faggots have always pissed me off. Long as I can remember. I can't understand how guys can do those things. It makes me puke. Shit, I can see why Adolf stoked his gas ovens with creeps like that" (*One Night* 51).

Even one familiar with Liksom's irony and dark humor may feel repulsed by this. Undoubtedly, this repulsion is even greater to a reader who interprets the text as realism or naturalism. In *Compartment No. 6*, the reader's disgust is mirrored by the girl's repulsion to Vadim's stories and demeanor. Chris Pawling notes the disparity between popular and avant-garde expectations of literature and reminds us that "we may need to exercise caution in assuming that the 'bleached-out naturalism' and pastiche-

irony in Liksom's stories automatically offers a literary representation of the world of 'postmodernity' which is universally accessible" (<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article= 1171& context=clcweb>). That is to say, the irony of Liksom's offensiveness may not be recognized by all readers. In the figure of the girl, Liksom steps away from the darker side of her fiction, confronting its very offensiveness. By taking this distance from her writing, by becoming its audience, she invites the reader closer. This is not to offer a voyeuristic view into the life of the author, but to establish a mutual understanding of situatedness between the author and the reader. Neither enjoy a privileged point of view, but they can reach a communion of sorts in the realization that they are both immersed in a situation where no such vantage points exist.

When the girl's and Vadim's relationship is read as an allegory of the encounter between the reader, the narrator, and the author, some of Vadim's comments become almost didactic musings about history and its narration—virtual guidelines on how to read Liksom's texts. After telling the story about how he became married to his wife Katinka, Vadim rubs his lips, once again savoring the vulgarities of his tale, and then casts doubt on the trustworthiness of his narration: "That's not what happened. But it could have" (*Compartment* 72). This "could" points to two potentialities, namely epistemological and ontological. Firstly, what Vadim could be saying is that his tale is plausible, that there are no inherent inconsistencies or hyperboles that would render the account unacceptable to a rational listener who does not possess contradictory evidence on the matter. Secondly, Vadim could be saying that the account is possible in the sense that, had some historical events turned out differently, his story could have come true.

One could, perhaps anachronistically, regard Vadim's attitude as metamodernist "pragmatic idealism" that is "inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by a postmodern skepticism" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes" 5 <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677>). The plausibility and the possibility of Vadim's story, of all his stories, highlight different but interrelated questions about narrating the past. What can we know about the past? Can our knowledge of the past be assembled into a coherent story, or is our knowledge constructed by this very assembling? Who is doing the narrating and whose voice is to be trusted? Is history deterministic or filled with latent, unrealized events and paths not taken, namely the utopianism of "uchronian fiction" as theorized by Wesseling ("Writing" 13-14, 100). Throughout his stories, Vadim points to these questions, warning against a naïve acceptance of historical narratives, but also hinting at the unrealized possibilities dormant in the past.

Vadim utters a sardonic idiom: "With a stick in the eye for those who remember the past, and in both eyes for those who forget it…" (Liksom, *Compartment* 82). The idiom points both to the importance of critical thinking and to the impossibility of finding a privileged vantage point for that critique outside the "cultural categories" of "postmodernist space" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 46). It tells us that Vadim's attitude towards the remembrance and recounting of the past is irresolute. He seems very skeptical both about the truth content of historical narratives and about the benefits to be gained by searching for the truth in those narratives. Yet abandoning this search and forgetting the past leads to blindness. After considering the merits and demerits of Stalin's reign, Vadim ponders the subjectivity of historical truths: "There are thousands and thousands of truths. Each fellow has his own. (*Compartment* 83). This could be read as succumbing to relativism—a danger that accompanies the postmodern critique of metanarratives (Waugh, *Practicing* 8-9)—or it could be read as a warning against accepting all claims to truths as equal. Vadim even cautions the girl not to take his stories at face value: "Don't believe everything I feed you, my girl" (*Compartment* 136). Of course, this warning necessarily extends to Vadim's (and Liksom's) cautionary advice as well. By warning about his own untrustworthiness, he is, ironically enough, being sincere.

Could *Compartment No. 6*, then, be engaged in something more than the subversion of the official past? To be sure, "That's not what happened. But it could have" (*Compartment* 72) seems an appropriate comment on the relation of Liksom's biographical past to the events in novel. Nealon, however, maintains that while literature "has a powerful conceptual resource in meaning, memory, and nostalgia, and as such can be a wedge against the present, in memory of a day gone by, or a series of roads not taken, "this resource still remains in the realm of postmodernism and is not in itself an effective response to "the present and its ubiquitous post-postmodernism" (*Post-Postmodernism 168*-69). How could *Compartment No. 6*, then, be seen to "reinvigorate those more 'positive' power of the false and modes of engagement with … [the globalized] world … outside the purely negative suture of undecidability?" (Nealon 169). Does the oscillation between irony and sincerity produce something beyond uncertainty?

An inkling to this positive power of the false can be read in *Compartment No. 6*'s wittiest criticism on the reliability of narratives, which is delivered by Vadim in an ironic reading of a newspaper: "Pile-up on Moscow ring road – five dead and twenty injured; coal mine explosion in Ukraine – three hundred dead; oil rig failure in Chelyabinsk – fifteen hundred reindeer drowned in oil; funicular crumbles in Georgia – thirty-four people dead; another sunk submarine in the Arctic Ocean – seventy-one sailors dead; boiler explosion in an old folks' home – one hundred and twenty-seven dead; radiator rupture in a kindergarten – forty-four children sprayed with boiling water; passenger boat sunk in the Black Sea – two hundred and six passengers drowned; chemical plant cancels work contract – an entire town wiped off the map; hydroelectric dam collapses in Karelia – thirteen villages underwater and seven hundred people drowned; if a power plant were to break down, a million people would die of radiation sickness" (77).

Although the laconic and detached listing of casualties no doubt ironically reproaches the treatment of people as numbers, the main target of Vadim's irony is the discrepancy between the official truth and personal truths—a discrepancy intensified in totalitarian regimes. His list culminates in a speculation about the possibility of a nuclear disaster, which alludes to the accident at the Chernobyl power

plant on 26 April 1986. If we consider the fact that Liksom claims to have modeled the novel partly on a trip she took on the Trans-Siberian railway in 1986 (Mayow, "Suomi-neito" <http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/a1373254712226>) to be an indication of the temporal context of the novel, and the fact the girl's journey begins in March, the only disaster not mentioned in the paper is just about to become actualized in the novel's near future. Skepticism and idealism conflate as knowledge of future events seeps into the narration: on the one hand, the authenticity of the novel's representation of the past is undermined, on the other, it is suggested that indications of future disasters and possibilities can be, however subliminally, sensed in the present.

So far, it seems we remain in the sphere of postmodernism. Yet metamodernism makes use of postmodern techniques to surpass postmodernism: it is postmodernism to the second degree. The productive, positive false here arises not from the ambiguity between skepticism and idealism, but from the understanding of this ambiguity as the necessary condition of all agency. Uncertainty is not the endpoint or the conclusion of the rapport between the girl and Vadim, but the beginning of a shared understanding of their situatedness in the world. This soon becomes apparent in Vadim's attempt to prompt a response by the girl. When he has recited his list, Vadim pauses and waits – apparently for the girl to react. As there is no reply from the girl, Vadim takes a breath and continues: "'Soviet pilots lost five cruise missiles on a test flight over Sakhalin Island. That's what it actually says here'" (*Compartment* 78).

The sentence indicates shared humor between the man and the girl. This makes it the punch line of a joke the girl is in on, the joke being mutual awareness of the fact that Vadim's news is made up or at least grossly exaggerated—but that it simultaneously conveys a deeper anxiety about the Soviet system and the disaster it is headed for. In Hutcheon's terms (see *Irony's* 88), Vadim's humorous gesture signals that he and the girl belong to a discursive community that enables them to interpret the so-called news ironically. When *Compartment No. 6* is read as an allegory of the relationship between the reader and the narrator, Vadim's punchline can be read as an invitation for the reader to take part in the irony: "That's what it actually says here" points as much to the novel's text as to the newspaper Vadim is reading. The discursive community of the girl and Vadim opens up to the attentive reader. It not so much warns against a credulous acceptance of both official truths and Liksom's own stories but signals an already existing awareness of this danger—and perhaps leads us to ask: what then? We have all become postmoderns, we know grand narratives are not to be trusted, we know historiography is unreliable. How do we move to something positive beyond suspicion, knowing what we know?

The journey through Siberia allows the girl to take some distance from her present life in Moscow and reassess her priorities. Early on in the book, the trip is presented as the girl and Mitka's "shared dream" (*Compartment* 18); but it is later revealed that the girl had already dreamed of the journey before meeting her boyfriend. The journey is a means for the girl to end her relationship with Mitka and accept her love for Irina—and to come to terms with the guilt associated with this decision. Vadim's stories and advice act as catalysts in this process, allowing the girl to reflect on her own life and to put her own problems, hopes, and transgressions in perspective. The intertextuality between *Compartment No. 6* and "Ward Number Six" serves to illuminate this. The protagonist doctor of Chekhov's short story muses: "'The intellect marks a clear boundary line between animal and man, it intimates man's divine nature and even compensates him to some extent for not being immortal'" ('Ward' 37). This assessment turns out to be ironic, because it is the doctor's interest in intellectual matters and their incommensurability with his social and professional obligations that finally leads him to be admitted in his own hospital. Vadim's contemplations point to this irony: "'Do you know why people live longer than other animals do? It's because animals live by their instincts, and they don't make mistakes. We people, on the other hand, rely on reason, and we screw up all the time. We spend half our lives messing things up, half realizing the stupid mistakes we've made, and the rest of the time trying to fix whatever we can'" (*Compartment* 174-75). The present ("messing things up"), the past ("realizing the stupid mistakes we've made"), and the future ("trying to fix whatever we can") are all in their own way represented in Vadim's words. Trying to think of them as a meaningful whole is, according to Vadim, the human condition.

Initially, the girl is put off by Vadim's vulgar stories and belligerent behavior. By the end of the novel, however, she finds an unexpected comradeship with the complicated man, who can be as sincere as he is ironic, and as sensitive as he is brutal. The development of their relationship culminates near the end of the novel, when they finally arrive in Mongolia, and Vadim gives the girl his Siberian knife, which he calls his "father's cross" (175): "She took the knife. It was heavy. The black handle was made of bone and had a silver Orthodox cross inlaid in it. She felt the power of the knife, and the trip up to this point, with all its light and shadow, flooded through her. Its joys, sorrows, hope, hopelessness, hate and, perhaps, love. Then she looked him in the eye and said, as Job said: 'For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come to me, Vadim Nikolayevich.'" (176) The knife is a powerful talisman but also a burden—a cross to bear. This burden of power, passed on from one generation to the next, points to historical agency, namely to accepting responsibility for our actions and their consequences. By accepting Vadim's gift, the girl signals she is ready to face her fears: her life in Moscow, her love, and the moment of decision she has put off until now.

More importantly, this ritual gift-giving is yet another signal of the mutual understanding reached by the girl and Vadim. Whereas a knife is considered a valuable gift in Finnish culture, in Russian culture it is a *faux-pas*: receiving a knife as a gift is bad luck, which can only be countered by offering a (token) payment for the gift. This is exactly what the girl does. She gives Vadim a twenty-five-ruble note, which the man accepts with a smile. The girl and the man engage in an ironic performance of each other's cultures as a sign of communion. By no means has postmodern skepticism been aban-

doned or the inevitable failure of communication forgotten. On the contrary, perpetual suspicion is the only thing the girl and the man certainly have in common, but, in a metamodernist fashion (see Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Utopia" 55), they make use of irony to convey their sincerity.

When *Compartment No. 6* is read as a metafictional exposition of the various positions of reader, narrator, author, character and informant, this suspension of suspicion between the girl and Vadim extends an invitation to the reader. "Compartment No. 6" refers to both the title of the novel and the train compartment in which most of the novel takes place. In this very tangible sense, the novel is placed inside itself. According to Brian McHale, mise-en-abyme, or "babushka doll" structures such as this are potent postmodern devices that foreground the ontological structure of a text by short-circuiting its ontological levels (*Postmodernist Fiction* 14, 112, 124). The reader is allowed to step into the novel and realize that we are all situated in the same condition of perpetual uncertainty and suspicion.

Arrival at this realization does not have to be the end of the journey, though. Metamodernism attempts to revive the perpetual motion of modernism, but without ever hoping to reach its destination. In *Compartment No. 6*, this motion cuts like a knife through Siberia, its melancholic vastness, perplexing beauty, decrepit industrial scenery, closed cities, and tragic history as the preferred site of Imperial and Soviet prison camps. A prison cell of sorts in itself, the compartment the girl, and Vadim are forced to share is an appropriate viewpoint from which to observe the crumbling remains of the failed communist utopia. Far from enjoying a privileged outside view, the girl and Vadim are very much situated in their particular space and time. Yet this situatedness does not equal imprisonment, but can be taken as a shared point of departure from which to "pursue a horizon that is forever receding" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "Notes" 12 <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677>). Like the girl, who by the end of the novel is "ready to meet her life, its happiness and unhappiness," (*Compartment* 181) our utopian desire can be revitalized by the insight that we will never have the final answers, but even our errors can produce new alternatives, ideas, and options to improve our future. With uncertainty as our common point of departure, we can hope to imagine something beyond our allotted compartment on the train of history.

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