Chapter 3
Degradation narratives: Dogs and humans in social and moral transformation

The poor man is a dog of society.

During the famine of the Revolution all my dogs had to be poisoned so that Tatars and Bulgarians would not eat them.
– Marina Tsvetaeva. 1932

The idea of parallelism between humans and dogs finds its expression in the similitude of suffering that humans undergo in response to socio-economic degradation. At such times humans’ lives and fortunes change in such a way that they embark on a life that calls for comparisons with the proverbial dog’s life. When a human becomes an underdog due to changing circumstances, he or she starts discovering and reflecting on the similarities between the two species. The social and economic degradation of a human can transform the life of that person to that of a street dog. A person in such a situation who finds a good guardian and serves him or her in exchange for financial favours parallels the dog who has a good master or mistress. Similarly, if this person is promoted, demoted or dropped from favour, his or her life parallels that of a dog in such circumstances. But how does this shift in status and fortune affect the moral outlook of the degraded person? At this juncture comparisons between human and animal nature come into play and humans show themselves to be more treacherous than dogs. The enquiry into human social and economic degradation often leads to an exploration of moral degradation as part of this process of

transformation. In terms of moral downfall the human-dog correlation often exposes human nature as inferior to that of an animal.

This chapter focuses on a form of degradation narrative based on parallelism between the economic and quasi-social transformations of dogs and people resulting from such a shift in fortune. The chapter discusses both well-known and formerly unstudied or little-known works. It gives a theme-focused reading of Nikolai Gogol’s famous Diary of a Madman (1835) and the relatively unknown work by Petr Furman (1816-1856), Prevrashchenie sobaki: Stat’ia iz neobyknovennoi estestvennoi istorii, posviashchenaiia vsem liubiteliam i liubitel’ntsam filosofii, prirody i sobak (Transformation of a dog: an article from an unusual natural history dedicated to all the lovers of philosophy, nature and dogs (1849). It then looks at Boris Pilnyak’s post-Revolutionary allegory ‘A Dog’s Life: The Vicissitudes of Destiny’ (1919) and also examines little studied stories by a group of important modernist writers who put together the volume A Dog’s Destiny (1922) while living in emigration in Berlin after the October Revolution. It also covers Ilya Ehrenburg’s reflections on human degradation vis-à-vis dogs in the time of the Leningrad Siege during World War II. The overarching theme of this chapter is the changes in human behaviour during extreme negative circumstances based on parallelism with dogs. These changes include the descent into madness; descent into dog-eating during times of famine after the October Revolution and during World War II.

Degradation or elevation? Transformation into a dog language-reading madman: Nikolai Gogol’s Diary of a Madman

In Diary of a Madman Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852), one of most enigmatic writers of the nineteenth-century, frames the theme of social degradation of his hero as a result of his descent into madness, thus making it part of a surreal reality. The first main sign of madness is manifested by the hero’s ability to understand the talking and corresponding dogs. The realm of madness is narrated in the first person.3

This madman hero has been traditionally interpreted as a victim of his

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