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The Problem of (Un)happiness in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* (1972)

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Abstract: In this article, the primary theme of exploration will be the connection between happiness and ideology in *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatsky brothers. Specifically, I will examine how the concept of happiness is approached by the citizens of Harmont amidst "the impossible"—the pursuit of a happy life in the aftermath of a great disaster, namely the alien Visit and its consequences. To analyze this complex relationship, I will utilize Sara Ahmed's theory of "happy objects" and "happy futures" from her monograph *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Ahmed's work focuses on understanding "what happiness does" to people rather than "what happiness is," revealing how specific notions of happiness and objects associated with happy feelings can be harmful, particularly for marginalized groups. By applying Ahmed's theory, I aim to move beyond the utopia and dystopia characterizations often employed in science fiction studies and instead focus on the individual attempts to find happiness within the narrative of *Roadside Picnic*. Therefore, I will explore the relationship between key characters—such as Red, Kirill, newcomer stalkers, and Richard Noonan—and "happy objects" such as the empties or full empties, the Zone, and the golden sphere.

Keywords: Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic, Soviet Russia, Dystopias, Utopias, Happiness, Science-Fiction

Introduction

Roadside Picnic, written by the brothers Strugatsky in post-Stalinist Soviet Russia and set somewhere in North America (presumably Harmont, Canada), is a novel Ursula Le Guin described as "indifferent to ideology" in her 2012 introduction to the novel.[1] In the afterword of the same edition, Boris Strutgatsky, describes it as: "not containing any criticism of the existing order, in line with reigning anti-bourgeois ideology."[2] *Roadside Picnic* indeed expresses a critique of the dominant capitalist narrative of continuous economic progress aiming at material bliss[3] when Red exclaims: "Now I get really *depressed*. I'll have to count

[1] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 6.
[2] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 203.
[3] Cohen, *The Infinite Desire for Growth*, 2. In his book Cohen explains that continuous material progress has been raised to an ideal without which people cannot live happily. He stresses that the insatiability and "malleability of human desire" will guarantee the survival of capitalism as an economic system that strives for constant economic growth.

every cent again";[4] but what interests me more in this article is the relation of the citizens of Harmont to (un)happiness. While happiness or unhappiness are not frequently mentioned in the novel, the prominence given to happiness at the end of the story stands out in contrast to its relatively limited presence elsewhere in the book. The final phrase is Red's wish: "HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN".[5]

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has conducted comprehensive research on the oeuvre of the brothers Strugatsky and their use and abuse of the fairy tale paradigm to expose the dreams of Soviet utopia. While Csicsery-Ronay frequently uses terms such as "happiness" and "happy ending" to describe character decisions and Soviet propaganda techniques within the framework of the fairy tale, he does not specifically analyze the various characters' behavior towards happiness. In my argument, this omission underscores the disillusionment inherent in any ideological system, be it communist or capitalist. Furthermore, if, as he proposes, "humanity's own alienated technological evolution" is symbolically reflected in the aftermath of the Visit, then it becomes even more significant to analyze the behaviors that led to such an extreme case of alienation.[6] In my analysis, I focus more on individual happiness, which is influenced to some extent by state promises, to demonstrate how even on the personal level, the characters remain disoriented. More specifically, I am employing Sara Ahmed's theory of "happy objects" and "happy futures" from her monograph *The Promise of Happiness* to explore the relation of some of the main character's, namely Red, Kirill, newcomer stalkers and Richard Noonan, to "happy objects" such as the empties or full empties, the Zone, and the golden sphere. According to Ahmed specific objects and conceptions of the future that are connected to ideas of happiness can affect a person's actions in the present in ways that do not always bring forth happiness or might even cause unhappiness. In this article, I present my argument in three parts. First, I briefly contextualize the relation of happiness to ideology through the introduction, the afterword to the novel and the ideological context of 1970s Russia, the time when the Strugatsky brothers wrote *Roadside Picnic*. Then, I conduct a close reading of moments of happiness in the novel through different character perspectives connecting my observations to Ahmed's theory of "happy objects." Lastly, I analyze the somewhat counter cultural characters, Red and Valentine Pillman, and their critical examination of dominant narratives of happiness.

Happiness and Ideology: Soviet Russia and USA

This first section of the article analyzes the different approaches to happiness and ideology by Boris Strugatsky, in the afterword to the novel, in comparison to the Russian literary scene, and by Ursula Le Guin in the introduction to *Roadside Picnic*. In Soviet Russia collective happiness was supposed to be an ideal that the communist regime could fulfil[7] and the Soviet New Man was intended to embody prosperity, both material and intellectual.[8] In the afterword to the novel, Boris Strugatsky mentions that their publisher's comments to the authors were: "insert the word 'Soviet' when talking about Kirill Panov; get rid of the bleakness, hopelessness, coarseness, savageness…".[9] Kirill who is one of the main scientist characters in the novel, and the one who cares about collective scientific progress through the exploration of the Zone, is contrasted to Red who belongs to the class of the stalkers that profit through the trafficking of loot from the Zone. In addition, Red always remembers Kirill, who died early in

[4] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 47 (emphasis added).
[5] Strugatsky, *Roadisde Picnic*, 193.
[6] Csicsery, "Towards the Last Fairytale," 34.
[7] Balina, "Introduction," xvi.
[8] Gomel, "Gods like Men," 362.
[9] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 203.

the novel, with fondness. Even in his moment of despair at the end of the novel, he still speaks about Kirill's superiority and goodness, referring to him as a "holy man."[10] In the novel, Kirill represents the uncorrupted human mind that still strives for the goodness of society through scientific progress, and thus it makes sense that the literary establishment wanted to emphasize the Sovietness of Kirill Panov.

In a sense Kirill symbolizes "the future of possibility,"[11] to use Ahmed's term, since as Red confesses to the reader about Kirill: "You painted the future for me, showed me a new world, a changed world,"[12] because "every bit of this stinking world had to change."[13] Kiril still personifies the promise of utopia or happiness, a future that is entirely rejected, however, by his sudden and unexpected death. This death alludes, therefore, to the unattainability of utopia and happiness promised by the future of constant economic and scientific growth, whether in communist or capitalist terms.

In addition, the fact that Kirill dies, and that not even the golden sphere seems to be able to realize the ideal of Soviet utopia, explains why the novel was met with the displeasure of the Russian literary scene.[14] Boris Strugatsky defended the novel against the critique of potential publishers who objected to its depiction of moral cruelty. He insisted that the portrayal of cruelty referred to the world of "decaying capitalism and triumphant bourgeois ideology."[15] This capitalist cruelty is observed in the novel through the economic exploitation of the Zone and the wretchedness of what could be considered the lower-class character reflected in the face of Red. Nevertheless, the absence of hope for a better future, including a communist one perhaps, even in the existence of the wish granting golden sphere that does not "inspire hope", renders the novel partially nihilistic.[16] As a result, even though *Roadside Picnic* could be considered anti-capitalist, it does not follow the dreams of a utopian world and one perhaps associated with communism in the context of 1970's Russia.[17] Instead, it reveals the failings of ideology with Red exclaiming during his desperate monologue: "I do not know how to think."[18] Nonetheless, as Csicsery-Ronay poignantly points out "mere awareness of independence does not suffice to change reality" and indeed the authors of the novel do not offer any proposal on how a person should think independently and for themselves.[19] So, if Soviet literature, according to the editors of the novel was supposed to be "a textbook on morals, a guidebook to life", then *Roadside Picnic* offers only uncertainty, confusion, and the inability of the main character, Red, to make sense of his experience.[20]

Even if Red's despair and realization of the meaninglessness of his life takes place in the cruel world of capitalism, still the novel does not allude to a possibility of understanding and coming to terms with human experience. The question: "Where do you get all this disdain for man? Why do you constantly need to put him down?" addressed from Richard Noonan, a businessman, to Valentine, another scientist less optimistic than Kirill, could also be addressed to the Strugatsky brothers by their publishers.[21] The publishers' objection to the novel seems to

[10] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 185–186.
[11] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 163.
[12] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 53.
[13] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 187.
[14] Lazarchuk, quoted in Simon, "The Strugatskys in Political Context", 378. Lazarchuk asserts that: "The books they [the Strugatskys] have written are indeed Communist, but they are anti-Soviet" which caused their rejection by the ministry of Culture at Moscow in 1984.
[15] Strugatsky, *Roadisde Picnic*, 207.
[16] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic* 188.
[17] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic* 207.
[18] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic* 193.
[19] Csicsery, "Towards the Last Fairy Tale," 33.
[20] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 204.
[21] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 132.

have revolved more around the novel's refusal to happiness and progress or even just the promise of happiness which the Strugatskys, as I have argued, failed to deliver to the reader.

In contrast, Ursula Le Guin's introduction to the novel praises the *Roadside Picnic* authors by stating that "they wrote as free men write" and "as if they were indifferent to ideology."[22] Le Guin's view in this case comes into opposition to both the Russian literary status quo and Boris Strugatsky's claims in the afterword to the novel. Of course, Boris Strugatsky was claiming that the book was anti-capitalist to defend it against "the rulers of destinies, the deciders of fates," as he names the established Russian literary scene of his time, and not so much to make a claim on the value of the novel.[23] In her own literary oeuvre, Le Guin too is going against the capitalist organization of society and as Porter notes she condemns "the "ordinary politics" of exploitation, alienation and egocentrism"[24] while also favoring "anarchist and "counter-cultural" directions."[25] For this reason, it makes sense that she praises a novel that questions both the ideology's promise of happiness and the boundaries of knowledge. In other words, when she asks in the introduction: "what is understanding?", in relation to Red's inability to understand his experience, she puts forward her anti-foundationalist beliefs.[26] She then also highlights that *Roadside Picnic* cannot be "reduced to a mere fable of Soviet failure,"[27] which could have potentially been one possible interpretation of the novel in the USA in the context of the Cold War and Red Scare politics.[28] Le Guin's view, which aligns with my point of argumentation in this essay, brings the emphasis on the contestation of dominant ideologies of happiness. Red's primary challenge to ideology is placed after Arthur's speech about happiness, whether within a communist or capitalist context. As Fredric Jameson observes *Roadside Picnic* "goes beyond the facile obligatory references to the two rival systems [capitalism and communism]" and perhaps questions the understanding of happiness as a philosophical concept.[29]

"Happy Objects" in the unhappy Harmont

In this section, I will focus on the conception of happiness among the citizens living in the capitalist society of economic exploitation in Harmont. The heavily guarded Zone in *Roadside Picnic* is an area where all the byproducts of the Aliens' Visit are located. These byproducts include objects like the empties or full empties, the batteries, and the golden sphere; all of which attract stalkers and scientists into the Zone because of their promise of a "happy future" of economic or scientific glory.[30] However, inside the Zone there are phenomena like the silver web, that caused the death of Kiril, or the hell slime, that are dangerous to the lives of the people who enter it. The Zone is also responsible for the mutations in the population of Harmont with the most evident example being Red's daughter Monkey whose face was "overgrown with coarse brown fur."[31] The question then becomes why do the stalkers risk their lives to go into the Zone? I propose that the stalkers enter the Zone, because even in this corrupted and polluted society they try to create moments of possibility and meaning, even if the overall experience causes pain. To use Ahmed's theory of happiness, the stalkers venture into the Zone because

[22] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 6.
[23] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 201.
[24] Porter, "The Politics of Le Guin's Opus," 243.
[25] Porter, "The Politics of Le Guin's Opus," 246.
[26] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 8.
[27] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 9.
[28] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 5.
[29] Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia," 157.
[30] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 197.
[31] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 185.

"the promise of happiness is what makes things promising."[32] So, the objects of the Zone become "happy objects" and I am exploring how different characters relate to them, beginning with the relation of Kirill and Red to the objects of the Zone and then with that of the new class of stalkers and Richard Noonan.

In her chapter "Happy Objects," Ahmed explains how the concept of happiness is constructed externally, separate from the individual. The emotional value of happiness is then transferred into specific cultural objects which, in turn, can "affect" the subject's psychology, generating feelings of happiness when in proximity to the subject.[33] Red mentions in the beginning of the novel, when Kirill is still alive, that he is going to try to offer the full-empty he discovered to Kirill rather than get money for it because as he mentions: "in my hands Kirill has come to life again."[34] So, even though Kirill is supposed to personify Soviet scientific progress, he is still attached to objects in capitalist terms. In addition, he defines happiness through what might seem superficially more morally acceptable, intellectual advancement, rather than for example economic growth; but his happiness is still circumscribed by objects outside of himself, like the empties. The compulsive attachment to the "happy object" is even more dramatized in the phrase: "He's standing there, holding up the last empty, and looking like he wants to crawl right inside it" alluding to Ahmed's stance on the importance of the proximity to "happy objects" in affecting a person's happiness.[35] As a result, even though Kirill is supposed to be interested in immaterial ideals, like the progress of intellectual thought through the understanding of the empties, his approach to the "happy objects" of the Zone is no different from the economically exploitative approach of the stalkers. In this sense, in my analysis, Kirill does not represent the promise of the Soviet New Man. By contrast, he reveals the delusions, referring to happiness, of both the communist and the capitalist ideological system. It is rather Red that grasps the delusion of the scientist, but out of his love for him he decides to "give him a little gift,"[36] as he confesses to the reader. In other words, in a world of no hope, the Zone has subsumed all the meaning from the characters' lives. In a place where there is no future, "no hap, no possibility", Red tries out of generosity to create that meaning momentarily for his friend.[37]

Besides Kirill and Red, the relation of other stalkers and Richard Noonan to the Zone and its "happy objects" reveals similarities and differences regarding the issue of happiness in Harmont. Paradoxically, the new generation of stalkers who enter the Zone for "hair-rising adventures, untold riches, international fame, or some special religion" do not seem to differ so much from the benign and intellectual Kirill.[38] Like Kirill, they attach happiness to external objects, to the Zone, and of course when they get to enter the Zone, if they survive, they are afterwards "tormented by nebulous desires, angry at the whole world, horribly disappointed, and convinced that here, too, they'd been cheated." [39] According to Ahmed, this attitude and feelings reflect "the emptiness that haunts the subject in the very restlessness of its desire" and they also show how even a world dismantling event, like the Visit, is not even enough for people to question to what objects they attribute value as "happy objects."[40] Richard Noonan, a businessman profiting from the trafficking of loot from the Zone, is a character that abides by this model of happiness and exploitation, but for brief moments he is willing to question his ideology. As when he thinks to himself: "If it wasn't for the Visit, it would have been something

[32] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 181.
[33] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 21.
[34] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 9.
[35] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 9.
[36] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 53.
[37] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 163.
[38] Strugatsky, Roadside Picnic, 91.
[39] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 91.
[40] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 16.

else. Pigs always find mud";[41] this is a very Orwellian idea that might suggest that the problem of unhappiness in Harmont does not come from all the misfortune oozing from the Zone after the Visit, but rather form the unresolved, problematic relationship of humans to the world and events around them. And yet even if, in his moment of despair, he becomes aware of his and the citizens of Harmont inadequate response to change, a change forced by the Visit, his main worry remains the following: "And what if I turn out to be completely superfluous in their [the Aliens'] society? … What if we're all superfluous?."[42] Finally, the newcomer stalkers are consumed by the object of happiness and their way of explaining the world depends on whether the Zone fulfils their desires for a happy life or not. Richard Noonan, conversely, seems to understand this problematic connection to happiness, but he remains bound to the conflation of utility with happiness, by emphasizing his redundancy in a world whose logic he cannot fully grasp.

In the next and last section of my article, I will trace the evolution from the happy objects to the idea of happiness as approached by the characters of Red and Valentin. To do so, I will first analyze the last and most significant "happy object": the wish granting golden sphere, as it is the one that clearly introduces the idea of happiness in the novel, and then I will explore the counter-cultural attitudes to happiness as offered by Red and Valentin.

From "happy objects" to questions about happiness

I will begin this last part of my essay by referring first to Valentine as a bridge between the people who are obsessed with the "happy objects" from the Zone and the people, like him and Red, who might come to question their imaginary happiness. Valentine Pillman, a scientist who received the Nobel prize for physics for his radiant discovery, is rather alienated from the scientific community of Harmont, especially because of their obsession with technological progress. When asked by an interviewer in the beginning of the novel about the most important discovery in the last thirteen years he responds: "The fact of the Visit" which causes the confusion of his interlocutor as he was expecting a tangible technological discovery.[43] In this section, I will argue that Valentine Pillman embodies a more humane aspect of science and progress. He questions the motives of his fellow scientists in their pursuit of "understanding" the Zone. For Pillman, the value of the Visit lies in coming to terms with the acknowledgment that humanity has limitations and is not the center of the universe. This belief is quite ecological, as evidenced again by his comparison of the Visit to a roadside picnic, hence the title of the novel. The picnic serves as a way to explain the randomness of the natural world to Richard Noonan, who nonetheless characterizes the comparison as "a disgrace".[44] This comparison is considered a disgrace because it rejects the prospect of understanding the Zone, often tied to financial motivations, and, for that matter, of happiness. Even if the Zone and its by-products are incomprehensible to current scientists, as Ahmed points out: "not getting what you want allows you to preserve the happiness of "the what" as fantasy, as if once we are ready, we can have it."[45] This is another delusion that Valentine disrupts with his theory of randomness. What he is criticizing is the utilitarian and egocentric approach of the citizens and the scientific community towards the Zone, which might ultimately prevent them from learning something valuable. As he mentions, when people stop making mistakes because everything will be

[41] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 127.
[42] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 129.
[43] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 3.
[44] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 134.
[45] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 31.

"prescribed by a rigid code", then humanity will be led to its destruction.[46] This rigid code can take the form of any ideological explanation of the world that hinders creative responses to new situations. In the end, people at Harmont cannot live an authentically happy life if their values are determined entirely by capitalist ideology or for that matter by any ideology that they have never come to question for its suitability to their personal and unique lives.

In addition, Valentine, the drunk scientist could represent the thinker of the novel. The thinker according to Aristotle and his conception of happiness is the only member in any society who could potentially live a happy life of "contemplative speculation".[47] This image, however, is questioned by Valentine in a society that is fundamentally and, reasonably so, unhappy. In contrast to Kirill, the symbol of Soviet progress, whom he praises for his scientific merit, Valentine is presented as a character that does not consider the Zone and its objects as a potential source of happiness but just as a happening. To be more specific, Valentine during his dialogue with Richard Noonan about the Visit and its meaning both for the scientific community and the lives of the people at Harmont becomes rather mystical and expresses the idea that: "there is a need to understand, but that does not require knowledge."[48] Of course, Valentin is talking about the understanding of an alien civilization, and he compares it with believing in God in order to make sense of one's experience. However, this idea of understanding without knowledge could apply to any type of ideology, be it the economic exploitation of the Zone in a capitalist fashion or its scientific exploitation for intellectual progress in a communist fashion. Valentin is one of the characters that grasps the meaninglessness of the way people are trying to add value to their existence, whether by intellectual or material merits. He even mentions his discrepancy from other scientists whose interpretation of the Zone is "more respectable and flattering to human vanity."[49] Pilman is more interested in what we, the human race, can learn about ourselves after the Visit, rather than focusing on what the Visit can offer to scientists or businessmen like Richard Noonan. However, he does not necessarily have an answer to the human situation as a thinker might be expected to have. Regarding the scientific revolutions to which the Zone could lead according to Richard, Valentine responds: "I don't like empty fantasies" highlighting once again the absurdity of the Visit and of existence in general.[50] He progressively becomes drunker during his conversation with Richard reminding the reader his similarity to the other stalkers and Red who drink to escape the meaninglessness of reality. At this point, Red as a character becomes interesting in my analysis, because he could be considered a lower-class character and yet he is the one who, through both his material and intellectual struggle over happiness, reveals the deception of ideology.

Firstly, I will analyze Red's relation to the golden sphere, the ultimate "happy object" before exploring his way of unmasking the deception of ideology. Red together with Arthur enter one last time the Zone determined to find the golden sphere that would fulfil their purest wishes. Red's motivation for going back to the Zone has to do with the hope that the sphere will help his family and especially his daughter Monkey, whose health seems to be deteriorating without a cure available in the medical community. So, he has to give up his dream of leaving behind the stalker life and moving to a cottage with his family far away from Harmont. Even more so because of an emigration law that makes impossible such a dream. As he admits himself, he would have never re-entered the Zone, after being released from jail, "if he hadn't found himself in a hole from which no amount of money could rescue him, in which self-reliance was utterly pointless".[51] The golden sphere then, becomes the ultimate "happy object" not for financial

[46] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 130.
[47] Aristotle, quoted in Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 13.
[48] Strugatsky, *Roadisde Picnic*, 131.
[49] Strugatsky, *Roadisde Picnic*, 133.
[50] Strugatsky, *Roadisde Picnic*, 135.
[51] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*,165.

reasons this time, but for its supernatural powers. The sphere is "the one thing that he still had left, the one thing that had kept him afloat in recent months, was the hope for a miracle."[52] That is not because he cannot be happy with his family as it is, a family that does not correspond of course to dominant narratives of happiness (Guta, his wife, was advised to not have a child with him), but because the scientific community is more interested in gaining knowledge regarding alien intelligence than in helping the children who are affected by the Zone. Therefore, the miracle of the sphere is the only way out of his misery, that unlike that of other stalkers or even of Kirill is not a financial or an intellectual one.

Melanie McMahon has conducted an insightful analysis of the golden sphere and its relation to desire as an inability to name the unmediated, unconscious desires and the impossibility of satisfaction for the subject.[53] She proposes that the sphere "delivers the supplicant from the torments of his desire," which is a torture stemming from the capitalist construction of insatiateness, whether for material or intellectual progress.[54] However, I would like to add, and perhaps clarify, that not all desire is contemptible. Red's desire to enter the Zone one last time did not arise from a desire to be his own boss or to accumulate wealth, as it was in the past. Instead, it came from a desire to help his family. This is probably the reason why Le Guin characterizes him as a "mensch" in the introduction to the novel. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that, despite being a stalker, Red cares more about his emotional bonds with his friends and family than his financial prosperity. While McMahon's observation regarding the sphere is valid, my emphasis is more on the sphere's failure to legitimize any ideological construction of happiness. Arthur, who is still blinded by desire in front of the sphere, before dying, exclaims: "Happiness for everyone! Free! As much happiness as you want! Everyone gather around! Plenty for everyone! No one will be forgotten! Free! Happiness! Free!"[55] His last words are repeated, slightly modified, by Red in the last sentences of the novel. With this ending, the idea of happiness throughout the novel is revealed for what it actually is: a commodified object. After Arthur's contact with the sphere happiness will supposedly be "free" for everyone and its consumers will not need money to access it. However, Arthur's erratic monologue and subsequent death instigate Red's most esoteric and life-questioning moment in the whole novel. For the first time Red confesses that he wished his flask contained water instead of alcohol, rejecting the past desired numbness and embracing a new-found clarity.[56] This clarity refers to his inability to have his own thoughts: "A man is born to think (there he is, Kirill, finally!), Except I don't believe that. I've never believed it, and I still don't believe it, and what man is born for-I have no idea."[57] Kirill's idea about man's purpose in life would coincide with Aristotle's idea of "speculative contemplation" as the embodiment of happiness.[58] However, in this context Red and the reader are made aware of the impossibility of such a scenario for anyone who is an active member of society, be it working-class Red or the more middle-class Burbridge, a newly rich character. As Red explains: "Let us all be healthy and let them all go to hell. Who's us? Who's them? I don't understand a thing."[59] This monologue affirms Csicsery's point about the debates in the Strugatsky novels that often "cast doubt on the ability of thought to comprehend its own historical conditions and problems."[60] In addition, Red realizes that the utopic idea of Arthur: "happiness free for everyone" is to use

[52] Strugatsky, *Roadisde Picnic*, 164.
[53] MacMahon, "LIKE A STALKER TO THE ZONE," 60–61.
[54] MacMahon, "LIKE A STALKER TO THE ZONE," 12.
[55] Strugtasky, *Roadside Picnic*, 190.
[56] Strugtasky, *Roadisde Picnic*,190.
[57] Strugatsky, *Roadisde Picnic*, 191.
[58] Aristotle quoted in Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 13.
[59] Strugtasky, *Roadside Picnic*, 191.
[60] Csicsery, "Towards the Last Fairytale," 18.

Valentin's words "an empty fantasy."[61] They can never be all happy at the same time and they will not.

The way society is structured means that some of its members will have to suffer for the others to be happy. After reaching this point of despair, Red stops thinking because as he insists: "they've cheated me, left me voiceless, the bastards … Riffraff"– unclear as to who these bastards are, the people for whom he was working, society in general? – and he declares that what he desires cannot be something harmful to other people.[62] He does not even mention Monkey, his daughter, and his father anymore, after witnessing Arthur's death, and he fixates on Arthur's words about happiness being free and no one being forgotten. Happiness for everyone and free is impossible either in capitalist or communist imaginaries and coincides with Ursula Le Guin's point that the Strugatskys write as "free men."[63] Free in the sense of not favoring one ideological conception of happiness over the other.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have demonstrated how the theme of happiness, though not explicitly mentioned throughout the novel, except for the final scene featuring Arthur's prophetic message before his demise due to contact with the golden sphere, shapes the narrative as a whole. Furthermore, I explored how this theme has historically influenced the decision regarding the publication of the book. The way the characters of *Roadside Picnic* connect to the world and the objects around them, especially those coming from the Zone, reveals their ideas regarding what a happy life could be; it could look like one of contributing to scientific progress and achieving intellectual glory, in the case of Kirill Panov, or one of material bliss in the case of most of the stalkers and Richard Noonan, the businessman. However, both Valentin and more evidently Red, who is also a stalker, come to represent not only the disillusionment from the capitalist attachment to "happy objects," but also the impossibility of any attempts at understanding humanity and the concept of happiness through a rigid ideology. The ultimate "happy object," the golden sphere is the one which dramatizes the fear and anxiety over an imaginary happiness expressed through Red's thoughts: "[the sphere would] throw him out of the heaven he'd managed to ascend to, choking on shit along the way …".[64] Happiness is perceived as reaching that specific point that it will instantly make all previous actions, "choking on shit along the way," worthwhile. In "Happy Futures," Ahmed suggests that the question of happiness which is usually connected to a happy future should also include the realization that "the future might be a time of loss".[65] This realization of no future is always lurking behind the decisions of the citizens of Harmont and yet, in all their misery, they still retain the desire for a hope of a better, happy future. In the end, *Roadside Picnic* shows how the inability to think and act for a happy present complicates the possibility of a happy future. Red emphasizes that the problem of personal (un)happiness might lie in the fact that he didn't "learn how to think" without proposing how someone can learn how to think.[66] Adopting a personal code about how to live one's life, experimenting, experiencing failure, and re-evaluating one's relationship to their surroundings can transform happiness from a promise into a lived experience.

[61] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 135.
[62] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 191.
[63] Strugtasky, *Roadside Picnic*, 6.
[64] Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, 188.
[65] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 163.
[66] Strugtasky, *Roadside Picnic*, 193.

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