

Indisputably, we are living in a different world now. Customs and morality have changed, and people find themselves in different kinds of relationships. The sexual revolution in the West has become a greater reality than the communist "community of wives" in the East.

In short, there is a problem. A complex problem. A problem Valeriia Narbikova spoke about and Anton Nikitin, from the other end of the table, attempted to comprehend. Nonetheless, life is life and literature is literature. And literature is revolt. Literature is fairy tale. Thomas Mann said that children aren't born as a result of kisses—bearing in mind that one should not condemn literature in which something is described with especial candor, according to the laws of everyday morality.

At the same time, there is the issue of the "contagiousness" of the influence on the reader—it does exist, it is real. The demand for an educational role for literature has stuck in everyone's craw so that frequently the opposite tendency arises: let literature do what it does. Somehow noble morality itself will establish itself in the public consciousness. That probably doesn't happen either, though.

I'm afraid that in conclusion I have added my own perplexed questions to yours, but I think that the publication of our discussion in the magazine may be useful, particularly in the sense that the reader can see that the people who write books "on an erotic theme," the people who write articles and translate novels on an erotic theme, are not the same people they're going to find in a Moscow underground passageway offering to sell them *The Technique of Sex*. These are different levels of perception, different levels of literature. Art is not scabrous; it does not arouse sensuality. So far, unfortunately, the mass consciousness has not taken this into consideration. The chief result of our conversation may be an awareness of this distinction.

Notes

1. Published in the "Inostrannaia literatura" Library.
2. See also Henry Miller's essay, "Razmyshleniia o pisatel'stve," *Inostrannaia literatura*, 1991, no. 8.
3. See *Inostrannaia literatura*, 1991, no. 8, "Liubovnik ledi Chatterli"—roman i ego tvorets" (I. Kon: "S tochki zreniia seksologii"; N. Pal'tsev: "Po tu storonu seksologii").

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Eros from the Underground

Sex Bestsellers of the 1990s and the Russian Literary Tradition

As one "TV-bridge" broadcast made clear, there is no "sex" in our country. This curious statement provoked many interpretations, mostly humorous. One, however, raises serious thoughts about Russia's erotic culture. How are we to assess the shortage of sex in a country "where there's not enough of anything"? As a shortcoming or a virtue?

Given a patriotic bent, one could talk about originality. But why has it suddenly ceased to suit? In this era of "sexual renaissance," everything seems to be erotically tinged. Debates go on in parliament about democracy—the "innocent maiden." Characteristic, too, are the newspaper headlines, as L. Saraskina demonstrated in *Moskovskie novosti* (1992, no. 8): "A Deflowering in the Kremlin." The article was about a rock music festival. We seem to have taken a 180-degree turn, from phobia to mania, with all our characteristic lack of restraint and primordially Russian attraction to extremes.

Literature—a "barometer of spiritual weather" (A. V. Gulyga)—fixes this avalanche of eroticization heavily, crudely, and visibly.

The unprepared reader will probably perceive the erotic disputatious arm-waving of contemporary prose with panic-stricken terror. The entire limitless cosmos of Russian and Soviet literature has apparently been shattered to pieces, and the same motif has been reflected in the

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innumerable shards, repeating itself *ad infinitum*: "the magic stick and the magic hole" (E. Kharitonov).

The hierarchies have been abolished, and the absolute top has coincided with the "corporeal bottom," or rather, the "basely corporeal." The "eye of God," in E. Popov's story by that name [Glaz bozhii], turns out to be the pupil of the pervert who has crawled under a boardwalk in order to look up girls' skirts.

Love is not only blind, it is also not squeamish; it can flare up even in a public toilet ("Artist" [Khudozhnik], by P. Kozhevnikov). "Passion-discharges" "magically" transform the world: "We are genital, yes, the damp tampax burns, we're drowning fast in condom dough, the scrota of daily life, the ovaries of insults . . . the vaginas of the plains are flung open to the expanse and the sperms of daily life link fates all over again; the star of blind lesbianism shines, and anal love rules the silence" (V. Sorokin, "Road Accident" [Dorozhnoe proisshestvie]). The classical primer looks like it's been demonstratively smeared with fresh paint.

Snatched from oblivion, the spirit of the Marquis de Sade dictates a story about how a man's inherent attraction to suffering excites lust ("Parakeet" [Popugaichik], by Vik. Erofeev).

Idiots are rated highly as sex partners ("Spinoza's Last Sign" [Poslednii znak Spinozy], by Iu. Mamleev). Popularity records are being broken, however, by same-sex love. Apart from the above-mentioned "Parakeet," it is depicted in stories by E. Popov and in the prose of E. Kharitonov—in the platonic and touching "To the Oven" [Dukhovke], and in the stories "One's Like That, the Other's Not" [Odin takoi, drugoi drugoi] and "In the Cold, the Highest Sense" [V kholodnom, vysshem smysle].

Let the sociologists ask who is to blame and what is to be done. The task of literary scholars is to reply that what is going on in Russian artistic erotica is either a rebirth or a crisis, a renewal or a complete change of tradition. We will reply—one can decide whether the world is going to be saved by a new beauty or it should try to save itself from that beauty.

1

In search of the sources, it is natural to go back to the turn of the century, when a dress rehearsal was under way for our present efforts

to "rip the trousers" off the forbidden theme, and listen to the ideas of V. Rozanov, the "Russian Freud," a connoisseur of traditions and a philosopher of corporeal love.

In *People of the Moonlight* [Liudi lunnogo sveta], Rozanov lumped together those who are attracted to their own sex and eternal virgins: both the priests of Molekh and Astarte, who castrated themselves, and also the Christians and monks who followed them, and also . . . L. Tolstoy and V. Solov'ev. That is, he put the facts of "spiritual-Sodomistic civilization," which emerged "not from the head of Zeus or the hips of Aphrodite but as a reflection of the nature of Pallas and Ganymede," on an equal footing with natural deviations from the sexual norm. Let's try to sort out the reasons for these conclusions, inasmuch as they affect Russian writers.

In Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata" [Kreitzerovaia sonata], the path to the bonds of Hymen turns out to be the direct road to a "terrible hell" where "convicts who detest each other are shackled in pairs and suffer without end." The root of this misfortune, seemingly, is that love between the sexes is fatally physical and crudely natural: "Our brother is always lying about his lofty feelings—when all he needs is the body." Offered as a substitute in the *povest'* is the esthetic ideal of celibacy. Solov'ev, on the contrary, ironizes about purely spiritual love, likening it to "the little angels in ancient painting who have only a head and wings and nothing else," so that these angels are doomed to static and fruitless hovering. Genuine love, according to Solov'ev, creatively transforms two natural essences into one spiritualized, immortal essence. Actually, physical love itself should still be relegated to last place (*The Meaning of Love* [Smysl liubvi]).

Rozanov hinted at the biological subtext of "lofty" love theories. The whole point, he said, is that in theory sex is primordially "equinoctial" or confused. Let us leave this problem to the doctors or those who are seriously concerned about whether Z. Gippius was a "woman," a "hermaphrodite," or neither. For us, something else is important.

The disregard for the physical aspect of love at the turn of the century created a *unique optics*: healthy and "deviant" sex were not differentiated. All that was important was that the sexual energy be treated correctly—on its upward flight. Theoretically, "null" or "minus" sex (as Rozanov determined), if you like, is actually preferable for this: sublimation is easier.

Indeed, wholly in the spirit of the day, N. Berdiaev asserted that the

future lies with the "androgynous, the girl-boy, the integral, bisexual person," in the image and likeness of Christ, the "man-maiden" in whom "sex that gives birth is transformed into sex that creates" ("The Meaning of Creativity" [Smysl tvorchestva]).

Wholly in the spirit of the time, the first Russian work on a homosexual theme, M. Kuzmin's novel *Wings* [Kryl'ia], is in essence about lofty, platonic love, and not coincidentally calls to mind Platonov's "Feast" [Pir]: "And people saw that all beauty, all love, comes from the gods, and they became free and bold and they grew wings." It is not surprising that the paths of the "Sodomites" and the admirers of the Beautiful Lady converged: it is no accident that Blok responded ecstatically to Kuzmin's homosexual works.

In the final analysis, Rozanov accurately guessed the blue color of the wings of the Russian Eros—the extraphysical, extrasensual nature of love in Russian literature.

Blue (which includes those shades of meaning that have formed in the channel of romanticism, and, on Russian soil, in the poetics of icons as well) is an unworldly color that leads the eye to the heavenly heights, the color of the transparent and ethereal space of everything incorporeal and weightless, generally speaking, and also—the sad color of hopeless desires.

"Blue love"—that is what one of the fragments in Rozanov's *The Solitary* [Uedinennyi] is called. This is a story about the author's childhood love for a tender maiden with "magically light" movements and a "silvery voice." But in Rozanov this adoring-elevating glance, this languor at arm's length, is fraught with humiliation and a sense of being totally crushed morally in the visions of an insulted boy who has been crushed on the street by horses (it's interesting what "libido-babble" a Freudian interpretation of the plot would yield). For Rozanov, "blue love" is an infantile, deceptive love that leads inexorably to the awareness of one's own insignificance and isolation.

Contemporaries would have strongly resisted the alternative line of development of the Russian Eros—the creative work of Rozanov himself, the prophet of the health of sex—because the thinker did not base himself in the Christian tradition, but also because Rozanov's logic in searching for the "golden mean" probably seemed too "Philistine" (compare: in "The Kreutzer Sonata," the choice follows the principle of "either-or," "not-but," or "sleep together" or "spiritual affinity"). Moreover, Rozanov "vulgarily" pointed out a feasible path that inspires

joy at approaching the end and not shame for imperfection (compare: in the afterword to "The Kreutzer Sonata," it is particularly emphasized that total chastity is not a model but a "compass," a utopia). Finally, Rozanov generalized the experience of worldly successes, since "great" Russian literature, as a rule, has erected philosophical structures on the unstable, swampy ground of life's failures, tragedies, and so on. It is no surprise that the "path" to erotic culture that Rozanov discovered broke off at the edge of an abyss; the writer's ideas will hail each other later.

Let us return to the motif of blue love, though. Its further transformation will help us trace the fate of the Russian erotic ideal.

The blue spirit of the Russian Eros hovered over B. Zaitsev, too. To this most consistent follower of V. Solov'ev, even Blok was seen as having betrayed the Beautiful Lady with the Woman Stranger, "Beatrice at the public bar." Love in Zaitsev's prose is intrinsically ideal and inevitably unrequited.

The feelings of Khristoforov, the hero of the *povest'* "Blue Star" [Golubaia zvezda], have the same tints as the color of his heavenly protector Vega: strangely cold, even, and calm, identical to woman and a distant star—"poetic ecstasy," "a dream, a kind of fantasy."

In L. Tolstoy, lofty, moral feeling is juxtaposed to physiology, sexual practice. As a result, sensual beauty itself proves suspect: both the "baring of the arms, shoulders, and breasts, the close fitting of out-thrust buttocks," and "dancing and music, singing." Tolstoy's hero is wary of being deceived by a selfish goal—wary that he will be enslaved forever in marriage. What remains is to will yourself to say that sensual beauty is disgraceful, which brings us to Orwell already. For Zaitsev, love is elevated not by any moral principle but by actual participation in the beauty that infuses the world of poetry.

It may be this respect for beauty that forced Zaitsev to doubt at times the values of Blue love. You can see this if you look at the fates of the writer's heroines. By her nature, woman is drawn to the worldly, to "what in life is called love." But Zaitsev's women have no one with whom to share their passion. They admit that they are first and are doomed to nongratification of their feelings, since they encounter either a theoretical, fruitless attitude toward life ("The Actress" [Aktrisa]), or a lack of taste (incapacity) for vital, sensual love ("Mother and Katia" [Mat' i Katia]), in which Panurin, having run off into the unreachable distance, sends the woman who has fallen in love

with him a composition "On Early German Romanticism in Connection with Mysticism"). Zaitsev's women, passionate and tender, are compelled to live in a "quasi-monastic state," and one can assume that the writer has guessed: genuine love is still unknown in Russia; it has yet to be experienced. Actually, emigration seemed to return Zaitsev to the well-worn rut of the tradition of Russia's Eros.

Did artistic erotica of the early part of the century really not have any other paths laid through it? If one doesn't count culturally derivative mass literature, then no. "The Crude, Naked Truth" [Grubaia obnazhennaia pravda] and "Staging Posts" [Iamy] by Kuprin are nothing but a negative awaiting development—the illumination of the genuine color of love. In Bunin, passion is hopelessly tragic. G. Gachev accurately called the Eros in Gorky "furtively adolescent." The ideal of Blue love evidently looked the clearest, the most effective, and the most attractive.

The new "stage" on the path of the Russian Blue Eros could be judged by that vivid milestone "The Universe" [Vselennaia], from Platonov's first poetry collection, characteristically entitled *The Blue Depth* [Golubaia glubina].

Fleshly passion in Platonov is hot and genuine: "tear off all our clothing for the first time," "Let us begin to kiss, let us know you." Actually, he is talking about mastering . . . the Universe. It is she who is the bride, it is the universe that is ultimately prescribed "to yield this day." There is no room in the new world for human physical love. Curiously, the young Platonov predicted the absence of women under communism, with the reservation, however, that this did not mean destroying the "weaker sex" but transforming woman into brother. Sex (like art), Platonov felt, would retreat into the past along with the reign of the bourgeoisie and be replaced by knowledge and creativity.

This is again a matter of sublimating sexual energy. Is there anything new in the idea that the era of love for God (or of God in man) is over? The time of love-hate for the "blue soul"—nature—has come.

In "Universe," a certain "we" appeared—not fraternally united mankind, as in the writers of the early part of the century, but the proletariat, with its incredible sense and will, a kind of caste: "This is a world adorned by us alone." Their goal in the final analysis is self-affirmation: they "will conquer the world" "in their own name," in order later to assemble a habitat based on the image and likeness of their machines: "We shall extinguish the tired sun. / Ignite a different light

throughout the universe. / Give men iron souls. / Sweep the planets from our path with fire."

"We" are ready to follow our aspirations to the end, even if it seems the end of the human race; they are aroused by destruction: "No one will come after us. / Upon the corpses the spring flowers will smile."

Thus Eros turned into Thanatos.

When afterward Platonov started separating the wheat from the chaff, the idea of the transformation of sexual energy into creative energy held on longer than the others, fed by N. Fedorov's plans to put the force of procreation into the matter of resurrecting ancestors.

In the mid-1920s, Platonov's heroes were still instructing: "What is revealed to a man in woman is closed off in the wider world" ("Coachmen's District" [Iamskaia sloboda]); they were afraid of the "nit of love" and dreamed of throwing the "force of their bodies" not into the "production of descendants" but into the discovery of a fantastic civilization, anthropotechnology—the art of constructing man ("A Nation's Forefathers" [Rodonachal'niki natsii]). Only toward the late 1930s, actually, in "The River Potudan'" [Reka Potudan'], was there a final reconciliation between the writer and "poor but necessary pleasure."

It's too bad that the maps of Platonov the explorer have been left to gather dust in the libraries and special archives. The plan of the new people-cogs—whom the peasants in Leonov's "Sot'" say are different from the "Orthodox" in that they "sleep without snoring or breathing" (and we might add, without sexual impulses), "they speak in the manner of threshing machines"—has conquered.

2

Judging from the artistic literature, in twentieth-century Russia, in some inscrutable way, sexual energy has spilled out in all directions except its natural one, which has been thought of as too base.

And if we move out of the temporal framework of our observations?

In his article "The Russian Eros" [Russkii Eros], G. Gachev noted that in nineteenth-century Russian classics what is most poetic is unrealized love. Or "enlightened Eros": the man in Russia expects from a woman comfort, soothing like "what the land, the mother-homeland gives" (the people are more likely to say "pity" rather than "love"). If some intimacy does occur, it is an event, a skirmish between the sexes, a natural disaster after which one cannot live, and there remains only the river's wave, the precipice, the rails, and the "unmown ditch."

Erotica itself in Russia is not printed on principle: it is distinguished by grotesque plots and a challengingly indecent, obscene vocabulary (in the language of our native wasps, *maternaia*). Naturally it is not a matter of censors (only the "golden" and "silver" ages in Russia were receptive to a liberated Eros); the censor's ferocity can also be explained, after all, by a certain cultural tradition.

What there hasn't been in Russia is this poetry of healthy sex, of sensual passion. There have been virtually no books like Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, that apology of the natural man in the era of intellect and industry triumphant, or Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. These books were banned in their authors' homelands, but they were created, after all! *Evidently, in the most Russian consciousness, carnal love has been relegated to the cultural underground.*

The culture of prohibitions and voluntary silences gives birth in daily life to "monstrous naiveté in an embrace with an even more monstrous cynicism" (D. Savitskii), hypocrisy, the "tragedy of the bedroom" (recall Tolstoy)—sexual impotence, pathology, and neuroses. Whereas in literature . . . centuries of abstinence and jokesters—and infrequent sexual revolts. Like the present one, which has thrown down chaste "village prose" and the "forty-year-olds," whom daily life has repressed. Freud's IT has crawled out from the recesses of the Russian consciousness onto the nudist beaches of modern prose, and having stretched out its pale and withered (from a lack of light and movement) body, is unembarrassedly giving itself over—in full view of a shocked public—to all manner of sexual excesses and perversions.

This is a revolt that may be "merciless," but it is not "senseless." Its pivotal motif, if you like, is dethroning the Tradition of Blue Love, knocking it off its high pedestal.

In Iu. Mamleev's story "The Mystic" [Mistik], touchingly and mutually in love are the heroine, who adores "gazing into the distant clouds in the heavens," and the hero, who languishes for the other world. (That world in Mamleev is frequently blue—"Blue Advent" [Goluboi prikhod] and "Living Death" [Zhivaia smert'].) In the world on that other side, the highest essences while away eternity in pure love: "As far as broads there, chicks, uh-uh. . . 'Cause there isn't. . . It's all kind of ethereal there. But you can love anyone you like. . . 'Cause people love there after just talking." The heroine, however, is a prostitute, "she has a strange dress splashed either with dirt or piss"; her chosen one is "a healthy forty-year-old man with a belly that droops like his lips."

Blue love is brought down to earth, too, in the stories of E. Popov. His poetic sense is stained by the fact that it pours out of a hero who has been eating *khlodnik* [a soup—Ed.] ("M.F.'s" [Udaki]). An underpinning of high passion is bared and examined on the physiological level in the story "The Ascent" [Voskhozhdenie], about a homosexual falling in love with a monument "that symbolizes the River E" and becoming the idol's victim when he drops off the monument.

The Blue tradition is parodied most thoroughly, however, in "The Blue Flute" [Golubaia fleita]. At the beginning of the story, the theme of the high idyll is introduced, with a shepherd and shepherdess, but in a socialist realist version. A picture hangs in the station: "Somewhere far away, near the emerald mountains, happy, colorful cows graze and a joyful airplane flies across an azure sky," and in the center in garlands, "HE and SHE, the age of Daphne and Chloe, but dressed"; SHE is playing a blue flute.

Popov is part of the generation that had to "make a cover from Marfa Semenovna and Petr Kirillovich," as one modern prose writer put it. Popov arranges something like a court where he himself acts as accuser, the high canon is the respondent, and the undressed, distraught heroes are the victims.

The story's heroes, Mitia Pysikov and Masha Khareglazova, are vanguard brigade leaders; on the advice of their wise and concerned bosses they celebrate a Komsomol wedding. This is the first misfire in the plot: their family life does not go well. Masha is apparently frigid, and there are ugly scandals. The stubborn canon gets his second wind: "the collective helped," directing them to consult a famous professor. The spouses, however, are in shock from the doctor's cynical—or so it seems to them—advice, and the tragic dénouement gathers steam. Once again there is an unpredictable turn: Mitia, in despair, shaking his hand at the unfeeling façade, attempts a rear entry, and . . . the doctor is right, Masha is happy!

It is stupid to make modern prose responsible for our fellow citizens' daily life or behavior in bed, to accuse it of legitimizing sexual minorities (who immediately organized a world congress), and of AIDS (as well as the increase in abortions, prostitution, teenage pregnancy, etc.). There is probably no point in cherishing special hopes: "We are not the doctors, we are the pain" (Herzen). However, there is something literature can do: it can be the first to express what is painful and to liberate what has been kept secret . . . to find a new style of life.

Up until now we have been talking about the *rejection* of tradition. Its *renewal* can also be noted in major genre forms.

3

F. Gorenshtein is one of those who brought sex back to Soviet literature. Brought it back, however, while hating it.

In *Redemption* [Iskuplenie] (1967), even the moment the lovers first unite is depicted with obvious dismissal and alienation, like a skirmish between two eternally opposed forces: "Joyous moans were wrested from her breast, and finally a sensation she had never known before of disappearing, of her soul dying, a sensation she would have liked to continue forever, throwing a heady, demonic challenge to life, nature, and powerless order, jeering, triumphing over all the sanctities of this world, spitting on God, mocking atheism, despising suffering, refusing to recognize her father, her mother, her homeland, her love, and on, and on. . . ."

Thus, the high and the low (God and the devil, the soul and the body), meaning and its destruction—chaos: life and death. . . . If I were to continue the quotation, two more participants in the single combat would be revealed: man and the beast. We understand whose side the author is on. Although he does know that the attraction between the sexes is stronger than the highest ideas, for him it is an "apocalyptic thirst," that is, even worse than suicide: subconscious temptation rejects life in general, in any event, the readiness for such a step.

Words are used that are, actually, lofty and solemn: "sweet torments," "blissful tortures," and so on. We understand why: despite everything, man recognizes his place in the world order, although evidently not by what is for Gorenshtein a more perfect means such as thought. However, the escalating heaviness of languages and cumbersome of rhythmic structures betray the falsity in the respectful tone and the author's revulsion toward ruinous ecstasies of the flesh.

How has a natural, festive event turned into a crime against nature? By what miracle has the holy "moment of conception" become the triumph of "body over soul," the "idea of the devil over the idea of God"? How could "nature" and "beast" wind up in different camps?

The reason, clearly, is a foreshortening specific to Gorenshtein—extrapersonal (in *Redemption* there is no love between individuals, between personalities), almost even extrahuman (a gaze from the heights of abstract categories, from outside the bounds of the human "system").

At "an immense distance," amorous sufferings and dramas seem petty and insignificant. They merge to the point of indistinguishability; they are distorted, they turn into their opposite. It is curious that the view from eternity inclines the author to accept on principle the judgments that the flesh yields in brief moments of illumination. In the moment of passion, they inform us, "life, without the aid of fantasy and reason, shows its true worth, which is equal to zero"; here, for the narrator himself, the zero-value of life turns out to be—genuine!

In the novel *Psalm* [Psalom] (1975), the revulsion for lust is just as strong. The description of copulations are purposely given ugly features. This is why the description itself becomes thickly spoken: "Then he stretched out his arms to grab her to punish her. Kseniia did not try to stop him; she merely dodged being grabbed by the throat with a movement of her full hips." Or the fantastically implausible: "instead of her throat, Aleksei Aleksandrovich, obviously delirious, started choking Kseniia's heavy, milk-colored breast . . . with his other hand Aleksei Aleksandrovich grabbed Kseniia by her luxuriant beauty, whooped, and tore her from the floor, like a heavy railroad tool case, resting his palm on the bottom of Kseniia's round belly."

Sexual love moves in the novel from the rank of crimes to another—that of punishments: "the Lord's third punishment is the savage beast-adultery," which lent the image an unusual coloration: "In that terrible image she saw her father, and a woman's bared upraised legs loomed over him, as if to devour him." The novel's metaphorical structure is mythological: the inanimate comes to life and is assigned the features of a hungry beast dreaming of devouring man. For man the encounter with this beast is pain and disease: "and he moaned then like a man with typhus," "he began to moan with special force, as if his body were being torn up the way he had torn up Mariia's body."

Sometimes Gorenshtein seems to soften the severity of his judgments: there are conditions under which passion can be justified and man saved—love and its consequence, "fruitfulness."

Higher still is the embodiment of the "age-old dream of some third thing, neither bodily nor ascetic." This third thing was found in the novel by Dan-Antichrist and Tasia: when they met they stood, embracing, and lust did not penetrate to their souls. Naturally, this is not biblicalism but the familiar traditions of the Russian Eros.

In Gorenshtein's novels, literature once again began speaking frankly about sexual passion, in order to dethrone and degrade it once

more. At best, love proves necessary in the world order so that the hopelessly little, "shamefully insignificant" before God, can mount that step, reach for the heavens, and graze the Eternal . . . having stained it: "The most extreme . . . humiliation of eternity is pleasure." Where sensual love is thought of as an *annex* to values of a higher order, it is logical that revulsion toward it inevitably intensifies.

This revulsion probably reaches its peak in the 1987 *povest'* "Chok-Chok," in which Gorenstein utilizes the "everyday" comparison of the female sex organ and "raw meat," which creates a stronger effect than lofty meditations or metaphor-myths. The characteristically gloomy plot—with its childish sexual failures and hopeless love for a lesbian—seems to brighten in the end. But the mention of "faith" and "heavenly love" is beside the point; they are transitory and somehow unnecessary. It is more a matter that Gorenstein, having recognized the power of sex, has become more analytic. In the *povest'* he scrupulously stratifies the "psychic overtones"—old sufferings that intensify new dramas. This clarity of glance "cleanses" the tragedy of sex.

In Iuz Aleshkovskii the sexual theme also seems subsidiary: pulling the covers off it, he bares the ulcers of the totalitarian regime; the element of life is used as a weapon in the dissident struggle, as it is in "Camouflage" [Maskirovka], in which a "maniac, the specter of communism" runs through a case involving the assault on several "camouflage-winos." As in the novel *Kangaroo* [Kenguru], in which the Cheka concocts "The Case of the Brutal Assault and Murder of the Oldest Kangaroo in the Moscow Zoo" for the glorious anniversary, thereby cultivating its fantasy.

In Aleshkovskii, however, there is a special hero who seems to have crossed over from the pages of picaresque adventure novels: a pick-pocket or, say, a Guliaev: "He is Sidorov, he is Katsenelenbogen, he is von Patoff, he is Erkrants, he is Petianchikov, he is Tede" (as well as Zbigneu Cherez-Sedel'nik, Ter-Ioganesian Bakh, Khariton Ustinych Iork . . .). A new attitude toward sex matures: Aleshkovskii's hero flees the absurd and repulsive system for daily life on principle, and his attitude toward sensual joys is serious.

Aleshkovskii's erotic image is very close to what the "thirty-year-olds" have brought to literature. For them, private life is the last bastion, where man must become independent and omnipotent (intimate life could be likened to the foundation of the daily life-fortress).

What intimate feelings could there be in an era of tank marches

through city streets or demonstrations in lines of hungry people? However, as sexologist S. Agarkov asserts, "love under the tanks" is only reinforced: the self-defense mechanism clicks in. This is what distinguishes man from beast: let an ape wind up in similar conditions (having to fight for a banana) and the consequences would be catastrophic: atrophy of the sex glands, balding, infarctions. . . . However, if man is ruled by his psyche rather than his physiology, this is encouraging.

On the shield of the "alternative" prose writers are Rozanov's "fateful" words about how "private life is above everything": "simply sitting home, picking your nose and watching the sunset." The issue is how to read the philosopher's words: as a challenge to society and an incentive whipping one on to arrange one's personal destiny; or literally, as a justification for creative impotence and infantilism.

4

Most astonishing in Vik. Erofeev's *Russian Beauty* [Russkaia krasavitsa] is the different ways you can interpret it. Assortments to suit all tastes.

One gets the impression, however, that the author himself is not serious about any meaning he projects.

There is the dissident perspective: free love as a revolt against the system. Nonetheless, dissidents are depicted ironically. There is the perspective of the political novel: the martyr, the passion-sufferer, laying down her life in the struggle against a possible war; however, the threat of war is linked to . . . "the inflation of love": "well, just because there isn't anything to expend your energy on"—the American, joyfully, "Sublimation!" and he strikes his knee—"Yes!" In addition, the heroine during the interview is powerfully distracted; she attempts to seduce the inert foreigners. In a strange way, the theme of desecrated Russian lineage (the possible aristocratic origins of Irina Tarakanova) is imposed on the image of the "inter-girl"* by calling up the most secret dreams about the Latin American Carlos. The heroic model of conduct (Joan of Arc, the savior of her nation) is humorously restructured into a mystical-sexual harmony: having stripped naked, the "Russian beauty" runs across a field deep in the Russian countryside, expecting to be flooded at any moment by the "seed of Russia's chief enemy, which stinks like decay, the voluptuous demon, the usurper,

*International prostitute; actually, a Russian woman who sleeps mostly with foreigners for money.—Ed.

the autocrat." It is curious that afterward a completely different "archetype" comes to the fore: the repenting whore seeking the path to God.

In fact, all this corresponds to the declarations of the "postmodernists," whose credo is to reject attempts at influencing life through art, to reject serious, ponderous "ideology." The "postmodernists" prefer to carry out unhurried "excavations in the depths" of the "cultural strata" (M. Epshtein), training their eyes so that the unit of perception becomes, say, "not a cat but the image of a cat permeated with the contexts of our millennial culture" (V. Kuritsyn). Life in the space of culture associates to the eternal, "childish" issues, though.

All the "ideological" interpretations in Erofeev are reduced and canceled out by the eternal love theme. Might that be the core of his intent? You can try to read the novel "existentially," as a myth: in the center is the "genius of love," the woman, sexually gifted nature with all its generosity, marked by the scent of bergamot from her lap, although in the course of the plot these smells are replaced by the vile spirit of decay.

Could this be the author's way of presenting the bill to the woman who squandered her gift and spent it on trifles? The tempting possibility arises of reading *Russian Beauty* as a social novel about a girl from the provinces: she dreams of compensation—the role of "national idol"—and proceeds toward her goal, attempting to get a venerable literary die-hard from the preserve of official literature to marry her. Something in between a subduer of the big city from the Rastignac line, a "huntress of mammoths," and the broad Russian soul, a kind of modern Soviet Cinderella. Actually, on the psychological level what is accentuated is not the "guilt" but the drama: the longing for a great love and the search for it, the tragic absence of someone capable of appreciating feminine talent, and, as a result, the pretense of being a "scatter-brained daisy," a stupid bitch without any precious depth of soul, inasmuch as the latter is off-putting when it is revealed. The possibility opens up of explaining the intriguing plot moves ("conception by a corpse") as sick raving, insanity—due to the crushing of her hopes and her desperate loneliness.

As a result, the novel seemingly is transformed into an accusatory act of time against a society that has mutilated people's intimate life. It is interesting that at the "Erotica and Literature" roundtable (*Inostrannaia literatura*, 1991, no. 5), the subject of Vik. Erofeev's statement was the "Brezhnev" sexual revolution of the late 1970s and the

unprecedented number of cases of lesbianism in Moscow in that period—due to the absence of worthwhile men (who were probably waiting out the "frosts" on the couch?).

The embarrassing scenes from the novel can be considered an appendix to a kind of sociocultural research. However, the picture of the capital's sexual mores is obviously calculated for the stock-jobbing demand of the "Sove" reader, who longs for fruit that is not simply forbidden but befuddlingly exotic.

For instance, a party is described where the guests, having paid handsomely, simultaneously play the role of mirror for passion and propose that the intrigued reader rack his brains over the puzzle: What actually is the nature of the mistress's partner, the silent beast Timofei? "I, at any rate, was astonished at his knack, and guests reached a confused state of spirit, too." In the morning, locked up at home with the order: "Don't howl!" "Timofei, the parasite, walked around the apartment as if he were the master, one foot after the other, took a shower, stayed on the telephone, and did not put himself out for us." (The kind of human phallocracy that feminists are battling "over the horizon" does not threaten Russia.) So, about deviations, with a puzzle and embellishments. It is a game for the audience, nothing more.

Let us sum up. Organic life inside culture, and the conversation about life in general, all too often both are replaced in the novel by a game of literary models, frequently one that has already been worked out.

The reader is too obviously (if not visibly) present in the novel. Well, play does always assume a partner and a win—literary success, a response. Erofeev, however, toys with the mass reader. Anyone who has leafed through *Russian Beauty* will take away an idea to suit his own taste and understanding. Naturally, in the final analysis, the author is laughing at that trusting simpleton, making clichés collide, smashing the schemes he himself constructed. However, the playing field itself (the initial level of discourse) is in principle accessible to all. You can envy the double win: the readers are made fools of—and are content.

In *Ros and I* [Ros i ia—a pun on "Russia," *Rossia*—Trans.], F. Erskin (M. Berg), too, plays with literary clichés, quoting, parodying, imitating Nabokov, the "chinari," and the genre schemata of an antiutopia or fantasy about the past like Aksenov's *Island of Crimea* [Ostrov Krym]. Of course, he uses fashionable erotic constructions to good effect.

Erskin is more ironic and elitist than Erofeev. The two writers seem to have divided up the spheres of interest from Rozanov's outrageous

formula about private life: Erofeev chose the Philistine activity; Erskin the more poetic. The purpose of his game is apparently critical: to recreate the cuisine of modern prose. For example, a recipe for a literary dish intended to "rack the reader with rapid-fire orgasms" is very precisely composed: "An infinite variety of fucking, from oral to anal, badly camouflaged coitus in public places, and a blatant penchant for still lifes composed of a maidenly mouth and a man's member—and all this, allowed through the prism of purposely sleepy indifference, with a progressively mounting number of combinations and participants . . . the text in essence consists of interwoven quotations."

The novel's central plot is the attraction to Ros (his passion for Rosa, his poem "Ros, how I loved you, but with the strangest love, . . ." "Ros, my Ros, gray-eyed daughter," and so on); a fragment about Ros the nymphet alludes to Nabokov's novel. This parallel is murderous for the contemporary novel, though. For Nabokov, *Lolita* is a continuation of his lifelong theme of the poetic deceit of vision, yet another attempt to settle the question of whether, as the poet said, "to live in an invented world." It is a novel about a love that went astray in childhood, became a mania, and lost sight of nature, but was cleansed by the hero's confession and his tragic end. In addition, the life of the novel is connected with the writer's efforts to enter a new cultural milieu, to tie his novel to "young" America, so to speak; it is curious that his contemporaries found something similar in *Lolita*, either old Europe was corrupting young America or vice-versa, they noted.

In *Ros and I* (as in *Russian Beauty*), there is no such subtext formed by the "breath of soil and destiny"; in any event, it is completely overshadowed by what becomes an intrinsically costly game.

Even "sex" is turned into a game.

In his article in *Novy mir*, "Through Oblivion and Back" [Cherez Letu i obratno], M. Berg justified the abundance of sexual reading in the Western market: emancipation is not a synonym for debauchery. However, literature "on sexual motifs" can be *nonnutritious for culture*—when it becomes a toy, a trifle, a bubble-gum bubble.

It is not surprising that Petrushevskaja, having attempted to append "pure erotic experiences" to "Sove" existence, decided to reject the holiday of the flesh. The luxury was too expensive: "Where, we ask, is all this to be implemented?" "When lonely schoolteachers read this, where can they go? It's too hard on lonely people."

It is a sad picture. Those who are crushed by existence without life

look on with amazement and censure at those who have fled into a special dimension, the museum halls of culture, and "as if gamboling and playing" at sex, entertain themselves and the reader. Actually, both of them seem tragicomic, inasmuch as they do not know freedom to an equal extent—passion, the way. Destiny.

In a recent article, "Trifonov, Shukshin, and We" [Trifonov, Shukshin i my], S. P. Zalygin remarked not without bitterness that a *generation without a destiny* has come to literature.

There are exceptions, though. D. Savitskii's *From Nowhere with Love* [Niotkuda s liubov'iu] and E. Limonov's *It's Me, Eddie* [Eto ia—Edichka] have been given a destiny. The destiny of exodus.

5

Limonov and Savitskii are very different. What is striking first is their different stylistics for the love-sex theme. For all his candor, Savitskii prefers euphemism, relatively elegant metaphors, quotations ("she jerked the clasp on her breast, letting two moist pink creatures out to play," "the brief locking of our mortal bodies," "What a tree I chopped down!" "the slow descent from Mt. Everest," "keeping her finger on someone's cock"). Even his obscenity isn't vulgar but plays cheerfully and ardently: "atsa khotsa!" Limonov is unprintable and crude, which is explained by the novel's point of departure: Elena's refusal to "make love." In addition, one could note that Eddie has a tender, individual name for his beloved's wished-for place: "my girl's sweet puss."

Meanwhile, both *From Nowhere with Love* and *It's Me, Eddie* certainly do converge in something central.

If you make an adjustment in the heroes' soul, you notice that there is no naked physiology in these frank novels; sex merely echoes the voice of the soul. Eddie's beloved has left, and he is looking for—but not finding—a replacement, or rather, attention, kindness, consolation. Sumburov, Savitskii's hero, fills the emotional blank spots in with a string of liaisons—until he meets up with Lidia. This may also be an attempt to cross over the "official border" into daily life—to try on a different life style. In any event, this is not a case of "millions of dirty little people loving each other."

Most importantly, the heroes' fates are ruled by their passion for the One Woman; they have truly "wagered their life on the card of a woman's love." It is interesting that their relations with a woman are

somehow connected with their relationship to the "soil." Well, that's the Russian style. G. Gachev says that in Russia love is always perceived symbolically: nature's soul, its vital life, even if it is mute and voiceless, has somehow certified the kinship of the hero's searchings for itself ("The Image in Russian Artistic Culture" [Obraz v russkoi khudozhestvennoi kul'ture]). In Russian style, Timofei Sumburov is tormented by his passion for Lidiia-France, and Eddie becomes lost in thought, pondering whether he is capable of being a "hero" since his Moscow girl-poet has left him.

The drama of passion rests on a matter of life or death and demands total inner rebirth. Eddie is near suicide but persists in imposing a reanimation experiment on himself, since the novel becomes the story about a "program for crawling into a new life." And the price of resurrection.

Love gives Timofei Sumburov the strength to squeeze the "Sove-ness" out of himself drop by drop. Savitskii's hero is a writer, and the memory of beauty is still not completely repressed in his soul; he responds painfully to the grimaces of his native existence, which are especially tangible by contrast. When he heads off for an Intourist hotel, Sumburov mostly remarks on what isn't there. "There weren't any wall signs in the lobby, any naive pornography, any pronouncements like 'Fool, put it in your mouth . . . ' or any laconic vengeance: 'Shura gives it to MUR drivers, call 232-16-02.' " "There weren't any black scorch marks on the ceiling—the amusement of schoolboys and lazy delinquents." Thus is born the theme of a violated, utterly frayed world—in a variation on the theme of the Kremlin stars: " 'A red light,' I said, 'means either a traffic light or a whorehouse.' " Only love can lead you out of the "vanguard impasse" and up the rungs of incarnation: "Through you, a world I didn't know whipped into my life. . . . You were my first free person. . . . With you I started to change: my skin began to crawl, my joints began to creak, I got on all fours. I gathered my strength day by day." Here it's easy to slip off and fly back into the abyss; the proximity of death can always be felt. It is no accident that death comes to the fore in the novel.

The hero of the modern "novel of destiny" seems capable of withstanding torture by love; to survive and preserve his human dignity. His freedom of choice of lifestyle and "soil." Lidiia the Frenchwoman liberated Sumburov from his "Sove-girl"; France liberated him from Lidiia: "She was drunk. Dead drunk . . . with a force that I never

suspected her of, she grabbed my head by the hair and shoved it . . . between her legs and, when I fell face first into that mash of yielding, juicy flesh, I realized that she had just done the same thing with somebody else. . . . I struggled to get free of her pressing hand—she was sleeping, snoring, there was a puddle on the sheet, and her hair was stuck to her forehead. This was the end." Free love in a Western key had turned into a gloomy prison of sex, a dismal nightmarish, "ugliness" (which, according to Dostoevsky, will destroy you).

In sum, Timofei Sumburov is destined to discover in himself a certain remnant that does not fall under the "Sove" definition but that also does not subscribe to the foreign life; it can be designated most accurately by the quotation from Brodsky: "From nowhere with love."

What the heroes do unquestionably acquire on their dramatic path is art. This is obvious in Savitskii and concealed in Limonov—which makes it all the more interesting to figure out in order later to sum up the theme of the Russian writer "on a rendezvous."

As soon as the need arose to explain Limonov's recent "swing to the right," he was likened to Mayakovsky. The attentive reader, of course, will note that what the biased descendant (for example, Iu. Karabchievskii) discovers in Mayakovsky only now, Limonov's hero expresses frankly. He is aware that his "class hatred" is "conventional" and proceeds from the fact that his beloved was "stolen away." But he also does not try to hide the fact that he is a "lumpen-poet."

The second half of the self-designation is extremely interesting. Unlike Mayakovsky, Limonov will not give up his "dear lyre." Eddie rejects American culture itself specifically as a poet. He despises films—"sweet sexual syrups with rich, handsome, gray-haired men" who captivate "the woman who loves the life of luxury she has never seen before." He rages at the "plague of money." Actually, Eddie has an aversion for civilization—"a paradise for mediocrities"—not only in its American version (where "commercial ideas" are paramount) but also in its Soviet version.

Mayakovsky might not have gone to work as a busboy to get money for a black lace shirt, but this shirt may have reinforced Eddie in his "wail of the individual against the violence of the collectives," as Limonov once formulated it in discussing his novel. He does not allow the "man-artist" to submit to the law of the herd. Limonov and his wife in bed in front of a muted television where Solzhenitsyn is speaking is effective "performance" art. It is no surprise that embittered political

émigrés burned copies of the novel. Oh well, this period of summarizing the "uprising of the masses" (Ortega y Gasset) convinces us that the place of the true poet now is not in the "workers' order" but "in his own little house."

So, the model for poetic conduct does not come from the "great poet Vovka Mayakovsky." Unlike his predecessor socialist realists, Limonov is prepared candidly to "reflect esthetically" his "own psychological experience" and does not try to replace it with "ideological compensation, the creation of a myth" (see T. I. Pecherskaia's essay on Russian revolutionary-democrats in *Literaturnoe obozrenie*). "Morality is truth," as a writer of an older generation used to say, however indecent this truth might seem.

It is tempting to end the story of Limonov's and Savitskii's novels triumphantly. To declare that the Russian tradition of love-destiny is growing stronger: concluding an alliance with sensuality and art, feeling gets rid of its one-sidedness.

As before, however, the heroes don't win their beloved; they win their art. An ode on the rejection of sensual love, a parody on the rejection of it, literary games of free sex, and now here the tragedy of loss—in each case, art replaces life, nature, natural and spiritual sensuality. . . .

* * *

In the books of Gorenshtein and Aleshkovskii, Erofeev and Erskin, Limonov and Savitskii, the Russian Eros comes out from underground—and matures. That is, it realizes itself as an irreplaceable part of life, a part that does not replace all of life. "*Cogito, ergo sum*" and "*Coito, ergo sum*" are in essence two sides of one coin—for crime and against the integral and harmonious life. Fortunately, the coin isn't in fashion these days.

The blue wings of the Russian Eros have carried us very high up—too far from the sinful word and vital life.

Modern prose, tormented and pejorative, stains these blue wings with all manner of filth. It attempts to clip them, assuring us that someone born to crawl cannot fly. With an infant's thoughtlessness, wingless Cupid pulls his divine attribute apart into feathers and plays with it. Nonetheless, the wings grow out again for the maturing Eros—black, the color of mourning for a lost loved one. That's how it is today. And tomorrow?

MARIIA REMIZOVA

Whom Shall We Flog This Time?

Writers on Morals Sentry

An international fellowship of writers' unions has come before the Russian Federation's Supreme Soviet asking them to draft and pass (sic!) immediately a basic law on the defense of morality. (I could never compose a sentence like that; it is plagiarism.) The leadership of the Supreme Soviet (the quotation continues) has responded to the initiative accordingly—that is, positively. A working group under the Commission on Culture and the Natural Heritage (lovely name!) was formed instantaneously—made up entirely of writers. The group will now get busy on working out the rules of good taste and on the formation, one assumes, of the militant detachment—complete with whips—that will make the guilty parties strictly answerable.

Relations between morality and our literature are of long standing and complex. People often curse literature for its past sins, for its pathos and didacticism, for the fact that it always tried to sow something sensible, good, and eternal in someone (and at the same time for the fact that what came up was usually neither good nor sensible). They may have cause to curse it. It may have gotten carried away. But to the point of running to the "leadership" in the name of thirty-seven writers' unions and asking for the immediate introduction of a morals police? Nothing similar happened to it before—that is, *before* before.

If Leo Tolstoy did shout in a temper from time to time about the fact that, as he put it, "games of chance are prohibited but women wearing provocative prostitutes' clothing are not?" nonetheless he did not demand that the government pass appropriate laws.

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