

Carnality and Eroticism in the History of Russian Literature: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse of Silence

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The main argument of this essay is built around the observation that Russian literary culture is short of the necessary discursive resources for discussing sexualities and eroticism. It is possible to claim that sexual behavior is presented in dominant literary and social discourses most often as a pathology or aberration that can only be burlesqued or represented as grotesqueries, often of a brutal and repulsive nature. To explore these representations, I will attempt in this essay to outline a genealogy of what I have termed a *discourse*, or a *figure, of silence* as it evolved throughout Russia's cultural and intellectual history.¹

For everyday life situations in Russian-language cultures, this utter inability to articulate themes of eroticism and sexuality in a meaningful way might be responsible for a number of cultural predicaments and idiosyncrasies. One such idiosyncrasy is that the cultural weight of literature remains very high in Russian culture,² and thus one should not underestimate its role in shaping the outlooks of the people who are sexually active now, including the ways they think and talk about sex. When appropriate discourses are missing from that literature, in consequence, the public sphere will itself be shaped in particular ways to compensate for it.

The main study question for a comparative philologist and/or a sociologist of literature interested in the Russian tradition is this: why does this particular *discourse of silence*

1 It is not one of my goals in this essay to account for the historical complexity of such geographical, cultural and historical formations as "Rus," "Kyivan Rus," "Russia," etc. or to react in any meaningful way to ongoing scholarly debates about what constitutes being "Russian" and "Russianness." However, bearing this complexity in mind, I will try, where possible, to avoid sweeping generalizations and overusing such expressions as "ancient Russian culture" or "old Russian literature."

2 Aleksandr Etkind notes the "programming influence of literature" in Russia (*Содом и Психея* 329), while Joseph Stalin, following Yuri Olesha, aptly called writers *инженеры человеческих душ* / "engineers of human souls". Dmitri Galkovsky calls the Bolshevik/Soviet rule *графократия* / "graphocracy" – literally, the rule of writers (Galkovsky 365). And, conversely, he thinks that the development of Russian literature has never been an immanently "literary process" as it "has always with professional complaisance fulfilled certain social demands and has never been therefore something explicable mainly 'within itself'. The laws of literary development in Russia were not literary laws" (Ibid. 78). When I talk about the relatively high "cultural weight" of literature in Russia, I imply this special status of creative writing and writers in Russian culture.

dominate in Russian letters, and how is the representation of sexuality therein similar and different to that of the other (e.g., Francophone or Anglophone) literary traditions? Despite the obvious fact that, with regard to sexual matters, all Western cultures (whether we include Russia in those or not) have always taken up discourses of sexuality in rather controversial ways, the question of degree remains: i.e., *to what degree* is one able to render artistic and cultural production and consumption relatively more receptive and open to human sexualities, even using discourses sometimes outside of the mainstream? The end of the trajectory I will trace in the present essay, therefore, addresses how these discourses began to emerge in distinctly Russian forms, not necessarily resembling those in the West, but in full awareness of the deficit in the indigenous tradition.

This article will outline what the *discourse of silence* about sexualities in Russia originated from and rested on. Sections will trace the religious-cultural roots of the problem, its early accommodation in literary discourse under Pushkin, later attempts (however weak) to use medicalized discourses to supplement this lack, and then finally various confrontations with Western literary discourses on the topic. That situation, I argue, may have persisted into the twenty-first century.

The Birth of the Discourse of Silence: A Historical Sketch

I would argue that prerevolutionary Russian religious culture was heavily dependent on a neo-Platonic version of Christianity received through Byzantium, and it is no surprise that this culture determined early boundaries for discourses of sexuality and the flesh in Russia. For example, Andrei Rublev's iconic representations of human and divine forms (such as his *Trinity*) are markedly non-naturalistic: one can observe in them what Orthodox theologians call "spiritual flesh," that is, the bodies look incredibly light, frail and unearthly. Familiar Western tableaux with Madonnas as full-bodied wives and mothers seem to have been absent within this culture of representation.³

3 See Amy Mandelker's "The Sacred and the Profane: Tolstoy's Aesthetics and Pornography" for a detailed account of Tolstoy's indignant critique of Western religious art, which, as she argues, has a lot in common with Orthodox critiques of it for its "fleshy naturalism" (Levitt 408). For a convincing argument in favor of Byzantine tradition's importance for Russian icon painting (as opposed to much weaker Western influences), see Engelina Smyrnova's article "Simon Ushakov – Historicism and Byzantinism: On the Interpretation of Russian Painting From the Second Half of the Seventeen Century" (Baron 169-183).

These prohibitions were very conscious and very resistant to change. For example, even the slightest violation of this tradition – a more realistic representation of iconic images – enraged the Archpriest Avvakum, a renowned schismatic and religious writer of the late seventeenth century.⁴ Frenzied and frightened by the Patriarch Nikon’s reform of the Orthodox religious ritual (the icon-painting canon in particular), he wrote:

Here is how they handle it today: they picture Emmanuel with a puffy face, mouth reddened, hair curly, arms and muscles thick, fingers pumped up, just as the legs are with fat hips, and he is all depicted as fat-bellied and chubby as a German, only a saber at his hip seems to be missing. This is all now done with a fleshly conceit as all the heretics [Nikonians – A.L.] have fallen in love with fleshly plumpness and defiled our icon-painting. Our Christ the Lord is all about the subtle feelings, just as the theologians have taught us... And this is all that bastard Nikon, our foe, has fancied that they all should be painted as if alive; he’s been rearranging everything in the Italian way, that is, in the German one (*Life* 251).

One can only fantasize about what the wrathful Archpriest, for whom the adjectives “Italian” and “German” were strong swear words (used interchangeably), would have written had he been able to visit the Sistine Chapel or the St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome and witness much more “fleshly” representations of human and divine forms.

Much of ancient Russian culture (including art and literature) related to Orthodoxy in one way or another was anti-carnal. Pre-Christian Russian epics called *byliny* had been relatively more open to sexuality, and sometimes were even obscene, but they apparently produced little or no direct impact on what we know today as canonical Russian literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One might be able to treat the Russian Orthodoxy’s initial uneasiness with sex matters as its deep-seated critical distrust of the famous biblical call to “increase and multiply.” One of the historical figures usually quoted approvingly by some Russian intellectuals (for example, by Dmitri Merezhkovsky in his 1895 novel *Smert’ bogov. Yulian Otstupnik* that influenced many Silver Age authors) is Julian the Apostate, Emperor of Rome (331-363), who used satire to cite but ultimately defuse the validity of fleshy discourse for his culture. When this well-known opponent of Christianity decided to ridicule the town of Antioch, which was predominantly Christian, Julian wrote his famous satire *Misopogon / The*

4 An excellent account of Russian religion and society of the period, including Nikon’s reform, the Schism and Avvakum’s challenge, can be found in *Religion and Society in Russia: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* by Paul Bushkovitch (Bushkovitch 51-73).

Beard-Hater (362). Aleksei Losev, a renowned Russian and Soviet philosopher and historian of antiquity and Christianity, summarizes his achievement as follows:

The Beard-Hater ... is written in the form of the author's sham self-criticism and mocking praise of the Antiochians. Julian "criticizes" himself here for asceticism, modesty, unshaven beard, etc.; while "praising" the Antiochians for the effeminacy of their mores, careless way of life, and licentiousness. Indirectly it is also a critique of Christianity because the population of Antioch was predominantly Christian. There are some direct attacks at the texts of the New Testament in Julian's satire as well (*История* 364).

Why would one go as far back as Julian's *Beard-Hater* to describe much more recent cultural phenomena? Obviously, the unshaven and unkempt beard appears to have always signified its bearer's indifference to the pleasures of the carnal and the corporeal and sometimes (as was the case of Julian) his disapproval of lasciviousness and all forms of hedonism. It is notable that for today's Russian traditionalists the "question of the beard" is the locution used to speak of this issue of paramount importance. For instance, the well-known "Eurasianist" Aleksandr Dugin (an organizer of the extremely conservative and nationalistic "imperial marches" in Moscow and other cities in Putin's Russia and a happy owner of a spade-like thick beard) writes:

Peter the First, as is well known, was famous for ordering all the boyars to shave off their beards. It was a desacralizing act of some kind of a "ritual castration" of all our people. Our traditional men, whose metaphysical solar function would manifest itself in wearing a beard, were thus deprived of the crucial element of religious piety and sacral signs of sexual traits in the metaphysical dimension (Dugin, web source).

This reasoning is quite typical and symptomatic of what has been what seems in Russian intellectual life an age-old assumption, at least since Nikolai Fyodorov (1829-1903) and Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900)⁵: Russian people's sexuality should be discussed strictly in terms of metaphysics, while the threat of Westernization is likened to a ritual castration of the "wrong," non-sacral (non-iconic) kind (distinct from the "right" one, aimed at forms of asceticism such as the practices of Russian sects like the *Skeoptsy* / castrates⁶).

5 Fyodorov's "philosophy of the common task" and Solovyov's ideas about love are discussed in detail by Irene Masing-Delic in her book on the myth of salvation in Russian literature (Masing-Delic 76-122). Another source on Solovyov's ideas about love and femininity and their influence on Russian Symbolists is Olga Matich's informative article "The Symbolist Meaning of Love: Theory and Practice" (Paperno 24-50).

6 Andrew Blane's essay contains an informative discussion of Protestant sects in late imperial Russia, which could be helpful in learning more about Orthodoxy vs sectarianism in the period (see Blane 267-304).

It is arguable that Russian Orthodoxy experienced a much more powerful influence of Neo-Platonism than Western Christianity. In Neo-Platonism, *symbolic* phenomena are of primary importance: such things as the beard may point to some unearthly substance, to some sort of transcendence, rather than to a mundane bodily habit of shaving. The beard is a symbol or religious figure for the more important transcendent realm rather than a reference to the individual believer's earthly life. Platonism also meant that the Russian Orthodox Church took on very different philosophical bases for the discourses of its most important theological debates. Thus one early result is that, in the Russian Christian tradition, the works of Aristotle and his followers were practically altogether ignored, whereas they were significant challenges within Western Church traditions from the first millennium onward.

In contrast, the texts of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a Neo-Platonist of the fifth century CE, seem to have exerted the strongest impact upon the Russian Church. It is possible to suppose that Orthodoxy (at least, in its Russian version) accumulated many such variants of the “anti-corporeal” sides of both Platonism and Neo-Platonism. It appears to have particularly endorsed Plato's thought of the body as a “prison-house for the soul,” a view which is absolutely incompatible with Western Catholicism, wherein, under the influence of Aristotle, it is assumed that the unity of the soul and body is more perfect than the life of the soul as such. There, the entelechy of man or woman's being is constituted of the unity of body and soul, a thesis which has been thoroughly rooted in Western literature(s).

This kind of ideology is arguably alien to Russian Orthodoxy. Paradoxically, however, the latter echoes, and is akin to, the overt discourse texts of Julian the Apostate, who has expressed the anti-corporeal orientation of Neo-Platonism most brilliantly. It should be noted that despite all of his purported “anti-Christianity,” Julian initiated discussions between representatives of Christian “heresies” in an attempt to strengthen the Church. I have included this historical character to show that one of his satires, *Misopogon*, considerably overlaps with the general mood with regard to corporeality in such Russian Christian writers as the above-mentioned Solovyov, Berdyaev, Fyodorov (among others) and provides an early example of what discursive strategies were used to hold religion and corporeality apart.

It is interesting that as Julian mockingly attacks all the aspects of the pleasurable lifestyle of Antiochians (excessive theater-going, dancing and partying, overindulgence in

food, women's independence, lasciviousness and even the right to bring up their children; well-shaven "effeminate" men's faces, among other things), once in a while his anger and frustration seep through his bitter sarcasm. He almost seems to regret he is unable to join the Antiochians in their mindless bodily pleasures; at times he seems nearly jealous. And yet he seems to wholeheartedly believe that his unkempt hair, unshaven beard, the "evil odor" of his body, and his habit of vomiting food (albeit probably all poetic exaggerations aimed at producing a humorous effect) are actually something for a venerable monarch to be proud of. He also praises himself for having "knowledge of Aphrodite, goddess of Wedlock, only for the purpose of marrying and having children and [knowing] Dionysus the Drink-Giver, only for the sake of so much wine as each can drink at a draught" (Julian 481).

This hypocritical ambiguity that simultaneously acknowledges and contains sexuality does eerily remind one of some strange combinations of pompous moralizing and bitter xenophobia one encounters in many Russian cultural and political figures of today, whose patriotic anger sometimes borders a thinly-veiled envy of certain Western values, lifestyles, and mental attitudes.⁷ More than that, Julian's assumption that his "unkempt appearance and lack of charm... are more genuine since they have especial reference to the soul" (Julian 501) strikes one as a quintessentially "Russian" line of argumentation: the less one cares for his/her looks and body, the more "soul" (s)he in fact possesses. In this insight, Julian may be treated as an important predecessor for such literary giants as Avvakum, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and his discourse an early example of a thematic link that remains almost unquestioned into the twentieth century – that soul is won at the expense of body.

The tradition of Russian Orthodoxy was thus to a large degree built upon a Neo-Platonist rejection of "carnal desires" and "sensual pleasures." Later on, those seem to have been ignored and/or silently assumed to be the turf of a bitter rival – Catholicism.

The Russian Orthodox Church has never been able (or willing) to modernize itself by moving beyond this strict dichotomy. It is possible to argue that nothing analogous to the West's transition to such secular art forms as sculpture and painting in the era of Renaissance ever took place in Russia. Unlike Catholicism, Russian Orthodoxy did not bother to develop a detailed, loquacious discourse that could nuance various forms of anti-

7 One can only recall such TV anchors and "politologists" as Mikhail Leontiev, Gleb Pavlovsky, Aleksandr Dugin, Sergei Markov and many others who are in charge of the pro-Kremlin propaganda in Putin's Russia. Not all of them have unkempt looks, of course, but their anti-Western rhetoric never lacks demagoguery and aggressiveness.

corporeality and take up more differentiated discussions of piety and the body. Indeed, to use a mixture of Foucault's and Weber's terms, even a model for conversation on sex matters between the priest and his "spiritual progeny" has never existed. Any radical anti-carnality was suppressed within the Church and replaced by the *figure of silence*. Human sexuality did not have to be discussed, i.e., argued for or against: the strategy was to silence it and ultimately pretend that it did not exist at all.

In other words, the upshot was that sexual culture was not regulated by the Church: due to the Church's silence and lack of influence in all strata of society, discourses about sexuality were left to develop at the "grassroots" level by the population itself, outside the domains of the Church and its intellectual influence. Max Weber, in his comprehensive study of world religions, suggests:

The poorly developed and rather general method of confession, which was particularly characteristic of the Russian church, frequently taking the collective form of iniquity, was certainly no way to effect any permanent influence over conduct (Weber 561).

This point needs to be further clarified. Unlike Catholicism, the Russian Orthodox Church has never undertaken a detailed survey of the sexuality of its congregation. There existed certain exceptions, such as the cases that became common knowledge of the public or those of repentance at the initiative of a layman. In these cases, the punishment for committing the "sin" could be severe. However, it well might be that the typical Orthodox sermon itself never included the specific advice on sexual matters that one finds in abundance in those of rural Catholic priests (Gurevich 253-255).

The results for Russian society were extremely odd. It follows that those who sinned secretly were not subjected to inquisitorial interrogations by the priests (as opposed to what Foucault notes in relation to the Catholic countries of the West [*The History of Sexuality* 18-23]). One can therefore formulate the main principle of the Orthodox treatment of sexuality as an object of theological/intellectual discussion: *a detailed, elaborate inquiry of sexual habits and oddities would have been no less abominable than the sin itself*. The Russian scholar Igor Kon characterizes this phenomenon in the following way: "The contradiction between the highest spirituality and total fleshlessness 'above' and rough naturalism of everyday life 'below' runs

through all of the history of Russian culture, including many peasant customs” (*Сексуальная культура в России*, web source).⁸

Indeed, unlike such Anglophone cultures as England or the United States, Russia seems to have experienced very little communication between cultures of the social “top” (upper classes) and “bottom” (mostly peasantry). The two appear to have existed concurrently, each running its own course. Starting with the period of the Russian Orthodoxy’s Schism (late seventeenth century), the Church has been mostly concerned with fighting Old Believers and other sectarians as schismatics, rather than with establishing control over the sexualities of the common folk / *narod*.

A prime example of the discourses marking typically Russian spiritual strivings is provided by the Archpriest Avvakum’s autobiographical *Жизнь / Life* (c. 1673). Avvakum was a major opponent of Patriarch Nikon’s church reform and a major ideologist of the Old Believers. He was burned at the stake in 1682.⁹ *Life of the Archpriest Avvakum* was considered by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky as the most important, formative text of then-emergent Russian literature.

At one point in the narrative, the Archpriest ecstatically equates himself, i.e., both his body and his soul, with cow dung, pus, and human feces (the English translation does not do justice to some of his morbid “strong expressions”):

How, then, shall we be punished for violating the commandments of the Lord? Ah, we shall deserve but fire and torment! I know not how to pass my days! I am full of weakness and hypocrisy and enmeshed with lies! I am clothed with hatred and self-love! I am lost because I condemn all men; I think of myself as something, whereas I - accursed! - am but excrement and rot, yea, dung! Foul of soul and body. ‘Twould be good if I lived with pigs and dogs in their kennels; they too are evil-smelling, like my soul. Their stench is from nature, but I am evil-smelling because of my sins, like a

8 For a pioneering account of sexual life in Ancient Rus see also Eve Levin’s 1989 book *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700*. Alex Flegon’s *Eroticism in Russian Art* (1976) is an album on the history of Russian erotic art. Kon provides a brief but comprehensive history of sexuality in Russian culture from Ancient Rus to the 1990s in his chapter “Sexuality and Culture” (Kon & Riordan 15-44), which can serve as a useful sequel to his above-mentioned “The Historical Prelude” to *The Sexual Revolution in Russia* (11-50).

9 The figure of Avvakum and other figures and features of the Russian Schism (Raskol) are discussed in the very informative and thoughtful essays of James Billington and Pierre Pascal (Blane 189-222).

In addition, a useful account of the history of religious literature in the “pre-Petrine” Russia’s is Victor Zhivov’s article “The Religious Reform and the Emergence of the Individual in Russian Seventeenth-Century Literature” (Baron 184-198). Two essays on Old Belief by Robert Crumme are also important: “The Miracle of Martyrdom: Reflections on Early old Believer Hagiography” (Baron 132-145) and “**Old Belief as Popular Religion.**” See also Dmitri Likhachev’s 1973 monograph *Razvitiie russkoi literatury X-XVII vekov: epokhi i stili* (in Russian).

dead dog left lying in the streets of the city. God bless the bishops who buried me underground; at least, giving out stench to myself for my sins, I offer no scandal to others. Yea, this is good (*Life*, web source).

This is all not just a matter of Russian Orthodox submissiveness (*смирение*) and disregard for individual human life; rather, this is a discourse, in which corporeality is directly related to absolute filth and abomination, without elaboration or discussion of degrees of guilt or the practices which make one guilty, as one would find in Western Catholic discourses on sin.¹⁰ One might be tempted to call Avvakum a true martyr or an ascetic or even a masochist; nevertheless, his pathologization of his own body might sound a little too exuberant, even for a schismatic Old Believer of the late seventeenth century.

If this is the prevailing discourse, then society is left without the resources for “official” discussions of certain topics. Other factors then added to the extent of this growing silence. Since Peter the Great (early eighteenth century), the upper classes had been rapidly westernizing themselves. In the Russian high court, aristocrats and cultural elite (3-5% of the actual population) spoke a variety of modern European languages (most notably, French and German) and classical ones (Latin and Greek). Many of them were not fluent in Russian and did not feel any need to think or write in it. Another factor in Russian cultural life has always been the strict censorship of all cultural production by both the Church and the State. Before Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) Russian literature had not managed, or even attempted, to create discourses of eroticism and sexuality. The Europeanized upper classes did of course employ a well-developed language of sex but this language was not Russian – these discussions were conducted in French, Latin or even sometimes Greek. It is well-known, for example, that such scandalous French authors as Evariste de Parvy and the Marquis de Sade were extremely popular in Russia in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, as were Roman lyrical poets like Ovid or Catullus and such masters of Menippean satire as Petronius Arbiter and Apuleius.¹¹

10 The extremely detailed, multi-layered character of confession in Catholic tradition is famously discussed by Foucault both in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* and in 19 February 1975 lecture at the Collège de France (*History* 3-35; *Abnormal* 167-94).

11 This essay is not focused on Russian popular culture, which went in decidedly different directions. There were, for example, a lot of often obscene and anticlerical oral folk tales collected by Aleksandr Afanasiev (first published in Geneva in 1872 under the title *Русские заветные сказки*). They contain interesting strategies and stylistic devices of dealing with the erotic and the corporeal, such as the use of allegory and Aesopian language. Viktor Shklovsky used Afanasiev's tales to illustrate his famous *ostraneniye* / “defamiliarization”: for example, in depicting coitus using allegories from the animal world. However, these oral folk tales, jokes and anecdotes were either largely ignored by the elite or *a priori* ascribed to the sphere

During this time, there did exist a whole corpus of anonymous “obscene” writing in the Russian language, but it seems to have produced little or no impact upon “official” literature (that is, the literature associated with social and intellectual elites). The infamous author of obscene, scabrous verses, Ivan Barkov (1732-1768), wrote in Russian vernacular using a vast array of the famous *Russkii mat* words and their endless derivatives. Yet he was never officially published, and the way his texts were printed and distributed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be easily compared with the famous “samizdat” of the Soviet dissidents of the 1970s. As Pushkin once said jokingly, whenever censorship is finally abolished in Russia, the first thing to be published will be the complete works of Barkov (Larionova, web source).

Pushkin and his Cult: Sex Discourses after Pushkin

It is a possibility that certain Russian authors dreamt about generating a sexuo-erotic discourse in the Russian language. Yet even Pushkin himself (as Russians like to say, “Pushkin is our everything”) in *Eugene Onegin* (1833) tells his reader that Tatiana’s famous love letter to Onegin was written by the fictional woman in French and that the Russian the author is going to use to render it to his readers is by definition inferior to the original French. Even the greatest Russian poet could feel tongue-tied when he had to describe the love confessions of his heroine who came to be a symbol of Russian womanhood!

Why was the Russian literary discourse of love and sex so underdeveloped even in the secular sphere? One interesting explanation may be that one of the major cultural myths of Russia was the delusional idea of the “chastity of the common Russian people,” fostered by the complete blindness imposed by religious discourse.¹² Once the Russian people are

of scabrous lowlife storytelling, often fascinating to adolescents but overall not worthy of taking seriously. Boris Uspensky provides the additional example of Appolon Grigoryev (1822-1864), a Russian poet, who grew up in a noble family. In his memoirs Grigoryev rues his “too early” exposure to folk tales and jokes heard from the family’s coachman and recalls that they were full of obscenities and strong sexual content, along with anticlericalism. In addition, Afanasiev’s book was forbidden by censors and published abroad: it is safe to suppose that not very many Russian readers could access it even at the end of the nineteenth century (Uspensky 129-150). See also Igor Kon’s “Sexuality and Culture” for more details on the Afanasiev work (Kon & Riordan 16).

12 See an interesting discussion of this phenomenon by Igor Kon and Viktor Yerofeyev at the latter’s radio show Encyclopedia of the Russian Soul:
<http://www.svoboda.org/programs/encl/2005/encl.020505.asp>

figured as eternally chaste, there is no need to speak about sexuality in the Russian language – the unchaste are not Russian and not of the people. Furthermore, any frankness in describing human sexuality via a literary medium might concomitantly be considered as an insult to those chaste common Russians by outsiders to them.¹³ Apart from that, writers who wrote about sex in Russian were running the risk of becoming targets of control by both church and state censors.¹⁴ Needless to say, French-language texts (or Greek ones that were common in the times of Catherine the Second) were beyond this control of indigenous life and expression. A good example of what could have happened to a writer who would dare to compete with the dominant Church for spiritual leadership or simply criticize the Church's patriarchs is the excommunication and anathematization of Leo Tolstoy in 1901.

A wonderful insight into the nature of Pushkin's cult in Russia is provided by Andrei Sinyavsky's (a.k.a. Abram Tertz) *Прогулки с Пушкиным / Strolls with Pushkin* (1975). It is quite remarkable that this long essay remains one of the very few critical attempts to "desacralize" Pushkin, portraying him as a human being with his own strengths and weaknesses and certainly ridiculing the reverence and awe with which this author is treated by Russian/Soviet critics and the reading public.¹⁵ Predictably enough, Tertz was widely hated and misunderstood both inside the Soviet Union and in Russian emigration circles (perhaps most notably denounced by the wrathful Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1984). Even the most oft-quoted passage from the essay was quite meaningfully misinterpreted:

13 Laura Engelstein notes that Russian physicians of the late 19th century were "the last to abandon their populist dreams" in that they "clung to the image of the sexually innocent peasant despite evidence to the contrary uncovered in the course of extensive practical experience" (Engelstein 163). A "presumption of chastity," she goes on to argue in her historical analysis of endemic syphilis in Russia, "governed the conclusions of the numerous observers who attributed sores on the lips and mouths of artisanal workers to communal eating habits." Oral intercourse could never be blamed as the observers believed that "coitus per os ('sapphism')... is not practiced in Russia" (ibid. 195).

14 One might suppose that most Orthodox clerics and lower level state bureaucrats did not know foreign languages as well as aristocrats did. It was thus easy to avoid problems just via writing in a foreign language (e.g., French), not in Russian.

15 One could also recall some other Russian intellectuals of earlier periods who professed a more reserved, levelheaded attitude to Pushkin and tried to question his cult. But many of them (e.g., such poets as Marina Tsvetayeva or Anna Akhmatova) were also guilty of a somewhat hysterical adoration of their idol, bordering on reverence and awe. Tsvetayeva soberly called for remembering Pushkin's "curse of the mouth" (i.e., his frequent use of foul language and taboo words) and the "heat of his lips" (she must have meant Pushkin's sexuality). She also famously wrote elsewhere: "I shake Pushkin's hand, but I don't lick it." However, in her essay "My Pushkin" Tsvetayeva finds herself in the state of exaltation when she ecstatically exclaims that "each of us" (all Russians) has been shot in the abdomen by Dantes (Pushkin's killer in the duel) (Tsvetayeva, web source).

Pushkin ran into great poetry on thin erotic legs and created a commotion. Erotica was his school – above all a schooling in nimbleness – and we are, as a result, indebted to it for the flexibility of the *Eugene Onegin* stanza as well as for other tricks... (*Прогулки* 55).

Sinyavsky would often recall the way his numerous astonished fellow Russian emigrants kept asking him what he meant by Pushkin's "thin legs." After all, as the renowned writer Georgii Vladimov marveled, Pushkin was "a very athletic person" (*Прогулки* 42). The author of the dangerous essay had to explain to him that this was supposed to be a metaphor: "It is some kind of sorcery: the man [Vladimov] wrote the whole novel [based on] a metaphor¹⁶ and [nonetheless] stumbled over those legs" (Ibid.).

In my opinion, Sinyavsky may have used this metaphor because in Pushkin's texts one can very easily observe some kind of "foot fetishism" that seems very strange to Western readers. In *Eugene Onegin*, for instance, he somewhat paradoxically complains that in the whole of Russia, he is unable to "find three pairs of slender female legs" (*Люблю их ножки; только вряд / Найдете вы в России целой / Три пары стройных женских ног...*). Even superficial knowledge of the poet's biography would convince anyone that he has in fact found much more than just "three pairs". The poem's narrator also reveals his desire to touch his undisclosed beloved's legs with his lips (*Евгений Онегин* 22, 23). This is arguably the reason why Andrei Sinyavsky comes up with Pushkin's own metaphoric "thin erotic legs." The on-going argument about Pushkin's use of sexual metaphors, however, also documents in its own way the problems faced by would-be elite Russian authors in crafting a literature that could be assessed as Russian and as applicable to a broad range of human experience, as was being thematized in the Western literatures of the era.

The most obvious reason for Pushkin to start writing about love in Russian could be the fact that his Russian and French were almost coeval, and thus he simply made no difference between the two languages when he wrote - he did not need *Russian* conceptual resources for eroticism, he "just" needed to transpose concepts familiar to him into the Russian language. An apt example of his several plagiarizations from the French is his notorious slightly pornographic long poem *Gavriliada* – very much a free translation into Russian of Evariste de Parny's *La Guerre des Dieux* (1796). In addition, Pushkin seems to be one of the few Russian writers (Nikolai Leskov may be one of the few of his nineteenth-century successors) who felt little or no shame before the "chaste common people." Despite

16 Sinyavsky probably meant Vladimov's novel *Faithful Ruslan* (1975, English translation 1979), in which the narrator is a guard dog in a Soviet gulag labor camp.

being a member of the ruling class, he seemed to be always curious about the life of commoners: peasants (for instance, his own serfs) and merchants. He often wore plain clothes of a Russian “muzhik,” attended village fairs, etc.¹⁷

Pushkin may have been the first Russian author who dreamt about what might happen if state censorship and church control could be somehow lifted, i.e., what kind of a literary discourse of sex and eroticism would then emerge. However, he had no way of knowing that even in the mid-twentieth century his perhaps most faithful disciple and connoisseur of his work, Vladimir Nabokov, would write his *Lolita* in English. One might fantasize that Nabokov, who then somewhat reluctantly translated his novel into Russian, might be a bizarre reincarnation of Tatiana Larina, failing to write about erotic passion in her native tongue and doing it so masterfully in a foreign language.

In the West (France, Britain or Germany), such sexual and erotic discourses in literature were preceded by the medicalization of sexuality. Sex was indeed under control of the Western Catholic church but this control was incomparably looser, or at least more plural, than in Orthodoxy. In fact, at least one form of Western fear and suspicion of sexualities (*sexophobia*) as we know it today developed as a direct result of medicalization (discussed below). Here, then, another contrast between Western and Russian available discourses becomes crucial.

At the time when medicalization started in the West (the mid-nineteenth century), there was no psychiatry in Russia at all (Kannabikh, web source). No scholarly (medical or psychiatric) discourse of sexuality was therefore possible, nor any viable precursors in notion of pastoral care and nuanced psychic reactions, discourses that played significant roles in the emergence of Western psychiatry. After the 1917 October Revolution, certain attempts to create this discourse were made, but they were instantly suppressed by the Bolshevik regime. The Soviet ideological establishment adopted exactly the same strategy for dealing with sexuality discourses as had been so successfully practiced by the Orthodox Church prior to the revolution, that is, *silence*.

17 This Pushkin’s habit has been witnessed by Akulina Skoropostizhnaya and recorded, see, for instance, I.L. Leontiev-Shcheglov’s Notes (web source).

Consequences of the Medicalization of Sexuality: Russia versus Europe

By the end of the nineteenth century, the educated strata of European society were living in the epoch of medicalization of practically all areas of social life (Scull 118-161). Most prominently, medicalization affected the spheres of sexuality, crime, “geniality” (i.e., being a genius) and other “deviant” phenomena. It was tightly linked to, first and foremost, the soaring influence of physician or medical communities that had managed to so successfully intrude into all the spheres of social life.

For my purposes of studying erotic discourses in Russian literature, Michel Foucault’s brilliant analysis of the medicalization of sexuality in his *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* appears to be most attractive and instructive. Foucault argued that medicalization had replaced the moralistic-religious control of pre-Enlightenment Europe and brought about the heyday of psychiatric discourses of sexuality. In consequence, everyone’s attention was drawn to all sorts of pathological and “physiological” aspects of sexual behavior. Various, oftentimes extremely quaint, classifications of sexual deviations emerged.¹⁸ The whole life cycle of a human being from birth to death was sexualized. Doctors encouraged their patients to tell them about their sexual lives – both real and imagined – in smallest detail, in a way that confessors had earlier (*History of Sexuality* 53-73).

The only naturally “healthy” form of sexuality was also delineated at the time, as well – that of a heterosexual married couple, fostering discourses of domesticity that were rising at the time. However, even this form underwent numerous restrictions: a couple’s sexual life now had to take place inside the bedroom forever closed to the outsider’s eyes (and ears). Its only goal was expected to be procreation, as posited by many Christians (*History of Sexuality* 103-114).

All this is widely familiar, but I would like to emphasize a new aspect of Foucault’s concept. He thought that all this bulky psychopathological discourse was employed to control sexualities, and this control bred new forms of sexual violence (for instance, the pathologization of masturbation, according to Foucault, became a variety of sexual violence toward children [*History of Sexuality* 104]) as it endlessly multiplied the recognized types of sexual pathology. On the one hand, it is obvious that literary censorship’s need for vigilance

18 For example, those centered on such “anomalies” and “pathologies” as the “masturbating child,” “hysterical woman,” “perverse adult,” which included the homosexual. The only “normal” form of sexuality was that of a married couple (*History* 103-5).

was enhanced. On the other, this “blooming garden” of sexual pathology also provided fiction writers with inexhaustible material as they set about representing the new pathologies, which had just been created. One just had to open any of the numerous books on sexual pathology and find oneself in a world more extravagant and exotic than that of *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. It can be supposed that, for example, without this development, Joyce would have never been able to focus on Leopold Bloom’s uncanny sexual habits and fantasies in such detail. All the nuanced depictions of defecation acts, voyeuristic peeping, masturbation, etc. found in *Ulysses* (1921) are, after all, unfolded very much along the lines of the sexopathological canon of Joyce’s times. For a reader familiar with the sexological debates of the late nineteenth century (such as the one about homosexual and homoerotic desires), it is immediately clear why Oscar Wilde’s Lord Henry is feasting his eyes on the portrait of a young attractive man in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1893).¹⁹

Writers like Wilde and Joyce were extremely sensitive to the verbal context of their times and absorbed this delicate aroma of sexual pathology with extreme relish, with all the fibers of their conscious and unconscious. This ability holds true especially for authors – again, just like Joyce or Wilde – interested in exploring “the darkest corners of the human soul,” where one can expect to find all sorts of secret urges, down to paraphilias and sexual pathologies.

It is conspicuous that the attention to sexual pathology in Western literature has always followed the lead of medicalization and pathologization of sex by physicians and biologists. Indeed, Nabokov’s *Lolita* could hardly have appeared without US psychiatrists’ obsession with pedophilia preceding it. Great writers arguably made use of the medicalized discourse of sexuality as their material, but this discourse created some striking vantage-points for them. I will take an episode from Joyce’s *Ulysses* as an example of how a logic of representation can parallel a medical/”sexopathological” optic.

In the “Nausicaa” chapter, Leopold Bloom furtively watches a teenage girl named Gerty MacDowell at a Dublin evening beach and masturbates. From the viewpoint of the psychiatry of his times, he suffers from multiple sexual pathologies: voyeurism, infantile sexuality, fetishism (he looks at her stockings and underwear), etc. But Gerty is also in a “pathological condition” at the moment: she apparently has the very premenstrual syndrome

19 See, for example, Foucault’s description of the late 19th century’s change: “Homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories, by which it was medically disqualified” (History 101).

that up to nowadays has been spurring the minds of Western psychiatrists (Caplan 154-168). Joyce must have found it amusing to allow the intrusion of so much sexual pathology into the chapter written in the style imitative of a women's novel (*Ulysses* 346-382).

As desires like Gerty's were pathologized along the lines of what Foucault calls the "hysterization of women's bodies" (*History of Sexuality* 104-105), the medicalization of sexuality as a means of social control created an unprecedented wealth of material for Western writers. To use Max Weber's language, it was an unforeseen and unintended effect of medicalization. The subsequent censoring and banning of such novels as *Ulysses* and *Lolita* are of secondary importance in that regard. It is crucial for my present argument that the expressive capabilities of the literary language, themes, and plot lines were thus significantly enhanced.

In nineteenth-century Russia, the situation was quite different. Psychiatry as an academic discipline began to be taught at the Saint Petersburg Military Medical Academy in 1867 (following a decree of the Russian government). The first course was given by Ivan Balinsky, a pediatric surgeon. His lectures were described as "so bold in their psychological and clinical analysis that [they] could appear as rather brilliant hypotheses than strict scientific analysis" (Kannabikh, web source). This implies that psychiatry in Russia was largely introduced and supported by political authorities, whereas in the West it was promoted through a vigorous initiative of physicians, criminologists and other influential lobbying groups (for instance, judges, social workers, all sorts of "humanistic" intellectuals). In Russia, in consequence, psychiatry would for a long time exist at the fringes of medical science (one version of psychology, in contrast, was earlier officialized in the form of the Pavlov Institute).²⁰

One can, in fact, observe a stunning contrast between the importance of medicine (and psychiatry in particular) in the West and its absolute impotence in Russia, where doctors often were starving in the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that psychiatry was in fact slowly developing and translating Western concepts into Russian academic medical science, and while some doctors were in the long run allowed try to treat sexual pathology, it is possible to claim that no sexopathological discourse *per se* ever emerged in Russia. Even the

²⁰ For a comprehensive history of Russian science and its influence on culture, including philosophical thought and literature, as well as the ways in which biology and medical science were developed in Russia in relation to national culture and society in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, see the second volume of Alexander Vucinic's study *Science in Russian Culture: 1861-1917* (Vucinic 3-34, 234-272, 424-490).

writers who were physicians by background and worked as doctors never paid any serious attention to sexual problems, which were not in the framework of medical practice in the era.²¹ Anton Chekhov (a practicing physician) was very well familiar with the medical practice of his time, which was predominantly focused on being able to provide a minimal amount of food to hospitalized patients rather than diagnose their sexual pathologies: in the few psychiatric clinics people were simply starving (Kannabikh, web source).

In addition, one could argue that the Russian Orthodox Church was part of the state apparatus at the time and exerted a strong influence upon spreading the ideas of sexual pathology. It also directly affected sex education in schools and universities (or the absence thereof). In fact, the very few Russian psychiatrists who existed were locked within their own circles of narrow academic specialists and did not have a chance to intrude into the private lives of Russian citizens. It was only in the early twentieth century that a certain interest in the works of Krafft-Ebing and early Freud emerged in Russia, but this movement was interrupted by World War I and the October Revolution (Kannabikh, web source).²²

After the Revolution, psychiatry had to go through a very difficult epoch. Throughout the whole Soviet period only *three* standard psychiatric hospitals were built. The rest were housed in secondary school buildings, former kindergartens and prison barracks. Therefore, the main means of controlling sexuality was still silence, now manifested physically in a lack of appropriate facilities. As noted above, this strategy had been deeply enrooted in the Russian Orthodox culture, notably in one of its popular offshoots, the “philosophy of the name.” Aleksei Losev, one of its theoreticians, supposed that pronouncing a “name” meant bringing the named to life.²³ It follows that, if we don’t talk about something, it does not exist. Interestingly, the KGB after the Twentieth Communist Party Congress (1956) seemed to intuitively adopt a similar approach. Whatever was being said outside the public sphere, “in the kitchen” of one’s apartment, did not “exist” as a social

21 The limits of Russian medical discourse on prostitution and syphilis and its key differences from the European sexopathological canon of the time are aptly analyzed by Laura Engelstein (*The Key to Happiness* 128-211).

22 The popularity of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1889) and other European works on “sexual psychopathology” of the period in pre-revolutionary Russia is discussed by Evgenii Bershtein in his informative article “*Psychopathia Sexualis* in Turn of the Century Russia: Politics and Genre” (Levitt 414-41).

23 See Losev’s *Filosofia imeni / Philosophy of the Name*, first published in 1927. “Philosophy of the name” was a significant trend in the Russian philosophy of 1910-20s, with Ern, S. Bulgakov, Florensky and Losev its best known proponents.

act, therefore it did not have to be persecuted: in Brezhnev's Soviet Union, for instance, a lot of people were really unhappy about the regime, but as long as they kept their discord relatively private, they were not sent to the Gulags any longer.

This method of controlling sexuality by silencing it proved to be a stunningly efficient tool for censorship compared to Western discourses of sexopathology used to generate oppositional representations of sexuality. In the West, physicians appeared to be "instructing" writers to boldly discuss sex in all of its manifestations (be it for the purpose of its "normalization" or not). Even in today's Russia, none of these speaking positions exist.

A tentative conclusion for the discursive space of sexuality in Russian culture recommends itself. In the West, thanks to the habit of constantly analyzing, discussing, "spying on" one's own and other persons' sexuality, at least the upper middle class has in the course of the twentieth century managed to develop the corresponding linguistic means for making this conversation possible. More than that, they grew accustomed to monitoring for explosions of sexuality in the smallest detail of their lives, psyches, and actions: for instance, distinguishing between clitoral and vaginal orgasms, the orgasm as a result of stimulating the G-spot, etc. Accordingly, this development enriched and enhanced the expressive power of the literary language. In Russia, on the contrary, one could observe the virtual absence of this discourse, which forced the creative writers into having to resolve the complicated task of the *independent formation* of such a discourse. Needless to say, they were doomed to fail and have in fact failed to create a discourse where the complete absence of any elite vocabulary for the topic is the norm. The indicators of this failure can be easily discerned in today Russia's literary scene, which has engaged sexuality primarily in the terms known to folk literature or to specific elite discourses: the anti-erotic, grotesque texts of Vladimir Sorokin and straightforwardly psychiatric descriptions of pathology in the works of his mentor Yuri Mamleyev are amongst the most obvious examples.²⁴

24 By saying that these two authors, Mamleyev and Sorokin, are anti-erotic, I do not mean to undermine their obvious achievements in Russian belles-lettres. The argument is that they have done little or nothing to contribute to the formation of literary discourses of sexuality, which is, as they say in Russia, not so much their fault ("vina") but their trouble ("beda"). It is only in Sorokin's most recent work – such as the novella *Metel' / Snowstorm* (2010) – that one can find less burlesque, travestied representations of the corporeal and the sexual, the desiring and desired body than in his earlier oeuvre (see, for example, the scene of sexual intercourse between the protagonist, Dr Garin, and the miller's wife: *Metel'* 98-108). One might hypothesize that this author's creative philosophy is slowly evolving toward more sympathetic and less grotesque portrayals of sexualities and eroticism.

One other comparison is here important. Foucault's analysis of French, predominantly Catholic, culture includes an argument about the evolution of confession techniques in the Catholic Church into the discourses of sexology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis toward the end of the nineteenth century - an association of pastoral care and psychological states. In his account, this shift from sexuality as a church-monitored discourse into a socially monitored one is directly related to the development of literary discourses of the erotic body as "confession is not a way of getting around a rule of silence... confession and freedom of expression face each other and complement each other" (*Abnormal* 170).

In Russia, this principle of *communicating vessels* allowing for a transition of discourses between literature and religious/sexological sphere simply could not operate because the dominant Russian Orthodox Church did not develop any analog to Catholic confession - Russia lacks exemplars for narratives of the forbidden, and for the culture of guilt, shame, and atonement that went with the confrontations between body and soul that so occupied Catholic clerics. Such exchanges of ideas about the corporeal between artists, literati and intellectuals on the one side and religious *narod* on the other was therefore limited to the former's fascination with the often bizarre sexual practices of such popular sects as the Khlysty, Beguny, Skoptsy, etc. that soared in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries (the Silver Age) - there were essentially no broad-scale social confrontations between classes, groups, or institutions about sexuality.

Conclusion

I have attempted to formulate a brief outline of the genesis and discourse space of suspicion and fear of sexuality in Russian intellectual history and literature, in comparison with its treatments in the West. Additionally, I have discussed some specific examples of how the strategies of silence and evasion evolved throughout the late eighteenth to early twentieth century, as well as certain precursors of these mental attitudes.

Elsewhere I argue that, from Nikolai Gogol to Ivan Bunin and up to the present, "mainstream" Russian literature seems to have adopted the strategic course for *pathologizing and burlesquing sexuality and eroticism*. In other words, the intent of almost any Russian author - be it Gogol in the 1840s with his necrophilia in *Viy*, distorted sexual and gender relationships in *Taras Bulba*, or *The Marriage*, or Sorokin in the late 1990s with Hitler

copulating with Stalin's daughter in *Голубое сало* / *Blue Lard* – has been fundamentally antierotic and/or sexophobic.

To use Bakhtin's terms rather loosely, the heteroglossia of the novelistic discourse in Russia has been invariably short of any articulate voices that would try to refrain from pathologizing or demonizing human sexuality in very distinct and very limited terms. However, there has been little or no interaction between the growing Russian highbrow literary culture and a more sexually unrestrained, often lowbrow culture and criminal, subculture of the era. The only exception one can find in Russian history is the Silver Age when these subcultures seem to have finally met and cross-pollinated each other.

Russia's reading public was thus in a particularly fraught position in the Silver Age, and continues to be so, when it comes to questions of modernization and joining the West: it should not only keep learning to admire Russian literature's canonized figures but also be able to "unlearn" its proclivity for shunning (keeping silent and silencing) and/or distorting (pathologizing or burlesquing) human sexualities. The thrust of this essay, therefore, has been to point out the ways, in which classical and contemporary Russian literature could be held partly answerable for the virtual absence of sound discourses of sexualities in today's Russian culture at large.

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