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Precursors of Lolita: The Adolescent and his/her Sexualized Body in Russian Erotic Writing of the Silver Age and in Emigration

Louis Malle's 1978 film *Pretty Baby*, starring Brooke Shields, Keith Carradine and Susan Sarandon, set in a New Orleans brothel in 1917 during the last few months of legal prostitution, tells a love story of Violet, a 13-year-old budding prostitute, and Bellocq, a young photographer, perhaps in his early thirties. When the film came out, it caused a scandal in the US mainly due to Brooke Shields' (who was 12 at the time) full nudity, but also because of its lurid main theme: adolescent sexuality and a sexual relationship between a pubescent girl and an adult man. The shock value of the film was enhanced by the French director's noticeable "estrangement" in his manner of presenting the events, without really condemning such horrifying societal sores as child prostitution and sex with minors. However, Malle did not seem to glorify these phenomena either.¹

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¹ Daring films and literary works like Malle's *Pretty Baby* or Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955) shock their audiences on both sides of the Atlantic by crossing the lines of the permissible in moral-legal terms and thus in many ways anticipate contemporaneous/subsequent studies of sexualities providing our deeper understanding of sexual attraction and allowing for certain additional possibilities whenever two consenting partners find themselves passionately attracted to one another. Malle's film and Nabokov's novel thus arguably raise the cultural weight of cinema/literature as they enrich the public's awareness of such controversial social phenomena as a possibility of consensual relationships whenever one of the partners happens to be considerably younger

Prior to Malle's film, the theme of adolescent sexuality and of a sexual relationship between a pubescent teenager and an adult had been explored by Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* and Stanley Kubrick's film of the same name. US audiences were also better prepared to accept *Pretty Baby* because it was marketed as "historical fiction." In other words, it was received as a "shock flick" and a historical drama with little relevance to the present. Very few reviewers seem to have noticed that it was a film about human sexuality, including that of female adolescents.

As with prostitution in New Orleans, the year of 1917 in Russia became the dividing line between a relative liberalization of attitudes to sexuality in 1890–1917 and Bolshevik onslaught on the sexual and the erotic that culminated, in the early perestroika times, with a Leningrad school teacher telling a TV audience in the USSR and US that "we have no sex in the USSR."² True, in the initial several years of the new regime, while Lenin was still surrounded by relatively freethinking people such as Bonch-Bruевич and Kollontai, certain steps to establish equality between the sexes and a relative sexual freedom were made but they were quickly reversed by establishing a totalitarian regime characterized by oppressive control of pleasurable sexuality seen as a threat to its existence. The nature of such control was perhaps best imagined in the well-known dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell.

In 1917 Russian literature forked into two fully autonomous traditions: Soviet and emigrant. It is the latter that I am going to briefly discuss in this essay. In trying to create an anti-utopian literary discourse of sexualities and eroticism the émigré writers had

than the legal age of consent via representing such "illicit love" in a cinematographic or novelistic fictional medium.

² The woman, Lyudmila Ivanova, made this glorious statement in a 1986 Boston-Leningrad "television bridge" hosted by Phil Donahue and Vladimir Pozner. She was quite accurate, in a sense: "sex" was almost a swear word in the USSR, associated with "pernicious Western influence" and was commonly replaced by the euphemistic "love" in a "cultured" conversation. But she clearly did not imply that there was no *intercourse* between men and women in the Soviet Union. She just wanted to avoid the "loaded" Western term for it. See the Russian Wikipedia for a complete quote: http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/B_CCCP_секса_нет

several creative options and sources. One of these, as has been noted many times, was getting closer to Western modernisms: from Joyce and Kafka (as in the case of Nabokov) to Dos Passos and Henry Miller (as in the case of Georgii Ivanov, his contemporary, a poet and prose writer). Another strategy (oftentimes combined with the first one) was to look back at the legacy of Russia's Silver Age and even earlier periods for voices that would seem to deviate from the Russian literary norm of silencing and distorting human sexuality. It was necessary, in other words, to look beyond the Gogol-Dostoevsky and Turgenev-Tolstoy lines of succession in Russian literature.

The Legacy of Pushkin: "All Ages are Resigned to Love"

The thrust of the Russian utopian tradition — both in literature and in religious philosophy — has always been to dispense with human sexuality, to abolish the sexual act and replace it with other, spiritual, non-corporeal forms of communication between man and woman. In this environment, the ultimate taboo — and the gravest transgression — was a representation of sexual intercourse or even simply a mutual attraction between a male and female of different age groups — most prominently, if one of the partners was much younger than the other. Conversely, writers like Aleksandr Pushkin and Nikolai Leskov, represent an alternative sub-tradition of anti-utopianism, i. e., of trying to imagine sexual relationships in more sympathetic, less sexophobic terms.

The anti-utopian sub-tradition, as is now widely believed by critics, starts with Pushkin's macabre *Tale of the Golden Cockerel* (1834),³ in which Dadon, an old and lazy tsar, relies on the advice of an old Skopets, or a castrate, in order to protect his kingdom from enemies. The Golden Cockerel (clearly standing for the genitals of the castrate living a life of their own) one day points in a direction where there is no enemy but a tent with an exotic and beautiful Tsarina of Shemakha. The old tsar thus falls a victim to his own nascent sexuality, as Pushkin suggests to his readers that one

³ For a detailed argument, see Etkind, *Sodom i Psikheia* 135.

should not live an asexual life and use castrates as confidants. Dadon's passionate love for the youthful Tsarina of Shemakha ruined his friendship with the castrate and brought about his violent murder by the ruthless cockerel. Dostoevsky may have had this stanza in mind when he was creating Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, his most memorable libertine, desperately pursuing Grushen'ka, a voluptuous young woman, and ending his life as a victim of "deathly passion."

Examples of sex partners/lovers of different age groups abound in Russian literature. Father Sergii in late Tolstoy's eponymous novella was an aristocrat but now is a celibate reclusive monk in his mid-fifties, famous all over Russia for his chastity and healing prowess. Despite his age, he is a good-looking man of a youthful appearance. A few years ago, he axed his own index finger using the shock of pain to quell his lust for a lascivious woman, but contrary to what Freudian critics have said about it, obviously failed to emasculate himself: some time later, the recluse is seduced by his own 22-year-old patient, an insane but voluptuous young woman, in a stunningly absurd and grotesque scene.⁴

In the Silver Age, Fyodor Sologub in his detailed and largely sympathetic portrayal of an illicit love affair between a young woman Lyudmilochka and the pubescent gymnasium student Sasha Pylnikov (the 1902 novel *The Petty Demon*) pioneered portraying a sexualized adolescent in national belles-lettres. Shortly thereafter Aleksandr Kuprin in his novel *Sulamith* made use of a biblical allegory to present a doomed love affair between a middle-aged man and a 13-year-old girl, albeit in the exoticized setting of ancient Israel. Finally, in Nabokov's *Lolita* a man in his mid-thirties

⁴ The novella was completed in 1898, but Tolstoy never published it in his lifetime. He wrote to Chertkov that it is really not so much about "struggle with lust," which is just an "episode" of it, but about a "struggle with fame" (*Собрание сочинений* 475). But Sergii is much more successful in taming the latter than the former, as he cannot resist the charms of the girl almost three times younger than himself.

Tolstoy seems to be hinting that concupiscence is invincible and, whenever an opportunity presents itself, a human being cannot really keep it in check. Not even the same axe that he used to chop his finger off seven years ago is of any help this time (*Отец Сергий* 439–440).

does realize the deadliness of “passion’s imprint” as his “sad” infatuation with a precocious teenage girl culminates in (self)destruction and death.⁵

What exactly is a common point between all these sexual attractions, affairs, infatuations, loves and/or relationships? Most importantly, it is a vast age difference between the partners. Why did all these authors, starting with Pushkin, choose to portray lovers of different ages? Probably, among other goals, in order to create a shock effect, sometimes for the sake of parody or satire of Russian society. At the same time, they all seem to have concurred with Pushkin’s observation in *Onegin* that all ages are “resigned to love” or, in other words, are capable of experiencing it, enjoying it, albeit in the old age “its footprint is sad” (*Evgenii Onegin* 201).

If we pay attention to the way these infatuations and affairs are presented before and after the Silver Age period, we can clearly observe an evolution (or even a revolution?) from burlesque portrayals, in which the fatal passion is a pathology, a horrifying aberration (as in the case of Dostoevsky’s “pedophiles” Stavrogin and Svidrigailov) to finally depathologizing it almost fully, that is, finding a way to portray it compassionately, sympathetically (even if its “footprint” is, as ever, “sad”) as in Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and its predecessor, his Russian-language novella *The Enchanter* (1939).⁶ One can also notice that this turn happened during and

⁵ Viktor Erofeev, a contemporary author and critic, suggests an intriguing parallel between the Rutilova-Pylnikov love affair and Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert’s infatuation with Lolita, as both are among the few representations of “forbidden passion” in Russian literature (*Лолита* 8). I concur with Erofeev that Sologub’s novel may have been amongst the numerous sources for *Lolita*, but it should be borne in mind that Lyudmila is a very young woman, possibly in her early twenties, while H. H. is a thirty-six-year-old man. In addition, Sologub’s use of the characters’ genders (a young woman versus a pubescent boy) is less scandalous than Nabokov’s, whose H. H. has often been referred to as a “rapist” and a “pedophile.”

⁶ It is not part of my argument here that Rozanov, Sologub, Kuprin, Ivanov or Nabokov intended to depathologize pedophilia, hebephilia or any other sexual disorders. They certainly understood the complexity of these “deviances.” What they seem to have tried to imagine in a literary medium was a possibility of love and affection between persons of different age groups — and especially with one partner being an adolescent, while the other partner sometimes, as in the case of Nabokov’s Arthur of *The Enchanter*, clearly someone

immediately after Russia's Silver Age and was prompted by a totally autonomous development of Russian literature in exile — largely a “creolized,” hybridized literature, very much a product of cross-pollination with Western naturalisms, expressionisms and modernisms, especially French, British and American. Critics usually point out that it is unthinkable to ignore, for example, the influence of Emile Zola on Aleksandr Kuprin's *The Pit*, a serialized novel about prostitutes, or Henry Miller's formative impact upon Georgii Ivanov's tour de force *The Decay of the Atom* (1938), or the multiple allusions to James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the text of *Lolita*. What seems to be sometimes underestimated in, or even missing from, these critical discussions is the way all these works are enrooted in their own autochthonous Russian tradition.

Lyudmilochka Rutilova and Sasha Pylnikov: Sologub's Pioneering Couple

This process of depathologizing sexual attraction between very young people, or partners of different age groups, may well have started with Vasilii Rozanov's famous prescription for an antidote against masturbation and prostitution in the first “Basket” of his *Fallen Leaves* (“onanism” was heavily pathologized at the time, while prostitution was also seen as not so much a socio-psychological sore but more of a problem of biological degeneration):

A survey has shown that roughly from the 6th grade of gymnasium students enter the stage of onanism alternating with prostitution. One or the other. If not one, then the other. But aren't *both* awful? [It is imperative that]... not only marriage between gymnasium students of both sexes should be *allowed* but that it be made *compulsory* for 16-year-old boys and 14.5 year-old girls (to make sure their *imagination*s are not spoiled yet)... and only upon this condition they should be able to get their graduation certificates. Indeed, “dream” and “romance” could well be placed inside marriage and occur “later on” in wedlock. (*Опавшие листья* 237)

compulsively attracted to pubescent girls.

At roughly the same time, in 1908, Kuprin published his above-mentioned novel *Sulamith*, which in this Rozanovian light appears to be an illustration of the thinker's radical ideas.⁷ Even earlier than that, in 1902, Fyodor Sologub published his magnum opus, *The Petty Demon*. The novel is built around a large number of grotesque and burlesque characters, especially female ones. There are two notable exceptions: Lyudmilochka Rutilova and her secret lover, the pubescent gymnasium student Sasha Pylnikov.

Sologub purposefully and consistently presents Lyudmila as the antipode of Peredonov and his wife Varvara: she appreciates natural desires, likes to dress up and look sexually appealing in her shorter skirts and laced stockings. To employ Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, if this provincial town, the setting of the novel, can be seen as a model "intellectual field" of Russian society, she is a "heretic" in many ways.

Lyudmila's infatuation with Sasha is called "love" by the narrator (in the Russian context, *lyubov'* is often seen as a spiritually endowed kinship of souls, by no means a young woman's illicit passion for a teenage boy) but, as Lyudmila herself confides to Sasha, she doesn't believe in the existence of the soul as she "has never seen it with her own eyes" (to question the existence of the "soul" is quite a blasphemous statement for a Russian!). Her attraction to Sasha seems purely physical, as her "love-map"⁸ is definitely centered on boys in their mid-teens. She is definitely not a "pedophile" but the object of her passion is considerably below

⁷ In the novel, Kuprin decided to turn to the Old Testament's *Song of Songs* and retell the love-story of King Solomon and a maiden from the town of Shunem (the present Sulam). *Song of Songs* is the most erotic part of the Bible: a romantic love affair between the king of Israel and a girl of low social standing must have looked like an attractive story to retell at a time when Russian storytelling finally opened itself up to such seemingly artless but sexually charged plots. Indeed, Kuprin's short novel would have seemed a little too melodramatic take on a trite biblical anecdote, had it not been for one eerie touch, one little nuance that the writer added to it: his Sulamith is just *thirteen* years old, whereas Solomon who finds the "love of his life" in her is about forty-five.

⁸ *Lovemap*, according to John Money, is "a developmental representation or template in the mind and in the brain depicting the idealized lover and the idealized program of sexueroetic activity projected in imagery or actually engaged in with that lover" (*Lovemaps* 291).

the official age of consent. In sum, we learn a great deal about Lyudmila's sexual preferences from the text. First of all, she likes not just Sasha but attractive boys of his age:

"The very best age for boys," Lyudmila said, "is from fourteen to fifteen. He still can't do anything and doesn't understand in a genuine way, but he's already beginning to have premonitions of everything, definitely of everything. And then he hasn't a disgusting beard." (*The Petty Demon* 169)

It is interesting to note that despite all her attraction to Sasha's body, she does not seem keen on consummating their relationship, preferring to indulge in what she calls "innocent caresses" (in today's vocabulary, one would probably refer to it as "petting"). In this, Lyudmila does echo Nabokov's Humbert Humbert who at the beginning of his infatuation with Lolita did not really entertain thoughts of having sexual intercourse with her.

Lyudmila is obsessed with nude male adolescent bodies but, as she can never see much of those, she enjoys watching teenage boys walk around the streets barefoot:

Lyudmila was gripped by an impatient desire to see him [Sasha] again, but she was annoyed to think that she would see him dressed. How stupid that little boys don't go around naked! Or at least barefoot, like the street urchins in the summer [perhaps homeless or of poor, lower class families — A. L.], at whom Lyudmila loved to look because they were going around barefoot and at times with their legs left bare quite high.

"It's just as though it were shameful to have a body," Lyudmila thought, "so that even little boys hide it." (*The Petty Demon* 144–145)

The last insight is extremely important for understanding the novel: without Lyudmila's hedonism, her love of the male body (albeit a pubescent one) and almost an entire absence of grotesqueries in the way Sologub presents her to the reader, the novel would have been quite a different book: more of a Gogolian anatomy (Menippean satire) of Russian educated classes' lifestyles set in a provincial town. But *The Petty Demon* is a little broader and more ambitious than just that — and largely thanks to the introduction of Lyudmila and Sasha.

The other character, Pylnikov, is also extremely important. One can safely suppose that never before in Russian letters one would have dared to portray an adolescent, a boy of fourteen or fifteen, as a *sexual* being: not a victim of sexual abuse but a person who has his first love affair with a considerably older young woman and actually enjoys it. Just like Lyudmila, Sasha is not a caricature of any sort; his persona is presented thoughtfully and with much of narratorial/authorial sympathy.

Most importantly, Sasha Pylnikov's adolescent sexuality is at the center of the author's sympathetic attention. He seems to have his own conscious goals in pursuing the relationship, but the narrator always remains dubious about his corporal and carnal desires, emphasizing his innocence/virginity and bashfulness. Sologub also constantly (albeit obliquely) reminds his reader that Lyudmila is a very young woman, focusing on her tender skin, youthful voice, and so forth: the two lovers may have been only six or seven years apart, and Sologub is conscious that this small age difference — along with the fact that Lyudmila the older partner is a woman — will help his couple get away with their less than chaste kisses, caresses and light petting sessions, that is, would not provoke his Russian readers as a pairing of an older man and adolescent girl would have.

Aleksei Remizov recalls in his memoir about Vasiliï Rozanov that at one evening meeting in Remizov's house the thinker remarked: "During the minute of copulation... Beast turns into Man... — How about Man [when he is copulating]? Into an angel? Or, would you say [someone inquired]... — *Man [turns into] God* [Rozanov responded]" (Remizov 230; emphasis added). It is quite amusing to note that among the guests that night Fyodor Sologub is listed. The meeting took place on October 1, 1905, just three years after *The Petty Demon* was finished. A lot of ink has been spilled over documenting Sologub and Rozanov's mutual antipathy (see, for instance, A. Danilevsky's essay "About Rozanov as a Literary Type"), but let us compare the Rozanov adage with the following quote from the Solobub novel:

Lyudmila was hastily kissing Sasha's arms from the shoulders to the fingers, and Sasha, plunged into a passionate and cruel rev-

erie, did not attempt to remove them. Lyudmila's kisses were infused with the warmth of adoration, *as if her burning lips were kissing not a boy, but a god-youth* in some thrilling and mysterious ritual of the blossoming Flesh. (*The Petty Demon* 235; emphasis added)

One can argue, therefore, that, whatever personal antipathy they felt to each other, both authors were on the same wavelength regarding pleasurable sexuality: both clearly saw their task in de-pathologizing sexual desire, liberating it from trademark Russian reticence and/or scoffing, and, in the case of Sologub's novel, presenting both partners as possessing agency of his or her own, not reducing the relationship to a victim v. perpetrator model, so familiar to Russian readers from Dostoevsky.

This passage also reveals that Sasha, just like Lyudmila, has sadomasochistic dreams and desires whenever he is making out with his girlfriend. However, these desires do not imply that either of them is a compulsive masochist or a sadist; Sologub's narrator is careful to assure us that it is just one of the many sexual fantasies the two secret lovers have. Again, the authorial unwillingness to pathologize this mutually affectionate relationship is unprecedented in Russian writing: for instance, Lev Tolstoy did portray a very "healthy" Russian family through Levin and Kitty, but their relationship was represented as totally sexless, devoid of any carnal desires; it is not quite clear how Kitty could get pregnant in this ideal family.

The Petty Demon stands out from a today's perspective as a pioneering Russian modernist novel that combines certain traits of the classic realistic tradition in its reticence, evasiveness and burlesque in representing carnality and eroticism with a breakthrough sympathetic portrayal of an illicit love affair between a teenage boy and a very young woman in her twenties. After Sologub's novel was published, it was no longer feasible for a Russian *littérateur* to deny or silence the existence of sex for pleasure and shy away from depicting sexual "perversions" and "deviances." *Peredonov*, or *peredonovschina*, became a byword for being a sexual hypocrite: lascivious and depraved in thoughts and urges but at the same time committed to seeing the carnal and the cor-

poreal as an incorrigible aberration.⁹ What exactly was the way Sasha and Lyudmila's relationship influenced subsequent literary endeavors?

Toward a Definition of "Erotic Fiction"

I suggest that the lasting influence of Sologub's, Kuprin's (of the novel *Sulamith*) and Rozanov's pioneering thoughts and characters took at least two divergent paths, best illustrated by two Russian-language works of the late 1930s — Georgii Ivanov's *The Decay of the Atom* (1938) and Vladimir Nabokov's *The Enchanter* (1939). However, I would argue that these two paths do converge since both epitomize the process of modernization of the discourses of sex and eroticism in Russian post-Silver Age émigré literature.

Both literary works could perhaps be classified as "erotic," meaning that they are focused on sex and eroticism and in them human sexuality is not travestied but portrayed with authorial sympathy. The problem is, however, that the terms "erotic novel" or "erotic fiction" are becoming increasingly debased in Slavic studies. Just like the meaningless word combination "literary pornography" has often been a way of referring to some of the most accomplished works of fiction,¹⁰ the label "erotic fiction" is inten-

⁹ I argue elsewhere that Peredonov may have influenced Nabokov's conception of Humbert Humbert, one of the best-developed, convincing characters of all his oeuvre. H. H.'s sexual hypocrisy, his pharisaic and egotistic urge for comfort and convenience in matters of sexual love and attraction, and his nasty tendency to blackmail his own sex partner (the pubescent Lolita) make him akin to Sologub's protagonist (not only to Liudmilochka Rutilova who indulges in complex sexual games with a pubescent boy — the parallel that Viktor Yerofeev highlights).

However, it must be borne in mind that H. H. is obsessed with Lolita, a reincarnation of his childhood love Annabel, and his Peredonov-like hypocrisy may in part be explained by the sheer intensity of his "mad" infatuation with the girl.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Vladislav Khodasevich's essay «О порнографии» / "About Pornography" (1932). Khodasevich was a poet and critic who influenced many younger contemporaries of his in the Russian émigré circles in Ber-

ded to denote any work that contains scenes of sexual intercourse, regardless of how they are presented. This can be quite confusing and misleading.

For example, Aleksandr Etkind in a recent article on contemporary Russian literature calls Vladimir Sorokin's *Тридцатая любовь Марины* / *Marina's Thirtieth Love* (1984, first published 1995) an "erotic novel" ("Stories of the Undead" 653). Here is an excerpt from the first scene of the book, in which Marina, a 30-year-old music teacher, has sex with one of her boyfriends Valentin, a 52-year-old pianist:

"A-a-a-a-a," Valentin froze for a moment and then moaned bending the knees of his pillar-like legs.

Marina had hardly managed to squeeze one of the ostrich-like balls of his enormous shrinking scrotum that was turning violet when his thick sperm pushed its way into her mouth.

Squeezing his penis rhythmically, Marina clung to its head with her lips, greedily swallowing the arriving tasty liquid. (Sorokin 7)

This satiric novel is an anatomy, or Menippean satire, of late Soviet life, just like many of Sorokin's novels of the 1980s, including *Norma* and *Ochered'*. But, as seen from this fragment, it is certainly *anti-erotic*: sexuality is represented in grotesque burlesques aimed at shocking the writer's "samizdat" readers (in the 1980s) and also as a reaction to the extreme sterility and sexophobia of Soviet literature and culture. This reaction can be described as *stiob* (of which the Gogolian and Dostoevskian *glumleniye* was a

lin — most notably, Vladimir Nabokov who adored the poet and considered him the greatest one of his time (*Strong Opinions* 89, 223). It can be argued that the article "O pornografii" was known to Nabokov and may have paved the way to his conceiving of *Lolita*.

Khodasevich's argument is that there are no pornographic plots or works of literature as such; there exist only pornographic aims and intentions of an author who employs certain stylistic "devices" to stimulate his/her reader sexually. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the style of a literary work, not its plot or themes. Khodasevich warns critics that it is dangerous to call a literary work or even parts of this work "pornographic" (unless it is *aimed* at "arousing the instinct"), regardless of the amount and explicitness of erotic scenes therein (Khodasevich 296-8).

predecessor¹¹), one of the most popular intellectual attitudes of many Russian intellectuals to their environment from the early 1980s to this day. For Etkind, in any event, the absurd grotesqueries of representing sex in this novel (such as the woman greedily swallowing the tasty semen) are not noteworthy, which results in a crucial misreading and mislabeling of Sorokin's postmodernist text.

G. Ivanov's *The Decay of the Atom*
as a Key Text of Russian Modernism

On the one hand, it is difficult to compare the Ivanov and Nabokov texts, as they are vastly different in their respective designs and stylistic execution. *The Decay of the Atom*, a collection of philosophic "poems in prose," is a very ambitious and accomplished work of modernist literature, the closest Russian modernism has ever got to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*, as well as Joyce's *Ulysses*, Proust, Dos Passos and Henry Miller. The book far exceeds the limits of the label "erotic prose," being too many other things at the same time: an autobiographical confession, a poem in prose, an extravagant lecture on the history of Russian literature, from Pushkin and Gogol to Tolstoy, Rozanov and Andrei Bely. Nabokov's novella appears to be much more narrow thematically and reads like an early draft to his novel *Lolita*,

¹¹ The word *stiob* is derived by back-formation from the verb *stebat'* / 'to whip' (it is also used in the figurative sense meaning 'rip on someone or something': e. g. a Russian would say something like: "In this movie Tarantino 'stebyoť' mass culture"). Here is an 'old' but more or less adequate definition of *stiob*: "Stiob is a kind of intellectual mockery that is expressed as public or printed lowering of [verbal] symbols through their demonstrative use in a parodical context" (*Znamya*. #1. 1994. 166).

Contemporary critic Dmitrii Galkovsky suggests that intellectual communication between any two given Russians is *impossible* in principle: he claims that only a "subtle *scoffing* of your opponent" is feasible in a Russian-language intellectual community. Indeed, in Galkovsky's judgment, the Russian word for "scoffing" or "jeering" — *glumlēniye* — is extremely hard to adequately translate into English; it is one of those words that, in Galkovsky's opinion, describe Russia's "national essence" (Galkovsky 135, 192–193, 249).

written some 15 years later and in a different language and cultural setting. However, these two highly experimental, modernizing texts of Russian literature echo each other in a variety of ways, both biographical and poetic. In addition, both are anti-utopian in that they are focused on human sexuality as their authors aim to break free from the confines of Russian literary reticence and fear of sex and eroticism.

Ivanov's narrator (or "lyrical hero") is clearly a "sociopath" and a "paraphile" obsessed with "deviant" sexual attractions (for example, he certainly has pedophilic urges¹² and a number of fetishes, such as a female foot fetish, well familiar to Russian readers of Pushkin). Most of his fantasies are, however, not based on his real life experience or expectations for the future but on his masturbatory, autoerotic reveries. He is a middle-aged Russian intellectual, for whom his émigré existence in Paris is a torture: he clearly cannot have his ends meet, but his creative imagination continues to work, largely thanks to the "creolization" that his Russianness has experienced in exile. At the same time, he remains to a considerable extent too much immersed in the Russian cultural context, that is, to paraphrase Dmitrii Galkovsky's adage on Nabokov, he is not quite able to "strangle Russian thinking inside himself" (*Бесконечный тупик* 418). For example, he remains bitterly misogynistic ("women are either prostitutes or proud of themselves that they have managed to refrain from prostitution" [*Распад атома* 255]).¹³ But via his obsessive attention to sexuality, numerous precise and detailed naturalistic descriptions of sexual acts the narrator wants his readers to realize that his intent is to modernize Russian belles-lettres, to liberate it from its age-old complexes and phobias.

¹² To be more precise, the narrator is not a pedophile but an *ephebophile* in most of his erotic fantasies: he has a strong sexual interest in post-pubescent young women of sixteen to eighteen years old.

¹³ Early in the text the narrator declares that sexual love in this book will be presented from a man's point of view, as a woman's one "doesn't exist." Woman, he argues, is just the "body and reflected light": "Only man's standpoint can exist. There is no such thing as woman's standpoint. Woman, as such, does not exist at all. She is the body and reflected light" (*Распад атома* 254–5).

It is my argument that in the literary medium *The Decay of the Atom* appears to be the most successful reappraisal of the Gogolian tradition of silencing and burlesquing sexual and erotic experiences. It is at the same time an anti-utopian text, in which socio-political freethinking is finally reconciled and intermingled with sexual and erotic freethinking. And it is a text that represents the project of his generation of authors: finding the limits and applications of Russian literary traditions for the present age — a project that allows us new insights into Nabokov's work — especially *The Enchanter* and *Lolita*.¹⁴

Nabokov's *The Enchanter* as a Response to *The Decay of the Atom*

Nabokov and Ivanov belonged to different literary camps (of Berlin and Paris respectively) and had a tempestuous relationship as fellow authors, constantly attacking each other's work. When *The Decay of the Atom* was published in 1938, it was predictably reviewed negatively by V. Sirin a. k. a. Vladimir Nabokov. The reviewer was especially upset with Ivanov's "banal descriptions of urinals that can embarrass only the most inexperienced readers" (Nikolyukin 42). It is quite symptomatic that Nabokov picked "urinals" out of so many unsavory images of *The Decay of the Atom* for his denunciation of the book: this author seems to have been really ill-at-ease with all representations of the physiology of human excretions.¹⁵

¹⁴ I explore the Gogol connection and other aspects of *The Decay of the Atom* in "Exploring the Impetus of Russia's Silver Age: Representations of Sexuality and Eroticism in Aleksandr Kuprin, Ivan Bunin and Georgii Ivanov." *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 31 (Spring 2010). <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/31/lalo31.shtml>

¹⁵ Indeed, why didn't Nabokov single out the dead rat afloat in the garbage can or lengthy descriptions of suicides' corpses or multiple rape fantasies of the narrator as examples of "embarrassing" and disgusting elements of the book (*Распад атома* 257, 260, 262)? The answer may well be simple: although he clearly was at ease with explicit depictions of violence and eroticism, this author was rather prudish about representing the corporeal and physiological

Despite these differences and possible mutual animosity between Nabokov and Ivanov, Aleksandr Dolinin, a Nabokov scholar, believes that the Russian-language novella *The Enchanter* was largely a response to the “challenge” of *The Decay of the Atom*, as the Nabokov novella argues that Ivanov’s “global hideousness” can be transformed by “harmonious art.” The critic also notes some direct intertextual echoing between the two texts (Dolinin 156–158).

Indeed, explicit and implicit parallels between the two works are conspicuous. In Ivanov’s “poem in prose,” there is a character called the “[government] minister who signed the Treaty of Versailles” and who fell in love with a young girl and eventually went to jail on corruption charges caused by this adulterous affair (perhaps this was Ivanov’s distorted, largely fictional account of Britain’s ex-prime minister Lloyd George’s extramarital liaison with Frances Stevenson, his secretary). The narrator compares this man’s fall from grace with an “experienced and old” rat that was careless enough to eat the poison and die:

How could the minister... in his old age be caught stealing because of a little girl? ... A little girl [appears] all of a sudden, her stockings, knees, soft warm breath, a soft pink vagina — and the Treaty of Versailles and all his regalia are gone. The defamed old man is dying in his prison bed. (*Паснад атома* 268)

Despite the fact that Ivanov’s minister is unable to resist the fatal attraction and ends up destroying his life and career, the writer is far from blaming him for that. Rather, he purports to show how sexuality works, how firm its grip on a person’s thoughts and actions is.

This parallel may well be more than accidental, if one looks more carefully at Nabokov’s history than at his myth. In “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” Nabokov claims that

functions, both in his own work and in the work of others. In his lectures on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example, he would criticize Joyce for relishing the scenes of Bloom’s defecation, arguing those were redundant and unnecessary for the book he called the leading masterpiece of the century (*Lolita Annotated* lii-liii).

the first little throb of *Lolita* went through me in late 1939 or early 1940, in Paris, at a time when I was laid up with a severe attack of intercostals neuralgia... The initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: the sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage. (*Lolita Annotated* 311)

In other words, although Nabokov a. k. a. Sirin had wrathfully dismissed Ivanov's long poem in prose, he seems to have taken off right where Ivanov stopped: he decided to have the "minister" paint the picture of the bars of his prison cell.

To use Nabokov's language, the "first throb" of *Lolita* may as well have gone through him upon reading (and badmouthing) Ivanov's *The Decay of the Atom*. Both authors saw deviant sexuality as a cage with iron bars, which helps explain the compassion and humanity, with which they depict their paraphilic characters (the lustful minister and an avatar of Gogol's Bashmachkin in Ivanov; Arthur "the Enchanter" and Humbert Humbert in Nabokov).

The first reincarnation of the minister is the unnamed protagonist of *The Enchanter* (in some early drafts he was named Arthur). Just like H. H., he is a Central European of some sort of an intellectual profession. He is about 40 years old. The plot is very simple and indeed resembles that of the later novel *Lolita* (it could easily be read as a *mise-en-abyme* / a story within a story, had it been placed inside the novel). The man is attracted to young pubescent girls of around twelve, but has never had any sexual relationships with any of them. He meets an ailing widow, perhaps French, of about his age that is about to die. Her 12-year-old nymphet-like daughter, quite predictably, captures his imagination. He marries the dying woman and, as soon as she dies, the man gains custody of the child and goes traveling with her. In a hotel room, in the middle of the night, he attempts to touch the sleeping girl's body and achieve an orgasm by rubbing his erect penis against her thigh (the penis is black-humorously likened to a magician's wand), but she suddenly wakes up, sees his erection and starts screaming hysterically. In an ensuing almost *Anna Karenina*-like finale, the Enchanter fights his way to the street and is run over by a passing streetcar or, possibly, suburban train.

Dmitri Nabokov, the writer's son and translator of the novella, compares its heroine, really not much of an autonomous agent, with Lolita, for whom she was the main forerunner:

Dolores Haze may, as Nabokov says, be "very much the same lass" as the Enchanter's victim, but only in an inspirational, conceptual sense. In other ways the earlier child is very different — perverse only in the madman's eyes; innocently incapable of anything like the Quilty intrigue; sexually unawakened and physically immature. (*The Enchanter* 127)

The novella, according to D. Nabokov's afterword, "does contain what might be called the 'central theme' (if little else) of *Lolita*" (*The Enchanter* 126). However, he is quick to downplay the connection between its unnamed protagonist and Humbert Humbert, calling the enchanter a contemptible "cynic," a "criminal pedophile," and a "madman": "Like certain other Nabokov's works, *The Enchanter* is the study of madness seen through the madman's mind." The girl is "relegated forever to the category of very distant relative" of Lolita (*The Enchanter* 111–115, 126).

Humbert is surely a more complex character, one of whose sources was a petty Ukrainian landowner's memoir *Confession sexuelle d'un Russe du Sud, né vers 1870* (1912), which the British sexologist Havelock Ellis appended to his collected writings. According to Dmitri, Nabokov read Ellis no earlier than 1948, which means the sexologist could have influenced the conception of *Lolita*, rather than *The Enchanter* (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 201–202).¹⁶

¹⁶ Henry Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), nicknamed the "English Freud," was a psychologist, sexologist and literary critic, remembered now mainly for his pioneering work on autoerotism, homosexuality, etc.

There is no evidence that Nabokov had been familiar with Ellis's work before his friend Edmund Wilson sent him Ellis's collected writings in 1947 but it is conceivable that Nabokov, a voracious reader, read his university textbook *Psychology of Sex* (1933) in the 1930s, as he was working on *The Enchanter*. In the textbook, Ellis defines two types of pedophiles: mentally disabled people and refined intellectuals (Galinskaya, web resource). As he was creating both Arthur and H. H., Nabokov arguably combined the two types into one imaginary character: for instance, H. H. is both a sophisticated scholar and a patient of psycho-neurological clinics throughout his life (including his last days). "You have to

I would argue, nonetheless, that connections between Arthur and Humbert are more real and important than it seemed to the writer's son and translator. We remember from *Lolita* that H.H. comes full circle and partially redeems himself when he eventually finds his Lolita, now married and pregnant Mrs. Dolly Schiller, and all of a sudden feels still desperately in love with her. When Arthur envisages his future cohabitation with his nymphet, he is far from his usual cynicism as well. More than that, his ruminations can hardly be those of a madman:

As he imagined the coming years, he continued to envision her as an adolescent — such was the carnal postulate... He realized... that the gradual progression of successive delights would assure natural renewals of his pact with happiness... Against the light of that happiness, no matter what age she attained — seventeen, twenty — her present image would always transpire through her metamorphoses, nourishing their translucent strata from its internal fountainhead. And this very process would allow him... to savor each unblemished stage of her transformations. (*The Enchanter* 74—75)

We do know that the protagonist was unable to live up to his reveries and plans of mutual gratification in their future relationship, but it is crucial to realize that at least he had toyed with the idea. This circumstance contradicts viewing him as a cynical and merciless sexual predator who abuses the pubescent girl and allows us to think of him as more of Humbert's precursor.

One is led also to disagree with Vladimir Nabokov himself, as Lolita and her predecessor in the novella appear really worlds apart. Very much like various anonymous female characters in Ivanov's *The Decay of the Atom*, the anonymous girl is speechless and voiceless in the story, i.e., reduced to her secondary role and stripped of any agency of her own. Conversely, Lolita is arguably a driving force of the whole novel; her developing womanhood is portrayed as convincingly as Humbert's manhood.

be an artist *and* a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy" to discern a nymphet among other adolescent girls (*Lolita Annotated* 17; italics added). At the same time, Dmitri Nabokov is certainly right: the "Enchanter" is much more of a madman and less of a refined intellectual in comparison with H. H.

Concluding Remarks

We may conclude that, having been challenged and inspired by his bitter rival Ivanov, Nabokov pushed literary representation of human sexuality a step further: after experimenting with it in *The Enchanter*, he is able to have this story “grow in secret the claws and wings of the novel” (*The Enchanter* 13) and create Lolita, a precocious female child whose attraction to Humbert and Quilty is as important to Nabokov’s readers as their attraction to her. Nabokov achieves this transformation by going back to such characters of his Russian teachers and Silver Age predecessors as Kuprin’s Sulamith and Sologub’s Sasha Pylnikov, and rests his *magnum opus* not only on the shoulders of the literary giants of Western literatures (Edgar Poe, Lewis Carroll, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, among others) but also on the enormous discursive formation built around the personality, circle and philosophy of sexuality of Vasilii Rozanov in the Silver Age. In this sense, the novel *Lolita* (if seen as a Russian, post-Silver Age, literary phenomenon) completes and crowns the project of Russian literary modernization of sexualities and eroticism.

To this day, adolescent sexuality remains largely unknown to science, although we now certainly know more about it than Nabokov or Ivanov did. But it is symptomatic that the sexualized desiring and desired body of a pubescent sex partner was under scrutiny as a result of such purely imaginative constructions as the novel *Lolita* and its literary predecessors. To accomplish these creative tasks, Russian émigré writers were able to productively employ their “creolized,” “exilic consciousness” in order to incorporate anti-utopian discourses of eroticism and sexuality from both inside and outside Russia.

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