

Reading *Wings* Ahistorically: Mikhail Kuzmin's Reclamation of the Religious Record

Brett Donohoe, Amherst College

Abstract: This article picks up on a small moment from Mikhail Kuzmin's seminal novella, *Wings*, in which the character Maria Dmitrievna turns to the historical and religious record for justification for same-sex desire. After the novel's protagonist, Vanya, escapes from St. Petersburg and the homosexuality of his mentor to the Volga countryside, an Old Believer, Maria Dmitrievna, helps to inoculate Vanya into acceptance of queerness as not only natural but divinely ordained.

Through close analysis of the cited vitae of Sts. Eugenia of Rome, Nifont of Cyprus, and Pafnutii of Borovsk, I explore the representations of gender and sexual non-conformity within those texts while also contextualizing their reception through ideas of queerness contemporary to Kuzmin. Guided by theories of queer historiography, I propose that Kuzmin's Maria Dmitrievna interacts with the historical record in a way quite consonant with Martin Heidegger's idea of the always already; that is, Maria Dmitrievna views pejorative depictions of queerness in the religious canon as freed from their contemporary condemnations, as the mere act of representation imbues an entity with an unpredictable afterlife in which shifting ways of thinking and value systems can revivify that which was previously latent.

After this exploration of the interaction of Maria Dmitrievna and the religious record, my discussion considers the utility and ethics of queer historiography, specifically in relation to accusations of excerpting or anachronism. Ultimately, I argue in favor of Valerie Rohy's approach of ahistorical reading, alongside Carla Freccero's method of analytic metalepsis, especially as it relates to queer hermeneutics.

Mikhail Kuzmin's 1906 novella, *Kryl'ia* (*Wings*), is widely regarded as the first text in the Russian literary canon to thematize homosexuality (Baer 2011, 429–430). Writing during the Symbolist phase of his long career, Kuzmin confronts the reader with a litany of obvious representations of homosexuality, eschewing a normally hermetic poetics in favor of unequivocal and unapologetic signification. The novella is loosely structured as a Bildungsroman,¹ and it traces the development of its protagonist,

An earlier version of this article was presented at Princeton University's symposium on gender and sexuality. I am grateful for the comments and suggestions for improving this piece received at that event. I am also greatly indebted to the recommendations provided by Helena Goscilo and Philip Tuxbury-Gleissner, as well as the two anonymous peer reviewers.

© Brett Donohoe

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

<https://sqsjournal.org>

Vanya Smurov, from that of an impressionable orphan, new in St. Petersburg from the provinces, to an educated young adult, fluent in the ideas of classicism and the European Renaissance. A central conflict of Kuzmin's novella is Vanya's immediate rejection of his mentor, Larion Stroop, upon learning that this former figure of admiration is, indeed, a homosexual. This revelation causes Vanya to retreat from St. Petersburg to the countryside, where he is inoculated into a more accepting attitude by a provincial woman, Maria Dmitrievna. Vanya reencounters Stroop in Italy, where the young Vanya, eager for more education and a respite from Petersburg life, has accompanied his Greek and Latin teacher. Upon reconnection with Stroop, Vanya begins to grow reconciled to his own homosexuality, undergoing the uncomfortable travail of metaphorically sprouting wings, a recurrent symbol of queerness in the novella.

Kuzmin's novella is of paramount importance in the tradition of queer Russian literature and culture, although its appropriation as a model for later writers is debatable. Evgenii Bershtein, for example, asserts that the novella enjoys great respect to this day, but its themes and style remain "marginal" for later gay Russian authors (Bershtein 2011, 83–84). *Wings'* emergence onto the literary scene coincided with an increased visibility of all forms of sexuality, including forms that eschew the boundaries of normativity. As Alexei Lalo's excellent study notes, the intellectual culture of fin-de-siècle St. Petersburg was pivotal in transitioning the themes of eroticism and carnality into topics appropriate for literary engagement (Lalo 2011, 8–11). While it is true that Kuzmin was the first to self-consciously depict homosexuality on an explicit and positive level, he did not do so in an absolute vacuum. The cultural environment that surrounded him was increasingly moving toward a greater understanding of and reconciliation with the importance of embodied sexuality, and Lalo characterizes this shift as a form of "epistemological rupture" (Lalo 2011, 134). Many scholars have pointed to the avowedly antique and Renaissance topoi of *Wings* as the basis of Kuzmin's apologia for homosexuality, and the novella certainly does lend itself to such arguments. As Bershtein writes, the new life Vanya finds by the end of the novella is predicated on three elements: "First, this new life is based on sensual intensification of experience; second, it is a Hellenic life, shaped by classical patterns of beauty; and third, it incorporates the classical paederastic Eros that links a man to a boy, a teacher to a disciple, wisdom to beauty" (Bershtein 2011, 76). Lalo advances a similar argument in identifying one character's monologue about their society being composed of "Hellenes" as the "thematic center" of the text (Lalo 2011, 141).

Kuzmin certainly foregrounds the inheritance proffered by both the antique world and the culture of the Renaissance era, but he does not forsake the native religious tradition of Russian Orthodoxy. Indeed, the second of the three chapters of the novella is almost entirely concerned with Vanya's time spent among the Old Believers of the Volga countryside. While one may read Vanya's escape from this community after the most unwelcome sexual advances from a female companion within that community, Kuzmin certainly does not offer such an extended foray into the religious, cultural, and societal

¹ John Malmstad and Nikolai Bogomolov argue that *Wings* fits the mold of the *roman à thèse*, rather than the Bildungsroman (Malmstad and Bogomolov 1999, 77).

context of the community merely as a strawman that is later refuted in favor of the other models (those of the ancient world and the Renaissance) in the other two chapters of the novella. While the scholarship on the novella has not advanced such an argument in explicit forms, scholars of the text have principally investigated Kuzmin's representations of Western European culture as the sources of inspiration and guidance for his novella. My discussion seeks to recapture the religious elements of Kuzmin's apologia for homosexuality through close analysis of one often-overlooked speech in the novella's second chapter. Through close attention to the intertextuality of this speech and its hermeneutic mechanisms of citation, I contend that Kuzmin also relies on reinterpretation of pejorative religious pasts in his reclamation of earlier forms of queerness for his current moment.

"It's not hard to believe"

The novella's most explicit treatment of religion comes from Vanya's conversations in the Volga countryside with Maria Dmitrievna, who expresses compassion for and understanding of non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality. She remarks:

And another thing, the speaker [Maria Dmitrievna] added with a stumble, is that men love women and women men, but it does happen, they say, that a woman loves a woman, and a man a man. It happens, they say, and I've even read about it myself in the vitae: Sts. Eugenia, Nifont, Pafnutii of Borovsk; and also about Tsar Ivan Vasil'evich. Yes, it's not hard to believe; isn't God capable of placing that thorn in the human heart? But it's hard, Vanya, to go against God's placing, and it might even be sinful (Kuzmin 1984, 240; translation mine).²

Maria Dmitrievna's line of thinking is quite remarkable, as she connects homosexuality to a God-given attribute and views fighting against that divine investment as possibly rebelling against God's design. This gift, however, is bittersweet; the thorn may be given by God, but it stings nonetheless. Her source of encounter with non-heteronormative sexuality is varied in terms of sources: St. Eugenia of Rome is a Catholic and Orthodox saint who died in the middle of the third century; Sts. Nifont of Cyprus and Pafnutii of Borovsk are both exclusively Orthodox figures, the former of whom lived in the fourth century, whereas the latter hailed from the fifteenth century.³ Tsar Ivan Vasil'evich IV, perhaps the most striking and recognizable figure in this list, was the Grand Prince of Muscovy and the first tsar of Russia, who ruled during the sixteenth century.⁴ Maria Dmitrievna is right to separate Ivan Vasil'evich from the other members of the list, as he was primarily a secular figure, in contrast to the others' religious significance, and also

² While there is a fine translation of *Wings* by Hugh Aplin, I have opted to provide my own translation of the text because of some minor lexical disagreements with Aplin's version. In Aplin's translation of the novel, Maria Dmitrievna's speech reads as a bit more mannered, more tentative, than I find in the Russian original.

³ Most likely, Kuzmin relied upon Demetrius of Rostov's encyclopedic *Lives of the Saints* (*Chet'i-Minei*) from the late 17th and early 18th century. Despite Kuzmin coming of age nearly two centuries later, Demetrius of Rostov's *Menologion* remained a hagiographical authority.

⁴ For a deeper exploration of the appropriation of Ivan IV by queer artists from the 19th and 20th centuries, see Maya Garcia, *The Queer Legacy of Ivan the Terrible*.

because Ivan IV's relationship with Fyodor Basmanov, the head of his secret police force, the *oprichniki*, was something of an open secret, in contrast to the more subtle forms of queerness in the vitae (Healey 2006, 106–124). In all of the sources Maria Dmitrievna cites, the thorn of queerness pricks, and the blood drawn from that wound stains the narratives with condemnation. By the time Maria Dmitrievna reclaims the bygone tales, though, the blood has dried, and the queer figures from the past are no longer bound by their contemporaneous pejorative representations.

While the appearances of queer modes of being differ in each of the lives that Maria Dmitrievna lists, it is clear that Kuzmin compels the reader to consider them as a network, a constellation of medieval and classical pre-texts from which more contemporary forms of queerness can gain their justification and acceptance. Accordingly, I probe the vitae of the three religious figures and the received narrative⁵ of Ivan IV's sexual escapades in order to understand the ways in which Kuzmin renovates a pejorative past in favor of a more accepting present and future. I argue that Kuzmin's appropriation of historical mentions of non-heteronormative identities compose an “always already” (German: *immer schon*) of queerness in the Russian cultural and religious tradition. Finally, I examine the ethical implications of recasting a condemnatory past as affirmation and precedent in the contemporary moment against claims of anachronism and ahistoricism.

It is appropriate to complicate the notion of the past as a distinct entity. Elizabeth Freeman, in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, develops the concept of erotohistoriography, which offers a reading of the present as *hybrid* with the past, denying the independence of either entity from the other (Freeman 2010, 95). For Maria Dmitrievna, the importance of representation, even when such depictions are presented in a pejorative light, overshadows the semantic content of the scenes being represented, and this modality frees the historical situation from its original context and grants it a new life in the constantly evolving present. In the hagiography of St. Pafnutii of Borovsk, the disobedience of two monks who love each other in a secular manner—as opposed to the ecclesiastical love expected and prescribed in a monastic setting—manifests as a form of demonic intervention. That context does not seem to influence Maria Dmitrievna's understanding of same-sex desire. Rather, the mere mention of non-heteronormative attraction in the religious canon carries an appreciable force, opening up a space for the intervention of the contemporary subject beyond the judgments embedded in the original narrative. Kuzmin, then, engages in the very practice that Freeman denotes through erotohistoriography, resuscitating the past and placing it in conversation with the present moment, and thus denying the dormition of the historical record and the perpetuation of the value judgments therein.

⁵ Notably, there is no single narrative of Ivan IV's life and times. Rather, the record is left with fragments from letters, stories, and other representations. Maria Dmitrievna is quite right to separate this element from the others.

St. Eugenia of Rome

The first liturgical figure Maria Dmitrievna cites is St. Eugenia of Rome, an important third-century saint in both Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Since the fifth century, the narrative of her life has been a perennial source of interest throughout Europe. In Eastern Orthodoxy, St. Eugenia is credited as an important figure in establishing the martyrdom model of saintly existence. The hagiography of St. Eugenia of Rome is a clear encapsulation of Kuzmin's approach to the religious and historical record ("Zhitie i stradanie sviatoi prepodobnomuchenitsy Evgenii"). As the *vita* recounts, St. Eugenia was one of three children of a pagan family in Egypt during the Roman Empire. Despite her upbringing, she had a strong interest in Christianity.⁶ After her father, the governor of Egypt, was forced to expel Christians from Alexandria, Eugenia sought to continue her encounters with the Christian church. A nearby monastery was only open to men, so Eugenia cut her hair and dressed in male clothing in order to enter the monastery and continue her education in Christian teachings. She progresses through the monastery while presenting as a man, receiving baptism and healing parishioners. While still appearing as a man, Eugenia cures a wealthy local woman, Melanfiia, of a year-long fever, only to then be romantically and sexually propositioned by her. Eugenia rebukes these advances, compelling Melanfiia to denounce Eugenia, who went by the name Eugene while presenting as a man, as an adulterer out of a desire for revenge. Eugenia's father, who is ignorant of the existence of the abbot Eugene, presides over the trial, during which it is revealed that Eugene is, indeed, Eugenia, and these revelations lead to her whole family's conversion to Christianity. After her father's confession of faith, he is executed, compelling Eugenia and her remaining family's move to Rome to continue their proselytizing. Eventually, Eugenia, too, is executed and becomes a martyr.

At first glance, this hagiography does not seem to lend itself to a justification of (sexual) queerness. The author, at least in the Russian translation, makes clear that Melanfiia believes she is propositioning a man, going so far as using exclusively masculine pronouns to describe Eugenia in these scenes.⁷ As Roland Betancourt persuasively argues, Melanfiia's attraction to the saint is transgressive in two principal ways: "first, it is a same-gender desire of one woman for another; and second, [Melanfiia] desires to fornicate with a monk" (Betancourt 2020, 127). Betancourt delicately unpacks the various intersections of gender and sexuality in the *vita*, attempting to preserve respect for the saint's masculine presentation while still contextualizing the impermissibility of Melanfiia's attraction to Eugenia. To a modern reader, the *vita* of St. Eugenia operates along the axis of gender performance, in the Butlerian understanding of the concept, as the masculine gender is accomplished through the exercise of repetitive acts (Butler 1990, 190). It is difficult to parse Eugenia's hagiography through the lens of

⁶ In discussing St. Eugenia, I will be using female pronouns in accordance with the practice of the hagiography. Eugenia's masculine-presenting persona, Eugene, will be used alongside masculine pronouns to mark instances where Eugenia's masculine presentation is of key importance and used contrastively in the narrative.

⁷ Elsewhere, while St. Eugenia is presenting as Eugene, feminine pronouns are still maintained.

contemporary understandings of trans identity, as very little of Eugenia's internal psychic life is revealed in the narrative. Eugenia has a deeply-rooted, internal desire to study at the male monastery and must transform into a man in order to do so, going so far as to receive baptism—a spiritual rebirth into a new life—while presenting as Eugene. In effect, Eugenia becomes Eugene not to externalize an interior gender identity, according to the text, but rather to enjoy the benefits of male privilege. Once the trial has revealed the gender Eugenia/Eugene was assigned at birth, Eugene returns to presenting as Eugenia. When describing the time during which Eugenia presented as Eugene, the hagiographer takes pains to emphasize that Eugenia's biology is still present, merely hidden under traditionally masculine clothing and a shorter haircut. This biological determinism seems to stick with Maria Dmitrievna in Kuzmin's novella; she encodes the hagiography with a lesbian resonance, presupposing that Melanfiia's attraction to Eugene was, indeed, an instance in the religious record of a woman loving a woman. Maria Dmitrievna asserts the primacy of biological sex over gender presentation, finding justification for homosexual attraction in a scene in which a woman, Melanfiia, seeks to seduce someone biologically female, but socially and liturgically male. For Maria Dmitrievna—and perhaps for Kuzmin himself—biology wins out, and the hagiography is reinterpreted through the lens of sexuality rather than gender.

It is highly possible that Kuzmin was operating under the contemporary association of homosexuality and gender inversion. Owing to the influence of such nineteenth- and twentieth-century sexologists as Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, fin-de-siècle notions of homosexuality commingled the axes of gender and sexuality, asserting that lesbians and gay men were the products of a mismatch between internal constitution and external physicality. As such, according to Melanie Taylor, "if a woman is attracted to another woman not only is she conceptualized as male in terms of her sexuality, but she is also constructed as having a masculine gender and, frequently, male secondary characteristics" (Taylor 1998, 288). Kuzmin slightly shifts this paradigm: St. Eugenia is encoded as masculine in the encounter with Melanfiia, but the attraction is unidirectional, coming from the latter and not the former. Nevertheless, Kuzmin chooses to cite a scene of gender inversion as a place for homosexual resonances in the religious record, and that allusion then redefines the hagiography of St. Eugenia as a source text of queer representation, a classification that appears to be Kuzmin's innovation in the religious record.

It is important to note that the concept of gender inversion as the root of homosexuality is a theory contemporary to Kuzmin, not to the writer of St. Eugenia's hagiography, nor to the modern reader. Thus, Kuzmin engages in an ahistorical reading of the vita, interpreting a classical narrative through the lens of contemporary understandings. Valerie Rohy argues in favor of such an approach in her essay "Ahistorical," taking aim at accusations of anachronism and ahistoricism in the project of queer historiography.⁸ She argues, "queer reading requires attention to historical

⁸ Crucially, for Rohy, anachronism and ahistoricism mean very different things. The former term stubbornly clings to the past and seeks to assert the existence of modern ideas in the past, whereas the

specificity, but it does not demand a defense of an authentic past against the violation of backwardness" (Rohy 2006, 66). Rohy's argument is in defiance of dominant trends in historiography and seeks to complicate the idea that finding queer expressions in the past is an anachronistic overreach on the part of the modern reader. Kuzmin's Maria Dmitrievna certainly engages in an ahistorical reading of the vita of St. Eugenia, but, crucially, she does not assert that the writer of the hagiography sought to encode the narrative with a certain queerness; rather, the act of queer interpretation is firmly rooted in the present moment, and Maria Dmitrievna's perception of the homosexual attraction is filtered through her understanding of the topic. The inclusion of such clear ahistoricism on Kuzmin's part, then, seems to presuppose a certain *always already* nature in the queer vibrations he perceives in approaching the hagiography of St. Eugenia—as though the queerness of the text, regardless of the intent of the writer, was lying dormant, awaiting a future moment in which that resonance can reach its right epistemological frequency and become perceptible. The tone of Maria Dmitrievna's statement is rather blasé, and the frequent asides of "they say" suppose that such information is common knowledge, implying that such an approach to St. Eugenia's hagiography is immanent to the contemporary reader, clear enough in the text that one need not strain one's eyesight to find it between the lines.

St. Nifont of Cyprus

The second of Maria Dmitrievna's hagiographical references is to St. Nifont, the bishop of Constantia in Cyprus during the fourth century ("Zhitie sviatogo ottsa nashego Nifonta, episkopa Kiprskogo"). A fourth-century saint who is venerated in the Orthodox tradition, St. Nifont is, by all accounts, a rather minor saint whose recognizability is likely attributable to his feast day falling close to Christmas. Unlike in St. Eugenia's vita, the queer element of Nifont's hagiography does not lie in the saint himself but rather in a recounted scene in which demons and angels battle over the body of a woman who, according to the demons, "defiled herself until death with sins, not only natural but also unnatural [lit: against nature] . . ." ("Zhitie sviatogo ottsa nashego Nifonta, episkopa Kiprskogo"). This last element, the woman's unnatural sins, seems to be the source of queerness for Maria Dmitrievna.⁹ Mentions of sex are noticeably absent from the bitter dialogue between the angels and demons, but this one word opens up a world of ambiguity, a world big enough for Kuzmin to populate it with homosexual resonances.¹⁰ Lindsay F. Watton argues that this scene in the novella, as well as the subsequent

latter term refers to the ways in which a historical text can be read to anticipate certain modern phenomena and typologies.

⁹ Lindsay F. Watton notes that *unnatural* was a euphemism in the Russian legal code of Kuzmin's time to criminalize homosexuality (Watton 1994, 372).

¹⁰ It is possible that Kuzmin is referring not to St. Nifont of Cyprus but to the twelfth-century legal scholar Nifont, who was also made a saint. If Kuzmin, indeed, has in mind this latter St. Nifont, the analysis of this section would be different, but the general conclusion would remain intact. However, given Kuzmin's productive use of terms related to the natural and unnatural, both of which are commonplace in St. Nifont of Cyprus's vita, I opt to focus on this hagiography. Many thanks to the reviewer who brought this later St. Nifont to my attention.

reference to St. Pafnutii of Borovsk, is an example of “the kenotic principle of a world capable of being transfigured by one's perspective on it” (Watton 1994, 387). Watton's application of kenosis to this scene is in relation to the outer narrative of *Wings* rather than the cited narrative of Sts. Nifont and Pafnutii. Kenosis is a paradox in Christian mysticism by which one empties the self in order to become filled with God's will (Watton 1994, 375). Watton argues that Maria Dmitrievna drains the hagiography of St. Nifont of its condemnatory quality toward homosexuality and fills the textual world of the vita with her own positive perspective on the topic, analogically aligned with the importation of divine will.

However, there is an act of kenosis performed in the interpretation of the scene in the hagiography itself. The word *unnatural* (*protivoestestvennyi*) has a certain underdetermined quality, a euphemistic undertone by which a variety of acts could be referenced. To be sure, medieval texts in both Western and Eastern Europe employ this word as a clear euphemism for homosexuality, but such coded language allows for the accumulation of ambiguity over time, as the semantic content of the term shifts in a changing semiosphere. Euphemisms are connotatively unstable, and Maria Dmitrievna opts for the homosexual valence of the term, an understanding that coincides with contemporary Russian legal classifications of homosexuality (Watton 1994, 376). In her survey of pre-modern sexuality among the Orthodox Slavs, Eve Levin studies the expansive nature of the term *unnatural*. She maintains that this class of sins was frequently understood in sexual terms, and *unnatural* sex could encompass any variety of non-normative, non-procreative sexual practices (Levin 1989, 199). While the sins cited in the vita may be of various provenances, the evocation of their unnatural status implicitly codes them as sexual transgressions. Maria Dmitrievna's intervention, though, is to establish these sins as homosexual in nature. It is clear from the vita of St. Nifont that these unnatural sins are negative, a tool by which demons seek to impeach the soul, and Maria Dmitrievna empties the term of its contextualized meaning(s) and instead fills it with a more contemporary definition, again engaging in an ahistorical (or accidentally historical) understanding of a religious work. After doing so, she then divorces that sexual definition of “unnatural” from its pejorative connotations and unites it with an aura of acceptance, reinterpreting the idea of unnaturalness, as Watton argues, along one of two lines: either “the Hellenistic rejection of the distinction between natural or unnatural or the kenotic assumption that all that occurs naturally, including the body, has the potential to be redemptively transfigured and realigned with the realm of spiritual values” (Watton 1994, 387).

Maria Dmitrievna's reclamation of *unnatural* sins and practices is not the only such example in the novella. In the infamous “We are Hellenes” speech from Part One of the text, the speaker expounds upon the laws of nature and crafts a space in which such laws may be ignored. He understands the laws of nature not as moral precepts but as physical impossibilities: “Only the one who can kiss his own eyes without dislodging them and can see the nape of his neck without a mirror may break the laws of nature” (Kuzmin 1984, 219). In that light, as the speaker continues, the accusation of one's unnatural sins

do not deserve any attention, for they are pronounced by a blind individual with an unenlightened mouth: “And when they say to you ‘it is unnatural,’ just take a look at the blind man who said such words and pass him by” (Kuzmin 1984, 219). While Maria Dmitrievna takes the potentiality offered by the word *unnatural* as an opportunity to encode the existence of queerness in the canon, this earlier speaker finds the term to contain a fundamental incompatibility between its usage and its meaning. Nevertheless, both speakers rely upon the word to craft their spaces of queer acceptance; Kuzmin seems to believe that one must arrive at acceptance regardless of the path taken to reach that point.¹¹

Maria Dmitrievna picks up on queer vibrations from the religious archive in relation to this hagiography. She refuses to allow the queerness in St. Nifont’s vita to remain opaque and euphemistic, insisting on a determinate definition of the word *unnatural*. Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* analyzes this queer historical impulse. The book begins by examining the affective turn in queer historiography, asking readers to interrogate their own role in the desire to construct a queer genealogy. This line of thinking firmly roots the conversation in the present moment, the time of the queer historiographer. Love discusses the “dependence of the present on the past” and the importance of queer history as a “means of securing a more stable and positive identity in the present” (Love 33–34, 2009). Maria Dmitrievna’s kenotic reading of the hagiography of St. Nifont certainly seems to engage in precisely this project: she does not state that the representation of queerness in the vita is positive or affirming, but rather that it *exists*, to the contemporary reader, at least in the way she ahistorically approaches the text. Maria Dmitrievna takes a moment of ambiguity in the religious record and expands the underdetermination of a single word into an entire pathos, revealing both her intense desire to find an instance of queer representation and the reader’s ability to resurrect a pejorative discourse from the past and transform it into a buttress for a positive identity in the present.

St. Pafnutii of Borovsk

Turning to the hagiography of St. Pafnutii of Borovsk, Maria Dmitrievna seems to be employing a similar approach in relation to the kenotic principles outlined above. A fifteenth-century religious figure who lived an ascetic life at the monastery in Borovsk, Russia, he was renowned for his evangelism, spiritual insight, and “punitive miracles” (Fedotov 1975, 287–8). Similarly to St. Nifont, St. Pafnutii is not a major saint within the Orthodox tradition, although he has enjoyed the admiration of many people over the years, leading to the establishment of a magnificent monastery in his memory that was commissioned by Tsar Fedor Ivanovich in 1586. The scene from St. Pafnutii’s vita that Maria Dmitrievna alludes to is one in which he has learned that two monks in the monastery “had between them love not according to God but in a worldly manner”

¹¹ I am grateful to the reviewer who suggested connecting this moment from St. Nifont of Cyprus’s vita to the “We are Hellenes” speech.

("Zhitie prepodobnogo ottsa nashego Pafnutiia Borovskogo"). These two brothers intend to flee the monastery in secret. At a prayer service before the planned escape, a different monk, Evfimii, who is gifted with spiritual sight, sees a demon with a metal hook on the heads of the wayward monks. However, as Evfimii reports, when the two brothers engage in prayer, the demon loses his grasp. In the teaching of the hagiography, this demonstrates the ability of sinners to attract evil spirits when engaging in sinful thoughts but also the power of prayer to rebuke the Devil's power. After the liturgy, Pafnutii summons the two monks to his cell and commands them to struggle with their sinful inclinations. The scene ends by reporting that the two monks were successfully reformed by Pafnutii's intervention.

This vita represents homosexual desire more explicitly and determinately than does St. Nifont's hagiography. The euphemism of worldly love is rather transparent, and the phallic imagery of the demon's metal hooks penetrating the monks' heads paints a clear picture. The exact nature of the sin in this hagiography, however, is quite strange. Pafnutii's disappointment with the two monks focuses not so much on their secular love as on their plan to leave the monastery in secret.¹² Indeed, the demon is able to attach to their heads not because of the sin of homosexual desire, but rather because of the sin of disobedience and the idea to break their lifelong monastic vows. Furthermore, terms of kinship proliferate in this scene; the wayward monks are exclusively referred to as brothers, and the monastery is denoted by the word *obitel'*, which comes from the word *obitati* (to inhabit), a word that has followed different semantic paths throughout history. In modern Russian, the word has primarily retained its association of "domicile," although there is a competing influence from the South Slavic tradition, which enjoyed several periods of linguistic popularity in the medieval Russian liturgical language (Vinokur 1971, 70–1). In Croatian, the cognate word of the same root, *obitelj*, means "family." There seems to be an implication of incest on the part of the two monks, violating the prohibition against eros in the family structure—even if that family is spiritual rather than biological—through their secular love for one another. This notion is reinforced through their plan of escape, implying that physical removal from the site of spiritual kinship would then absolve them of the incest taboo, making them two people in love instead of two brothers in love.

Maria Dmitrievna's allusion to this scene from St. Pafnutii of Borovsk's hagiography again empties the representation of homosexuality from its pejorative quality. The passage about the two monks most readily lends itself to an interpretation in which homosexuality is the fateful sin, an opening for demonic penetration; however, as rehearsed earlier, there are other ways of parsing the scene, leaning on readings of spiritual incest and monastic disobedience as the site of sin between the two monks, rather than their homosexuality. Kuzmin does not include further discussion of the hagiographies in his novella, but his brief allusions to these religious texts certainly invite the reader to reconsider the utility of homosexuality in the liturgical canon.

¹² Fedotov concurs with this assessment, asserting that the sin is the "thought of leaving the monastery" (Fedotov 1975, 290).

Tsar Ivan IV and Queer Conjurings

The power of representation in Kuzmin's *Wings* is, perhaps, felt most keenly in the reference to Tsar Ivan Vasil'evich IV, otherwise known as Ivan the Terrible.¹³ He was well known for his affair with Fyodor Basmanov, the head of the infamous and feared *oprichniki*, who, however, was not Ivan IV's only male sexual companion.¹⁴ Ivan IV's reign was marked by tumult and bloodshed, ushering in The Time of Troubles and the end of Russia's Rurik dynasty.¹⁵ Ivan IV's bisexual behavior was something of an open secret during his own time, and it is recorded in his correspondence with Andrei Kurbsky, a refugee in Lithuania owing to Ivan IV's terror. In these letters, Kurbsky uses Ivan IV's sexual behavior as a means by to "[castigate] the tsar's bloodthirsty regime" (Healey 2006, 111).

Despite this negative valence associated with homosexual acts, Ivan IV enjoys a certain prestige among queer artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, serving as a frequent source of operas, novels, and films by queer creators. In these artistic works, Basmanov is very often present, continuously reminding the viewer or reader of Ivan IV's sexual escapades (Garcia 2023, 4). Kuzmin, too, seeks to emphasize the queerness of Ivan IV and, synecdochally, the Russian historical record. As is the case with the other three cited figures, Ivan IV's inclusion in Maria Dmitrievna's list may have come as something of a shock to Kuzmin's contemporary readers. While such artists as Pyotr Tchaikovsky staged Ivan IV's queerness in transparently coded ways, the common image of the tsar did not especially linger on his queer sexual exploits. Furthermore, it is important to note that Ivan IV is hardly a positive figure in Russian history and culture; he amply earned his moniker of *the terrible*. Nevertheless, as was the case in the preceding hagiographies, Maria Dmitrievna is able to find a positive element in a negative representation, resurrecting Ivan IV's ghost in relation to his sexuality while trying to keep at bay the negative associations that accrued around his persona. Doing so reveals the transformative power that Maria Dmitrievna's approach contains: extracting the good from the bad, she converts it into an ethic of acceptance. Perhaps, as Maria Dmitrievna remarks, it is not so difficult to believe that the persecution of same-sex love in the past can become a site of comfort now, because that love persists through the archive and into the present moment, lying in wait for the right reader to appreciate what was always already there.

¹³ It should be noted that St. Pafnutii's posthumous prayers are credited as leading to Ivan IV's conception in the womb (Fedotov 1975, 301).

¹⁴ In *Wings*, Stroop's servant and sexual partner in Part One is also named Fyodor.

¹⁵ Among the most important moments of Ivan IV's reign is the death of his son Dmitri under mysterious circumstances in Uglich. Baer reads the reference to Uglich in Part Three of the novella as an intertext to *Resurrected Gods*, a biography of Leonardo da Vinci by Kuzmin's contemporary Dmitry Merezhkovsky (Baer 2024, 169). While Baer does make a compelling argument, it is plausible that Kuzmin sought to use Uglich as a double reference, both to da Vinci (the Italian Renaissance) and Tsar Ivan IV (the native Russian tradition).

Just as Maria Dmitrievna finds the positives in the pejorative, the modern reader is left to grapple with the character of Maria Dmitrievna within *Wings*. Maria Dmitrievna delivers a powerful monologue that recasts the historical and religious record, enabling condemnation to transmute into affirmation. At the same time, she takes advantage of Vanya when he is in a vulnerable state and attempts to force herself on him sexually later, in the end of Part Two, leading to his flight from the provinces. Her advances come at a very important moment of personal recognition for Vanya. Having encountered the dead and decaying body of another young man who is also named Vanya, our protagonist suddenly becomes aware of both his physical beauty and its precariousness in light of inevitable death. While he is grappling with these realizations, Maria Dmitrievna silently enters his room, and he confides his thoughts in her. Upon hearing him out, she blows out the candle, symbolically extinguishing the nascent process of enlightenment for Vanya, and forces herself on him. This experience ultimately leads Vanya to agree to Daniil Ivanovich's proposal to travel abroad, seemingly as a means of escape from the sexual misconduct that his trusted friend inflicted upon him.

Maria Dmitrievna's actions toward Vanya coincide with her expressed personal philosophy. In her earlier monologue, she declares that opposing one's bodily desires is sinful (Kuzmin 1984, 240), and later states that knowledge of another's impending death would make her desire and love the person all the more (Kuzmin 1984, 260). When she makes advances to Vanya, she rationalizes her actions through religious language, attributing the forceful kissing to "the Lord's will" ("voli Gospodnei") (Kuzmin 1984, 278). Part Two of the novella is broadly concerned with the religious path toward self-acceptance, one that Maria Dmitrievna, the paragon of religious tolerance, seems to foreclose for Vanya by the end of his brief stint in the Volga. However, it is not just Maria Dmitrievna's actions that influence his decision to leave. The corpse Vanya encounters in the river is not just an ordinary countryman. As Baer highlights, "The drowned youth had three times escaped from a monastery where he had been sent by his family to become a monk" (Baer 2024, 163). The religious sensuality that Maria Dmitrievna expresses and directs at Vanya proves to be personal rather than endemic within this religious society. Had the deceased Vanya been able to follow his wishes and not fight against his desires, it is implied, he would not have wound up dead in the river. Vanya's rejection, then, of the entire community is not solely predicated on his harrowing experience with Maria Dmitrievna; rather, it is the culmination—partly prompted by Maria Dmitrievna's unwelcome advances—of a gradual recognition that the freedom he might find in Maria Dmitrievna's philosophy is neither widespread nor uniformly oriented toward positive outcomes.

Maria Dmitrievna's earlier comments about tolerance, openness, and acceptance become retroactively colored as manipulative in light of her later behavior. Although she reclaims the religious and historical record as a site of potential affirmation, Maria Dmitrievna is far from a uniformly positive figure within the novella. Nevertheless, she does serve an important role in Vanya's process of self-actualization, and not just as an antagonist who causes the protagonist to flee in disgust. As Baer argues, Kuzmin sought

to create "an apologia for same-sex desire that included carnal love" (Baer 2024, 158). Bershtein similarly observes that "Vanya finds it difficult to accept the physical side of sexuality in general" (Bershtein 2011, 75). Vanya's revulsion and rejection of Maria Dmitrievna, in this light, is also a symptom of his general discomfort with the fact of sexuality's embodied nature. While the unwelcome nature of Maria Dmitrievna's advances certainly plays a role in Vanya's decision to leave the countryside, his retreat to Italy is not a total rejection of all that he has learned from his stint in the community of Old Believers. In their intellectual biography of Kuzmin, John Malmstad and Nikolay Bogomolov note that Kuzmin's well-established fascination with and admiration for the Old Believers did not abate in the early 1900s (Malmstad and Bogomolov 1999, 63). However, just as one paradigm (whether it be the antiquity of Part One, the religiosity of Part Two, or the Renaissance in Part Three) proves insufficient for Vanya's full maturation into a sexual being, Kuzmin's intellectual purview became more eclectic as he aged. In particular, as Malmstad and Bogomolov highlight, the philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann was particularly influential in Kuzmin's life at this time: "Kuzmin would also have found encouragement in another of Hamann's central concepts, the belief that we must not regard any natural drive as evil or anti-Christian. There is no area of life from which we must feel as innately evil, nor one to which we can turn as a haven incorruptibly good" (Malmstad and Bogomolov 1999, 74). Such a philosophy is quite consonant with the views expressed by Maria Dmitrievna through the majority of her time in the novella.

Beyond Maria Dmitrievna's sexual transgressions, part of her failure comes from her steadfast adherence to one model of thinking. She attributes her advances to Vanya as part of a divine will in a telling revelation that uncovers her dogmatic enactment of her internal philosophy. She errs exclusively on the side of religion, with her idiosyncratic understanding of it, while Kuzmin was intellectually moving toward a more eclectic form of philosophical assemblage. As Malmstad and Bogomolov write, "Kuzmin had once seen art and religion in conflict and had rejected the one in the name of the other. Now, once he realized that the one could *serve* the other in the quest for an ideal of beauty and life, he could abandon his old fanatical opposition of the two and devote himself to art without guilt" (Malmstad and Bogomolov 1999, 79; italics in original). Maria Dmitrievna's fall into disgrace by the end of her time in the novella represents a failure of vision beyond the religious side of life. Nevertheless, she provides Vanya with important insights, both in her religious musings about the permissibility of bodily desires and in her negative example of relying on religion to justify sexual hedonism. Despite her later actions, her earlier words have an independent afterlife, just as is the case for the narratives she cites. It is compelling to allow Maria Dmitrievna's later actions to compromise her earlier affirmations, but doing so would cede important intellectual ground in the pursuit of moral and ethical purity. While her monologue may ultimately serve nefarious purposes, Vanya is not bound to those ulterior motives, nor is the modern reader. In justifying queerness as historically rooted and ethically acceptable, Maria Dmitrievna does not have the privilege of relying on morally uncompromised sources.

The conjuring of acceptance that Maria Dmitrievna undertakes in relation to the hagiographies is not in ignorance of their true content or a diachronic view of how queerness functions in those tales; it is in defiance of those elements. The same type of conjuring is available in regard to the character of Maria Dmitrievna herself.

Conclusion

Within the context of the novella, Maria Dmitrievna's reclamation of a condemnatory past aids Vanya in tangible ways, as their conversation proves to be a pivot toward personal and interpersonal acceptance. However, the past that has been reclaimed is one of demonic possession, eternal damnation, and corporal punishment, and the reclamation is delivered with sexual manipulation in mind. As mentioned earlier, Elizabeth Freeman's erotohistoriography compels us to understand that past and present as a chimera. Maria Dmitrievna's queer interpretation of the religious and cultural canon is not a new understanding of an old text; rather, it forces the vitae of her chosen saints and the story of Ivan IV into her contemporary sphere, and they are thus given the gift of evolution and resignification.

To Carla Freccero, this agnosticism regarding the directionality of temporal influence is the essence of queer time. She urges the scholar to read through metalepsis, to transcend the boundary of our own world and engage directly with the constructed world of the object of study. She writes, "Indeed, the reversal signified by the rhetorical term metalepsis could be seen to embody the spirit of queer analysis in its willful perversion of notions of temporal propriety and the reproductive order of things. To read metaleptically, then, would be to engage in queer theorizing" (Freccero 2006, 2). In other words, Freccero contends that we must read against history rather than ahistorically; however, the migration inherent to metalepsis forecloses the possibility of truly ahistorical interpretations. To allow these bygone figures to proclaim their subjective positionality is part and parcel of the affective project of queer historiography, and it is also a decisive means by which the field moves beyond the mere concatenation of two terms. The history is not of queer objects of study; rather, it is the acknowledging of the ability of queer subjects of any time period to write their own histories—ones that have always already been written—in the present moment, to perform metalepsis and enter a wholly new environment.

The responsibilities of such an endeavor are numerous. Inherent to this duty is the thorough examination of the queer historical impulse that propels the very types of textual work Kuzmin undertakes through Maria Dmitrievna. To search the medieval, pre-modern, early modern, and even current historical record for the perfect representation of queerness that is both affirming and wholly positive is an exercise in futility. As is often the case with minoritized and marginalized histories, the inheritance is a mixed bag that has been tainted by hegemonic forces of discrimination, exclusion, and oppression. It is not so much a question of how to find a usable history; rather, the queer historiographer is tasked with making use of the history that has been bequeathed

to us in the contemporary moment. In some cases, the narratives that we receive are similar to Maria Dmitrievna's God-given thorns: a gift that stings, but a gift nonetheless.

Without question the vitae Maria Dmitrievna cites constitute a usable past. She uses them quite explicitly, succinctly, and powerfully—and the results are a more tolerant present. This is precisely the formulation Love envisions: “We might conceive of the work of historical affirmation not, as it is often presented, as a lifeline thrown to those figures drowning in the bad gay past, but rather as a means of securing a more stable and positive identity in the present” (Love 2009, 34). Thus, queer historiography is not merely a history of those who (possibly) were gay in the past; it is about the present, and it is about the ways in which the past *is* the present and vice versa. The methods are specific and the stakes are different, for a faithful and productive excavation has the potential to recreate the hermeneutic approach deployed by Maria Dmitrievna: the transplantation of past and present in the aim of creating a more stable, tolerant, and free future. Vanya, eventually, finds that future in Italy, rather than in Maria Dmitrievna's Volga countryside, but the lessons he learned from this morally ambiguous provincial woman remain with him. The Hellenic world of the novella's first part and the Orthodox realm of its second both prove insufficient for Vanya, whose journey to personal acceptance does not follow the well-trodden paths of his contemporaries. As the novella closes, Stroop gives Vanya a binary choice; now a fully realized queer subject, Vanya crafts his own path, answering beyond Stroop's binary—not in a rejection of the choices bequeathed to him, but in a performance of their synthesis.

Bibliography

- Baer, Brian James. 2024. “‘My ‘Chaste’ Novel’: Mikhail Kuzmin's Wings and the Problem of Queer Beauty.” *Slavic and East European Journal* 68 (2): 157–76.
- . 2011. “Translating Queer Texts in Soviet Russia.” *Translation Studies* 4 (1): 21–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2011.528680>.
- Bershtein, Evgenii. 2011. “An Englishman in the Russian Bathhouse: Kuzmin's Wings and the Russian Tradition of Homoerotic Writing.” *The Many Facets of Mikhail Kuzmin: A Miscellany*, eds. Lada Panova and Sarah Pratt. Slavica.
- Betancourt, Roland. 2020. *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages*. Princeton University Press.
- Buse, Peter and Andrew Stott. 1999. “Introduction: A Future for Haunting.” *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, eds. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott. Palgrave.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Fedotov, George. 1975. *The Russian Religious Mind*. Vol 2. Edited by John Meyendorff. Norland Publishing Company.
- Freccero, Carla. 2006. *Queer/Early/Modern*. Duke University Press.

- Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press.
- Garcia, Maya. 2023. "The Queer Legacy of Ivan the Terrible." PhD diss., Harvard University.
- Halberstam, Jack. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press.
- Healey, Dan. 2006 "Can We 'Queer' Early Modern Russia." *Queer Masculinities, 1550–1800: Siting Same-Sex Desire in the Early Modern World*, edited by Katherine O'Donnell and Michael O'Rourke. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2010. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. State University of New York Press.
- Kuzmin, Mikhail. 1984. *Proza*. Vol. 1. Edited by Vladimir Markov, Berkeley Slavic Specialties.
- Lalo, Alexei. 2011. *Libertinage in Russian Culture and Literature: A Bio-History of Sexualities at the Threshold of Modernity*. Brill.
- Levin, Eve. 1989. *Sex and Society in the World of the Orthodox Slavs, 900–1700*. Cornell University Press.
- Love, Heather. 2009. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Harvard University Press.
- Malmstad, John, and Nikolay Bogomolov. 1999. *Mikhail Kuzmin: A Life in Art*. Harvard University Press.
- Rohy, Valerie. 2006. "Ahistorical." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12 (1): 61–83. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-12-1-61>.
- Rostovskii, Dimitrii. "Zhitie i stradanie sviatoi prepodobnomuchenitsy Evgenii," *Zhitiia sviatykh*. https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Dmitrij_Rostovskij/zhitija-svjatykh/1132. Accessed 12 February 2025.
- . "Zhitie sviatogo ottsa nashego Nifonta, episkopa Kiprskogo." *Zhitiia sviatykh*. https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Dmitrij_Rostovskij/zhitija-svjatykh/1129. Accessed 12 February 2025.
- . "Zhitie prepodobnogo ottsa nashego Pafnutiia Borovskogo." *Zhitiia sviatykh*. https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Dmitrij_Rostovskij/zhitija-svjatykh/385. Accessed 12 February 2025.
- Taylor, Melanie A. 1998. "'The Masculine Soul Heaving in the Female Bosom': Theories of Inversion and The Well of Loneliness." *Journal of Gender Studies* 7 (3): 287–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.1998.9960722>.
- Vinokur, G. O. 1971. *The Russian Language: A Brief History*. Translated by Mary A. Forsyth, Cambridge University Press.
- Watton, Lindsay F. 1994. "Constructs of Sin and Sodom in Russian Modernism, 1906–1909." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4 (3): 369–94.